



# Akumi Agitogi

Illustration by Tsukiho Tsukioka



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**AKUMI AGITOGI** 

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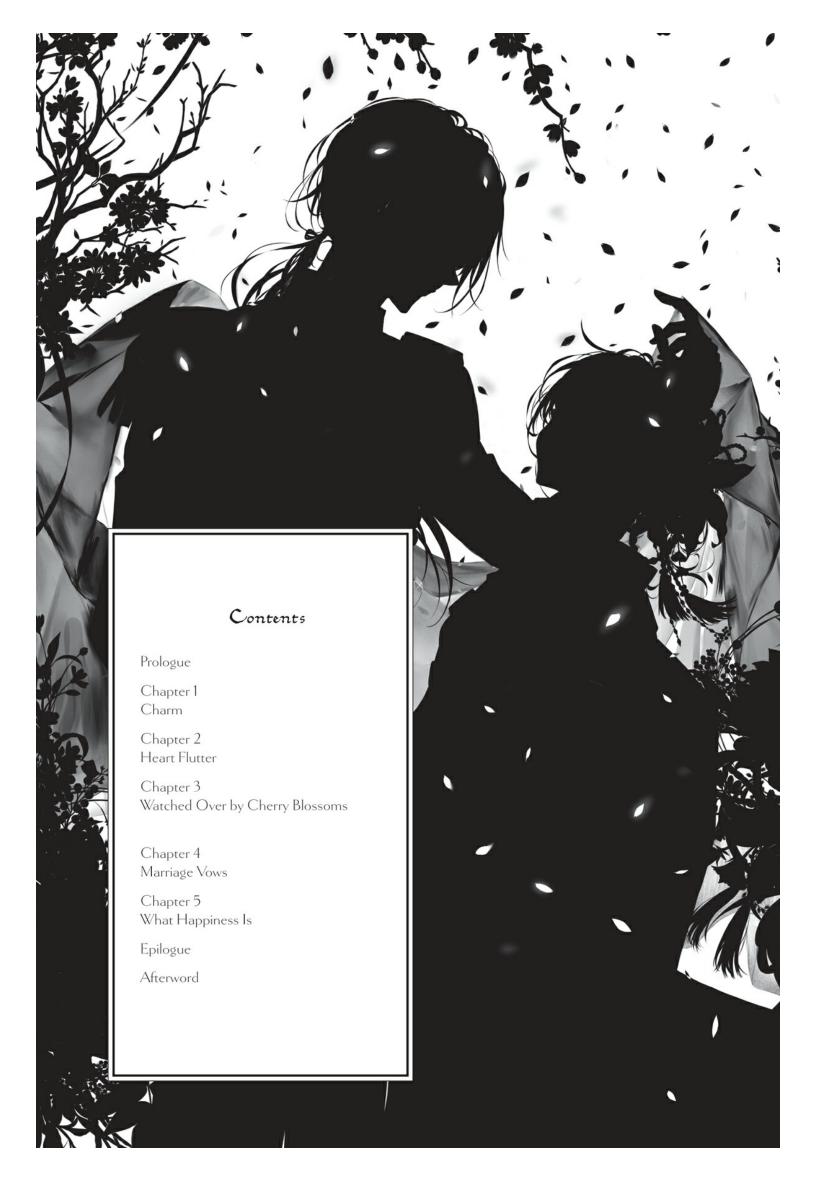
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**TAKAIHITO** 

Sumi Saimori's father,

Crown Prince.

Possesses the power of Divine Revelation.

and Arata and Miyo's grandfather.

Kiyoka's older sister. Mother of one.

#### **YURIE**

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

## **© PROLOGUE 9**

Outside the window, a light pink petal floated by, riding on the gentle spring wind.

The weather—sunny and clear and pleasantly breezy—was so exquisite that it lifted one's spirits.

While the cherry blossoms were a bit past peak bloom, they had only just begun to fall from the branches. Occasionally, they would drop down all at once like a rain shower, covering the ground in a thin carpet of petals.

Miyo sat in a chair, staring down at her hands.

Kiyoka...

Today, she would finally be wed.

The far-off voices of the attendees filtered unendingly into the dressing room.

Yet Miyo's heart was filled with impatience and anxiety—and not the kind that usually came before a wedding.

"U-um, Sis."

"Oh, Miyo! You are so, so pretty, I swear! I wish I could marry you myself."

At her side, her future sister-in-law, Hazuki Kudou, blushed, complimenting Miyo for what must have been the fifth time that day. Though Miyo was grateful for Hazuki's words, they did nothing to clear the feeling in her chest.

"Um, that's not it..."

"Miss Hazuki is absolutely right, Miss Miyo. You are so very beautiful and elegant... Oh, it's almost too much."

Although the ceremony had yet to start, Yurie, a longtime servant of the Kudou family, was already overcome with emotions, wiping the corners of her

eyes with her handkerchief.

Glancing at Yurie with slight displeasure was Fuyu Kudou, Miyo's future mother-in-law. For once, she wasn't wearing one of her luxurious Western dresses, owing to the importance of the occasion. Instead, she had on a married woman's ceremonial black kimono sporting the Kudou family's flower pattern crest, along with a beautifully refined pine, bamboo, and plum design. Tying this all together was her hairpin, which featured floral patterns of inlaid mother-of-pearl.

Fuyu smacked her closed fan against the palm of her hand in irritation.

"They do say fine feathers make fine birds, I suppose... Surely you can do something about that dismal look on your face, can't you, Miyo?"

"Excuse you!"

"M-my apologies."

Despite Hazuki's rebuke, Miyo meekly apologized, knowing full well that her melancholic expression was unsuitable for such a formal occasion.

Nevertheless, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't bring herself to smile. How could she?

After all, today should have been one of the happiest days of her life. It was the day she would be married to her fiancé, Kiyoka Kudou, the person she loved most in the world.

And yet the man himself was nowhere to be found.

As Miyo fell silent and cast her eyes down, Hazuki gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"It'll be okay, Miyo."

"But..."

"Kiyoka may be a surly blockhead, but he wouldn't dream of missing out on the wedding. He loves you so much. And though he may not show it, he's been looking forward to today more than anything. You know that, don't you?"

"Hazuki's absolutely right, Miss Miyo. Why, the young master has been ever

so excited about the wedding. It's heartwarming to see, though he's been so elated lately that I'm almost starting to worry about him."

Encouraged by Hazuki and Yurie, Miyo lifted up her head.

She wanted to believe in Kiyoka. In the man who would think of her first and foremost. She was sure that he would manage things somehow.

Miyo stared hard at the item in her hands.

The protective charm Kiyoka had given her shortly after they had met. She clutched it tightly.

"Excuse me? I apologize, but given the time...I don't believe we can wait any longer."

The person in charge timidly called out to them.

The time to begin the ceremony was already closing in. Originally, Miyo should have left the dressing room for the waiting room half an hour ago to get ready. However, she had selfishly insisted on making them wait where they were for Kiyoka.

But now that extra time had elapsed, too. It would adversely affect the schedule afterward and inconvenience all the people at the shrine conducting the ceremony, as well as the attending guests.

"I'll head over."

She just needed to get herself ready and wait for Kiyoka there instead. But in the event her fiancé did fail to appear, she would have a lot of apologizing to do.

"All right, let's get a move on. Pull it together."

Fuyu's brusque attempts at encouragement finally brought the hint of a smile to Miyo's face.

"I will. Here I go."

Miyo collected her nerves. She couldn't keep letting everyone worry over her. After all, she was going to be Kiyoka's wife from now on.

I'm going to be Miyo Kudou.

She would have to conduct herself respectfully if she wanted to honor the name.

Standing up straight, Miyo walked forward. She was sure it would be fine. Kiyoka would never betray Miyo's heart; it was unthinkable.

The soft spring breeze caressed Miyo's cheeks as she exited the dressing room.

## **❤ CHAPTER 1 ❤**

#### Charm

The morning smelled of spring.

A dry breeze possessing both the warmth of the season and a tinge of leftover chill blew through, filling even the interior of the house with a peculiar air of sleepiness.

Miyo picked up the wrapped lunch box she had prepared in the kitchen and joyfully carried it to the entryway.

She was proud of the day's lunch, which she'd prepared with seasonally appropriate butterbur and rape flowers.

She put her heart into making Kiyoka's lunch every day, of course, but she couldn't wait to see how he would enjoy the bitter spring vegetables she'd used. Her steps were light with excitement.

"Kiyoka."

"Right, thanks."

Kiyoka wore a tranquil and warm, almost relieved, smile on his lips as he turned to her.

"...Here you are."

Miyo held out the lunch box, and Kiyoka took it from her carefully, as though it were a valuable treasure, stowing it away in his bag.

It had been a year since they'd first met, and though scarcely a day went by when she didn't see him, she would still find herself captivated each morning by his quiet, handsome appearance and every little thing he did.

And if Miyo was not mistaken, he had started to wear a smile in the house more and more often this past month.

On a whim, he would show her a smile so lacking in sternness, it felt as if her head was being gently caressed, or as if she was being soaked in comfortable warm waters, leaving Miyo unsure what to do with herself.

He definitely wasn't like this before...

At the same time, however, Miyo's own disposition was completely unlike how it had been before. As such, there was a chance Kiyoka thought the same thing of her.

Even then, that didn't make it any less embarrassing.

The day of their wedding was fast approaching, and she couldn't stop herself from imagining what lay in store for them.

```
"Miyo? What's wrong?"
"Da..."
"Da...?"
"Do be careful, Kiyoka."
```

He broke into a smile as Miyo hastily blurted out her reply to prevent panic from showing on her face.

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"I'll be on my way."
```

Kiyoka's long, light brown hair swished behind him as he gallantly turned around. It was tied up with a brand-new light blue hair cord.

Miyo had gifted it to him just a little while ago to replace the purple hair cord that had been lost in the middle of all the turmoil. Kiyoka had used it to tie up his hair every day since.

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Why was I able to say it back then...?
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Miyo covered both her cheeks with her hands then touched the hairpin in her hair.

Whenever she thought back to the moment when she'd accepted Kiyoka's renewed marriage proposal, she felt like her face was on fire. Caught up in the momentum, she had let one outrageous thing after another escape her mouth.

```
"I love you, darling."
```

She thought it strange that she had been able to say such a thing.

Saying "I love you" outright was bad enough, but then to have topped it off by using a pet name for him! It was all so unbelievably audacious and embarrassing.

Unable to bear the thought anymore, Miyo quickly rushed back to the kitchen and began cleaning up after breakfast.

She was restless. But she was happy. Enough to question if there was anything that could possibly make her happier.

What would change once they became husband and wife?

She didn't want the cozy situation they were in now to change, but if she had the opportunity to build an even better relationship with Kiyoka, then she wanted to do anything she could to get to that point.

At times, she would remember the painful events of the recent and the long past, and they would cast a shadow on her heart.

But even so, Miyo's chest was filled with warmth, more than it ever had been before. That was why, surely...

This vague uneasiness I'm feeling right now must just be my nerves, right?

It was something that came in fits and starts, like a flutter in her chest. If she pretended not to notice it, it would naturally fade away on its own, but was she just imagining things?

After finishing the dishes and doing the laundry, Miyo set about cleaning. When she cleared her mind and focused on the chores that had become so familiar in the past year, she was able to forget about her uneasiness and embarrassment.

The same thing had happened last summer when she was troubled by nightmares.

When she thought of it that way, she realized that she was still the same person as always. Miyo smiled with exasperation at herself and headed to the sink to draw water for cleaning the floors.

As she did, she heard the engine of an automobile outside.

"Good morning, Miyo!"

She went out through the kitchen door and headed over to the front of the house, where she saw the driver open the passenger door for Hazuki, who waved at Miyo cheerfully.

"Good morning, Sis."

Miyo's future sister-in-law was as stylish as ever, her light yellow dress the perfect choice for springtime. She projected her usual brand of strength and beauty.

It was still very difficult for Miyo to pull off this style of Western dress. She'd always looked up to Hazuki, so just the sight of her was enough to cheer her up.

"Good morning. Guess what? I've brought something fantastic!"

Hazuki had an even sunnier look on her face than usual. Like Kiyoka, her features were handsome and pristine.

"Something fantastic?"

Miyo tilted her head in confusion, thinking it was surely too early for wedding gifts.

"Don't worry, you'll see," insisted Hazuki, pushing her from behind through the entryway and into the house.

After being brought to the living room, Miyo took a seat at a low table across from Hazuki.

Miyo was still inexperienced as a gentlewoman, and she was concerned about being disrespectful during the wedding ceremony and banquet, so she had asked Hazuki to reteach her how a woman marrying into the Kudou family ought to behave in front of everyone.

That was to say, Miyo had expected Hazuki to show up today. However, she had no idea what this "fantastic" thing of hers might be.

"Um, what's the thing you mentioned?"

"Right, right, let me show you."

Hazuki riffled through her bag on the tatami floor, taking out a notebook and

placing it on top of the table.

"Look, I made a bunch of newspaper and magazine clippings! Hee-hee, I'm sure you'll find them interesting."

"Wow..."

Miyo untied the string around the notebook. Just as Hazuki had said, there were a great many clippings from newspaper and magazine articles inside.

The variety was truly staggering—it had everything from large headlines to excerpts from smaller columns.

"You did all of this yourself?"

"That's right. Oh, but I had a blast doing it, so no need to worry about it or anything, okay? I mean, there's been so much reporting about your wedding! I can't help wanting to collect it all," Hazuki replied cheerfully, looking somewhat proud of herself.

Miyo nervously peered at the open notebook.

Since Kiyoka was somewhat of a celebrity, Miyo knew that their wedding was becoming a hot topic among the public. In fact, Kiyoka had vented to her about being fed up with all the requests for interviews he was getting from reporters.

But what was the press saying about their wedding?

Miyo was curious. Curious but scared. Unconsciously holding her breath, she lightly scanned the articles.

Unsurprisingly, the newspaper articles were mostly concerned with the events of the last few months that had threatened to shake the whole empire and how they had involved Kiyoka's own position. Conversely, the magazine articles consisted almost entirely of slightly gossipy fair.

"Th-there's nothing bad written in them...right?"

Miyo certainly didn't have the courage to pore over the articles, so she'd only skimmed them briefly. Though from what she'd read, the articles were far less vitriolic than expected. She heaved a sigh of relief.

Hazuki let out an amused chuckle.

"Come now, Miyo, do you really think I'd show you something that would make you sad on purpose? It's not necessarily one hundred percent flattering, but it's mostly just opinions about the government or the military, not anything attacking you or Kiyoka personally."

"That's a relief."

Thankfully, the matter of Kiyoka's temporary arrest was reported as false charges over and over again.

He'd avoided being slandered as a traitor.

Instead, the criticism was focused on the government for letting such a thing happen—that an individual like Naoshi Usui had been able to manipulate the military and even the emperor to plunge the country into danger.

In the modern age, when few people believed in the existence of Gifts or Giftusers, Usui's Gifted Communion and their peacekeeping squads were simply perceived as a religious group and nothing more, but that was all the more reason why there were so many voices reproaching the government for being shaken up by a group of civilians.

Regardless, the papers praised Kiyoka for striving against Usui's coup despite being arrested on false charges, and for proving his innocence. There were also many blessings for his marriage, which set Miyo at ease.

But when it came to the gossip in the magazines, however...

Wh-what is all this?

The headlines were outsized in both dimension and content: THE TEARS OF NOBLE DAUGHTERS EVERYWHERE!; COUNTLESS WOMEN FAINT AT NEWS OF FAIR SCION'S WEDDING!; NOBLE SON WHO DROVE MANY WOMEN TO TEARS FINALLY SETTLES DOWN.

"See, aren't they funny?"

Hazuki giggled, clutching her side.

The articles reported with great humor on the detailed resentments held by the young women who previously had their engagements to Kiyoka called off, as well as the laments of anonymous women who secretly pined for him. "Is this...really something I should laugh at...?"

Miyo had mixed feelings about the headlines and frowned slightly.

The authors of the articles came to some rather odd conclusions, writing quite scathing things such as, "One must strive to deepen the relationship before they can hope to be a partner to such an aspiring person," and "One shouldn't be content with their upbringing and should aim their ambitions ever higher."

There was even one writer who ended their article by saying, "I worry about the possibility that the deep resentment borne by these young noblewomen might bring some harm to the Kudou scion."

"Oh, of course you can laugh at the articles," said Hazuki. "That's why I brought them all here to you. Besides, half of it is Kiyoka's own fault, really, for being so cold to all those young girls and ensuring rumors got out about how mercilessly cruel he is. He could have turned down most of those marriage offers more amicably; that's for sure."

Hazuki never failed to frankly speak her mind.

However, she was right that now that Miyo and Kiyoka were about to tie the knot, the articles really served as nothing more than funny episodes. Miyo couldn't help chuckling a bit at Hazuki's way of putting it.

Still.

If Kiyoka had been more delicate about handling the situation like Hazuki had laid out, then Miyo probably wouldn't have been here right now.

The only reason she'd even had a chance with Kiyoka in the first place was because he'd left all those women in tears.

"Oh, is that a look of relief I'm seeing?"

Miyo flushed when Hazuki pointed this out.

"R-relief? No, of course not..."

"It's fine, right? You and Kiyoka choose and were chosen by each other. Whatever the process may have been to get there, it's delightful to meet someone who thinks about their partner as much as you two do. You can be proud of that."

"Thank you."

Regardless of the details pointed out in the articles, many people were giving their blessing to Kiyoka and Miyo's wedding. Even the gossipy stories devoted a significant amount of space to celebrating their union.

Though she first felt bashful and embarrassed by the thought of so many people knowing about her, a sense of happiness welled up inside her soon after, for she could feel it in her bones that the day she would finally become Kiyoka's wife was drawing closer.

"...Is it okay if I keep this?" Miyo asked, making up her mind. Hazuki blinked.

"Of course it's okay, but it wasn't very funny...for you, right?"

Hazuki had seen through her brief second of indecision.

Nevertheless, Miyo was happy that Hazuki had thought of her and had given her the clippings. Miyo would have never thought to save these articles; in fact, she probably wouldn't have even read them in the first place.

Ten years from now, they would assuredly be good mementos to laugh about.

"Of course I want it. You went to all the trouble of gathering these articles. I think that when I look back over this someday, it'll help me remember what I'm feeling now."

"My! Sheesh, Miyo! You're just, you're just too much...!"

Hazuki's words caught in her throat, and she covered her face with both her hands. After she'd spent a few moments calming down, she said, "Well then," shifting things completely and flashing a brilliant smile Miyo's way.

It was as though she was trying to say that now they were going to get to the real topic of conversation.

"Not to change the subject, but how are things? The ceremony's coming up, and you and Kiyoka are under the same roof like this, so...have you both gotten even more passionate with each other?"

"P-passionate—"

This time, Miyo went crimson to the tips of her ears, and she froze in place.

"No trying to escape the question by saying you're too modest, either. It's too late for that. So then, how is it? Isn't it about time you sleep with your mattresses lined up next to each other?"

"Wh-wh-what? I c-couldn't!"

Her head felt hot enough to boil, and her thoughts spiraled out of control. Why was Hazuki able to ask such a question so calmly?

Miyo would be lying if she said she hadn't imagined the situation at all, but she still wasn't quite ready for that yet. Sleeping with their mattresses lined up together was completely out of the question.

Although they had ended up in that situation once before, she had completely lost her composure, so she hadn't experienced the type of atmosphere that Hazuki was getting at.

On top of that, she was still embarrassed about how she'd shared a bed with Kiyoka's familiar, Kiyo, only to discover afterward that Kiyoka's consciousness was linked with Kiyo's.

"Oh, come on, that won't do. That's how things will be sooner or later anyway, so you need to get used to them soon."

"H-how could I possibly get used to that...?"

Even after a year of living together, she would frequently lose her composure in unguarded moments when she was sharing the same space as her fiancé.

Her heart wouldn't be able to then endure a whole night of that.

"Well, Kiyoka really wants to take good care of you, too. I mean, I get it. I would do the same thing myself."

"Kiyoka's always been kind, from the very beginning..."

Hazuki tilted her head at Miyo, who had lowered her eyes to hide her bright red face.

```
"Hey, Miyo."
```

"Yes?"

"I notice you can be quite stiff when you're around Kiyoka. Do you ever think

about changing that?"

Miyo startled.

She froze and kept her eyes on the ground as Hazuki brought up yet another topic she didn't want to think about.

"You've acted that way from the very beginning, right? But I guess that makes sense—at the start of your engagement, I bet you thought of him as more of the master of the house than your fiancé, right?"

"Urk...yes."

Hazuki was perfectly on the mark.

She had thought about this ever since she first called Kiyoka "darling."

When Miyo first came to this house, she hadn't thought for a moment that she would be able to become Kiyoka's wife. She was prepared to be chased out or even killed, so she'd believed that being treated like a servant would be one of the better outcomes.

That was why, to ensure she didn't offend him, she had tried to address him respectfully.

At this point, however, she was used to the way she talked to him. She was resistant to the idea of being less formal around him, and she lacked the courage to change it.

"Just once, I was able to loosen up around him...um, to call him 'darling."

"Oh, that's perfect, isn't it? I love the idea of calling him that. It's quite like what other married couples do these days, I would say."

"But I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to say it again..."

Miyo guessed her face was an awful mess at the moment. She couldn't possibly bring herself to look at Hazuki.

She was positive that it was red enough to burst into flames, no longer able to be explained away as innocent or adorable.

"Miyo."

Hearing Hazuki address her seriously, Miyo hesitantly lifted her head. There

she saw her gentlewoman mentor's kind, lovely smile.

"Why don't we practice?"

"What?"

Miyo wasn't sure what Hazuki was saying to her. Practice? Practice what exactly?

She understood, but she didn't want to, so her brain rejected the idea. As Miyo sat in blank surprise, Hazuki gave her the smile of a goddess.

"You can't be so formal around him forever. Listen, even my mother normally calls Father 'Tadakiyo,' but when the two are alone together, she's more casual with him and calls him 'dear.'"

"Mother calls him that?"

"It's infuriating, isn't it? I've always disliked that part of her. For as long as I can remember, she's only ever had eyes for my father, concerning herself with him and never showing any interest in me or Kiyoka."

*"…"* 

Hazuki's smile was growing more and more terrifying.

"Oops, I went on a bit of a tangent. Anyway, I think you should practice calling him 'darling,' so it'll come more naturally to you."

Practice. Practice calling Kiyoka "darling." How was she going to do that? Sitting by herself and saying it over and over again would be impossible for her.

"You can take your time with it, but make sure it happens sooner rather than later, okay?"

Faced with Hazuki's harsh reminder, which made it sound like she couldn't take her time at all, Miyo could only nod silently in agreement.



"Y'know...I reeeeeally don't want to take over here."

Godou's pathetic voice reverberated through the office.

He was in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station. Currently, there were

two desks inside the commander's office. The first, which Kiyoka used, had always been there. The other was for Godou. The unit members had dragged the second desk out from somewhere and set it up for him.

Having just cried out in despair, Godou collapsed face-first on his desk.

"Those documents have nothing to do with taking over. Stop complaining and process them already."

Not so much as glancing at his subordinate, Kiyoka kept his pen running across the paperwork in front of him.

His current workload had mainly returned to normal—handling matters that involved grotesqueries. However, since the Gifted Communion crisis had caused their normal caseload to pile up quite heavily, it was taking a significant amount of time and energy to process it all.

There's no end in sight, is there?

At some point during the weeks following the incident, the view outside the window had completely changed from a scene of winter to that of spring. Hearing the slightly clumsy warbling of the nightingale off in the distance, Kiyoka happened to look up from his desk and gaze at the hazy blue sky spreading out toward the horizon.

Not much time had passed since the whole affair—Usui's attempted coup—and yet the traces of winter that seemed to freeze both the body and the soul were already long gone.

"I still haven't accepted it, okay?"

Godou grumbled sullenly.

"And do I need your acceptance to resign from my post?"

"You absolutely do. I'm sure I'm going to end up the next commander, right?"

Kiyoka didn't answer him.

When Kiyoka thought about the role of unit commander, the final moments of Godou's father, Itsuto, always flickered into the back of his mind. Itsuto had once commanded the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit and was killed in the line of duty after facing off against a powerful grotesquerie known as the Earth

Spider.

Inevitably, Kiyoka would think of the words Itsuto Godou had left him with, too.

"Sorry for putting this on you."

After saying this, the light had left Itsuto's eyes. It was all still so clear—the wounds on Itsuto's face, his trembling lips and voice, and his short, weak breaths.

He'd never said what exactly he was putting on Kiyoka. But even if Itsuto hadn't spelled it out, Kiyoka had easily understood what he meant.

He knew that one of the things Itsuto was putting on him was the position of commander in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

That was why despite graduating from the imperial university, he'd simultaneously taken the difficult officer service exam and started down the career path he had turned his back on once before—that of a military man.

Of course, that was what he was meant to do. Kiyoka thought as much, at least.

"I figured that Itsuto would be ready to let me off the hook by now. Really, he'd probably chew me out if I kept going without my heart in it."

"..."

When Kiyoka turned to Godou, who had fallen silent, he saw that his subordinate was staring back at him, eyes wide and at a loss for words.

"What?" Kiyoka asked.

"I was just thinking it's been a long time since I last heard you talk about my dad, Kiyo—er, Commander. Took me off guard."

"And it's been a long time since I've heard you call me that."

He couldn't help breaking into a smile. Far in the past, farther back than he could remember now, Godou, or rather, Yoshito, had often referred to Kiyoka this way.

Godou had been young when they'd first met, and since he had studied

abroad after maturing, Kiyoka wasn't that close with him. But during the occasional moments their paths did cross, such as when Itsuto would bring his son with him to work, Godou would stare up at Kiyoka with sparkles in his eyes and call him "Big Brother Kiyo."

That being said, when they were reunited after Godou reached adulthood, Kiyoka had been met with a great deal of hatred from the man.

"I made absolutely sure that I wouldn't ever slip and call you that no matter what, under *any* circumstances. Aww, shoot, maybe that means for all my groaning, there's some part inside me that's already accepted that you're not going to be the commander anymore. Ugh, how frustrating."

Still pouting and keeping his head down, Godou flipped through the documents on his desk half-heartedly.

"Keep your hands moving. Did you finish allocating the personnel like I asked you?"

"I'm still stumped about what to do."

"Hurry up and get it over with."

How much longer would Kiyoka spend his days like this?

He caught himself getting inadvertently lost in thought.

When Kiyoka became commander, he had never considered that his state of mind would change the way it had.

After joining the military, he'd assumed he would live the life of a soldier and die a soldier. He'd given himself over so completely that he hadn't been able to envision life after the military at all.

However, the woman he loved was in a complicated position, one that he couldn't attend to while devoting himself to the military.

Miyo may not have had any intentions of wielding her abilities, but as the Usui matter had made abundantly clear, the world at large wouldn't leave the Gift of Dream Sight alone. Kiyoka didn't think that would change anytime soon.

I can't say for certain there won't be a second, or third, Usui to come out of the woodwork.

When push came to shove, Kiyoka wanted to protect Miyo more than he wanted to be a military man. He wanted to be at her side so he could keep her safe and support her.

In other words, Kiyoka's duties as a military officer had become an imposition.

"...You have it nice, don't you, Commander? I'm sure you and Miyo are doing all sorts of stuff together back home, aren't you?"

"Not this again."

"I mean, how will I possibly be able to get married if I take over as commander?! I'll be way too busy!!" Godou cried, tearing his hair out.

Unfortunately, Kiyoka couldn't exactly refute what he was saying.

When Kiyoka first became commander, his new duties had taken up all of his time. He'd been so swamped that he started sleeping at the station.

"That all depends on how much effort you're willing to put in."

"C'mon, you're clearly just brushing off my concerns here!"

Godou could complain all he wanted, but bringing up the topic of marriage and the like to Kiyoka had been a mistake to begin with. While he wasn't necessarily proud of it, Kiyoka was so poor at being affectionate that he hadn't be been able to find a partner until he turned twenty-seven.

"I bet you're pushing Miyo down and sleeping with her, aren't you?! How could anyone in your position understand how I feel here?!"

"Quit fantasizing."

"Gaah, I'm so jealous! I can't take it!"

Kiyoka heaved a sigh at his subordinate, who looked ready to jump up from his seat and start throwing a tantrum.

"Enough already. I haven't done anything of the sort."

"Huh?"

Godou looked over at him like he was witnessing the unbelievable.

"You haven't? At all?"

"Nope. Forget about my private life and stop prying. And keep your fantasies to yourself."

"Wait, Commander! Are you telling me you're a coward?"

Even Kiyoka couldn't stop himself from blowing his top at such a flagrant remark.

This was absolutely none of Godou's business. As such, Kiyoka gave Godou a tongue-lashing the likes of which his subordinate had never heard before.

$$\Diamond\Diamond\Diamond$$

Finished with dinner, Miyo and Kiyoka brought their hands together.

"Thanks for dinner."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

The mealtime routine she had repeated with Kiyoka over the past year brought more solace to Miyo than anything else.

Just then, Miyo suddenly remembered a topic she had forgotten to bring up during their meal.

"...K-Kiyoka."

"What's wrong?"

Hazuki's remarks from that afternoon flittered in the back of her mind and made her address to Kiyoka sound unnatural. Kiyoka responded with a somewhat suspicious look.

Sis has cursed me, hasn't she?

There was no way she could possibly call him "darling" right off the bat, but there had been a moment's hesitation.

As a result, Miyo had begun to act suspiciously every time she addressed Kiyoka, now wavering slightly when speaking to him.

"Um, well, tomorrow I'm going out with Sis," Miyo told him, speaking rapidly in a panicked attempt to hide her quandary.

Incidentally, this wasn't a lie; it was what she had originally wished to bring up

with him.

"Where?"

Seeming a bit surprised, Kiyoka shifted his gaze before furrowing his brow. Miyo found his unexpected displeasure unnerving.

For a moment, she worried she might have angered him, but upon closer inspection, he didn't appear upset.

Calming her mind, she maintained her composure and answered.

"To the home of a Mrs. Shioze, who has invited a chef from abroad to hold a cooking class. Sis asked me to tag along with her."

"Ahh, the Shiozes... I guess that'll be fine."

Kiyoka sighed with a slight hint of discontent. It was a family Hazuki was acquainted with, so it was only natural that Kiyoka would know them, too. He seemed to accept the reply.

Apparently, he truly had just been worried for Miyo's safety and nothing more.

I just hope he's all right with the way I refer to him for the time being.

It was all but impossible for her to honestly explain to Kiyoka her hesitance at using a pet name for him.

"I will be back home after lunch. I'm going to learn how to make dishes with flavors unlike anything I've prepared before."

"I've never felt dissatisfied with your cooking in the first place, though," he said, before a conflicted look came to his face. "Cooking with Sis? Are you serious?"

Miyo was at a loss for words.

Kiyoka's apprehensions were well founded. Indeed, Hazuki was a downright terrible cook.

Her culinary skills were beyond the realm of "terrible"—she was so unbelievably awful at making food that it was as if the gods themselves had stripped her of any ability in the kitchen to ensure she never cooked at all.

Miyo hadn't experienced a meal from her firsthand, but she had gotten glimpses before.

When was it exactly? It may have been after Miyo first became acquainted with Hazuki, shortly after she'd first told Miyo of her poor cooking skills.

Last summer, while Hazuki was teaching Miyo all sorts of things about being a proper gentlewoman, Miyo had gone to make lunch for them both as a bit of a break, and she'd asked Hazuki to boil the *somen* noodles for her.

All Hazuki needed to do was heat the water in a pot, place the noodles inside once the water had come to a boil, and spin them around with a pair of chopsticks. At the time, Miyo figured that it would be impossible to mess up such a simple, short process.

How naive she'd been.

In an unbelievable turn of events, Hazuki wound up turning the *somen* noodles, which had been perfectly fine up until entering the pot, into a pitiful mess of scraps.

After Hazuki was done with them, the already thin noodles were absolutely shredded, turning into small white strips of flour. Miyo would never forget the shock of seeing them slip through the gaps in the draining mat and spreading out all over the kitchen sink.

"Y-you're kidding... I can't even boil noodles right?"

Even the usually cheery Hazuki had been dumbfounded and crestfallen at the sight.

Somen noodles didn't need to be boiled long, either. During that time, Miyo had looked over at Hazuki on several occasions but hadn't noticed her doing anything wrong, either.

And yet her noodles had ended up ruined.

Miyo hadn't just been surprised by the results—a chill had ran down her spine. The phenomenon seemed somehow supernatural.

Hazuki's ineptness in the kitchen was almost a kind of Gift.

However, Miyo had heard that for this upcoming cooking class, the

participants would actually be quite limited in their chances to prepare food. They would be doing little more than divvying up certain tasks and practicing them for themselves.

That meant Hazuki wouldn't have to get involved.

At last, Miyo responded to Kiyoka. "Um, the chef will be showing a demonstration as he explains everything, and I believe we'll mostly be watching...I think. P-probably."

Miyo felt bad for Hazuki, but she couldn't help sounding unsure by the end of her sentence.

"That's good to hear. My sister may be dreadful in the kitchen, but it's not like she has a Gift that ruins *other people's* cooking."

Miyo felt strangely relieved by Kiyoka's reply. Evidently, she wasn't the only one who thought of Hazuki's inability to cook as a type of supernatural power.

With the conversation reaching a conclusion, Miyo began to clean up after the meal.

After gathering the tableware and stacking the personal tray tables, she returned the large *chabudai* table that she'd moved against the wall back to its original position. From there, she carried the tray tables into the kitchen, boiled some water, and prepared the after-dinner tea.

Carrying a tray holding the teacups and teapot, she returned to the living room to find Kiyoka looking at an open notebook.

It was the collection of clippings that Hazuki had brought that afternoon.

Miyo had left it on top of a shelf after Kiyoka's sister had gone home.

"Um, Kiyoka, that notebook..."

Miyo was sure that Kiyoka wouldn't be pleased to see the articles filled with gossip and half-truths. She regretted that she hadn't immediately put it away in her room earlier.

How would he interpret her hemming and hawing?

"I'm sure this is all Sis's handiwork. Not again with this nonsense."

Kiyoka merely sighed, looking bored as he flipped through the pages of the notebook.

"I'm sorry for showing you something so unbecoming."

"Huh? I was the one who decided to look through it. That's nothing that you should apologize for."

Kiyoka took the notebook in his long fingers—beautiful, yet with the rigidity befitting a soldier—and flipped it closed. Even this simple action was elegant, revealing the quality of his upbringing.

The closer and closer their wedding came, the more conscious she grew of his every little movement. Each was so endearing.

"More importantly, are you all right with this, Miyo?"

"What?"

"You're not used to this, right? Being looked at in such poor taste. It doesn't make you nervous or uncomfortable, does it?"

A shade of anxiety rose in Kiyoka's quiet gaze, and although this was inappropriate of her, she felt just the slightest bit happy about his concern.

Miyo smiled and shook her head.

"No. There wasn't very much written about me. As long as none of it has offended you, then I'm just fine."

The articles had revealed little more about Miyo than her age and the fact that she was the daughter of the Saimoris.

Miyo's reply brought a tender, relieved smile to Kiyoka's face.

"I've grown somewhat used to it all. Nothing's going to offend me at this point. Besides..."

Suddenly, Kiyoka fell silent.

Curious about what was wrong, Miyo looked up from pouring the tea into their cups. She couldn't help but widen her eyes in surprise at what she saw.

She was met with light vermilion cheeks and eyes awkwardly averted from her face. Kiyoka was wearing a look of embarrassment like that of a highborn lady, secluded in her estate. It was entrancing.

His next words struggled to escape his shapely lips.

"I don't really care what anyone says about me...as long the people in my life and my fiancée know the truth."

Normally, he wouldn't put it all into words like this. Miyo was dumbstruck; she hadn't expected him to say things so clearly, either.

Then her vision wobbled, as if from vertigo, and she felt herself slowly grow warm.

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"Oh, I—I see..."

"That's right—hey, you're spilling the tea."

"Eek!"
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At some point when she had been staring, the tea she was pouring had passed the brim of Kiyoka's cup and started spilling onto the tray.

Miyo quickly set the teapot down and wiped up the tea with a cloth.

It was then that she realized, however, that the pounding of her heart was unbelievably loud, and her hands were unsteady. She felt as though everything in front of her was spinning.

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"Are you all right?"
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"I-I'm...I'm fine!" she replied, even though her restlessness showed no signs of abating.

M-my heart isn't going to st-stop, is it?

She loved spending time together with Kiyoka, and it served to soothe her. Yet why was it during times like these that she wanted to run away more than anything?

She wished someone, anyone, would rescue her.

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"Give it here. I'll wipe it up."
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"No, I'll do it!"
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Kiyoka, unable to bear watching Miyo lose her head, tried to take the cloth

from her. But she couldn't possibly make her husband-to-be do something like this.

Immediately, Miyo vigorously pulled the cloth behind her back. Chasing after her hand and leaning over to her, Kiyoka drew in far too close.

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"Nh, heep!"
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In that instant, a pathetic cry escaped Miyo's lips.

The momentum sent her backward, but just before she fell on her back, Kiyoka shot out his arm behind her to keep her up—putting them in a strange position, halfway between embracing and being pushed down to the floor.

His face was so close. His body was, too... In fact, they were practically right up against each other.

"How are things? The ceremony's coming up, and you and Kiyoka are under the same roof like this, so...have you both gotten even more passionate with each other?"

"No trying to escape the question by saying you're too modest, either. It's too late for that. So then, how is it? Isn't it about time you sleep with your mattresses lined up next to each other?"

Her sister-in-law's words echoed again in the back of her mind. But right now, she wasn't in the state of mind to think on it too deeply.

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"K-Kiyoka."
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"Isn't it about time...?"

Paying no heed to Miyo's meaningless address to him, Kiyoka brought his face even closer to hers. And then.

"You address me more intimately?"

Even though her simmering mind was barely functional, she could tell that these words meant the same thing Hazuki had discussed with her earlier.

Her breath caught in her throat.

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"Erm, um, I—I just..."
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Kiyoka gently laid Miyo on the tatami and looked down at her, his body

completely hanging over hers.

His perfectly straight hair, like thin strands of silk, flowed down from his shoulders, casting a shadow. His eyes were calm as he stared at her, yet they still contained a faint heat.

"Won't you call me 'darling'? Like you did before."

Every one of Miyo's senses were focused solely on their respective breaths, despite not being heavy or rough at all.

She looked up at her fiancé's handsome features in a daze. She could hear her heartbeat pounding like an alarm bell deep in her ears.

She wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, locked in each other's gazes.

For some reason, out of neither sadness nor happiness, her vision slowly began to cloud with tears.

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"Kiyoka...I—I..."
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"Miyo?"

She let out a gasp as the tears pooled in her eyes and formed into droplets, falling down her temples.

In an instant, Kiyoka's eyes widened, as if he had been doused with cold water.

Then, wearing an expression somewhere between sorrow and despair, he moved away from Miyo in all-too-plain panic and confusion.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"N-not at all."

Based on his uncharacteristically hasty apology, even Miyo could clearly understand Kiyoka's lack of composure.

She slowly raised herself up and wiped away her trickling tears with her hand.

"Miyo, I'm sorry... I was moving too fast."

That wasn't it. Kiyoka hadn't done anything wrong. Miyo had simply been caught off guard.

She'd already been feeling bewildered and on edge after what Hazuki had said to her earlier that day, so hearing Kiyoka entreat her to call him by a term of endearment had thrown her entirely out of sorts.

Why? I don't feel bad at all when Kiyoka touches me, so why...?

If anything, she was happy about it.

Miyo couldn't reject Kiyoka, nor did she want to. She loved him, and the thought of them both growing closer, of feeling each other's warmth for themselves, made her happy.

But now she couldn't stop the tears from falling from her eyes.

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

Miyo was sure she had hurt him. She had burst into tears so suddenly that she might have convinced him that she was uncomfortable with his touch, and with calling him "darling."

Though she wanted to explain herself, the tears kept coming, and she couldn't get the most important words across to him.

As she sat with her hands covering her face, unable to speak, she sensed Kiyoka nervously coming up next to her.

"Sorry. Please don't apologize. It's okay. You don't need to call me 'darling.' I shouldn't have said that."

His voice was wholly out of character, lacking any spirit and deeply ashamed.

Miyo couldn't bear how disgusted she felt with herself for making him speak in such a tone.

How could she possibly clear up Kiyoka's misconception? What did she need to say to assure him that her reaction hadn't been caused by any discomfort?

Miyo was buffeted by her own thoughts, a jumbled mix of regret and embarrassment, and she stood up in tears.

"Miyo?"

She couldn't let Kiyoka, gazing up at her with unease, see her looking so disgraceful. Miyo hung her head and covered her face with the sleeves of her

kimono then turned around.

"I—I like you very much, Kiyoka...!"

Summoning up all her courage to leave this single sentence behind, she scampered out of the living room then made for the kitchen.

Although Miyo somehow managed to get through her chores without a hitch that night, she was unable to face Kiyoka, and she didn't sleep a wink.

The sky was unfortunately pallid the following day.

Spring's warm sunlight was obstructed by the gray clouds, and the blowing wind was a bit cold and damp.

"Miyo? Are you really, truly okay?"

"Yes..."

Hazuki looked more worried than ever as she turned to her, prompting Miyo to nod sluggishly.

She and Hazuki were currently in the Kudou family automobile, heading toward the Shioze estate, where there would be a cooking class.

After the incident from the night before, which had kept her from sleeping, Miyo still felt awkward come morning. She found herself unable to look Kiyoka in the eye and kept her conversation with him to the bare minimum.

When she looked in the mirror, she noticed that her face was in horrible condition, swollen from her tears and showing signs of her lack of sleep.

Judging by Hazuki's concerned expression, it was clear that her makeup wasn't concealing it in the slightest.

To make matters worse, she still hadn't made up with Kiyoka.

"Um, I just want to make sure here, but this isn't your Gift's fault, is it?"

"That's right. My Gift has nothing to do with it."

"Oh, phew! Well, that must mean it involves Kiyoka, doesn't it?!"

Hazuki clapped her hands together and spoke in an unnaturally cheery voice.

While it did concern her fiancé, it wasn't anything to be pleased about. While

it may have looked that way, the truth was that Miyo had ended up ruining it all.

Everything hung heavily on her, and she let out a sigh. Much to Miyo's surprise, it was quite a substantial sigh, more than enough for Hazuki to pick up on it and frown.

"Ahh... Hm, well. Miyo? See, the thing is, I don't really want to stick up for that fool, but even though he's twenty-eight now, well, he still lacks experience. In many senses of the word."

*"…"* 

"So if he's a bit clumsy with something, I hope you'll let him off the hook a bit. At least, could you try not to get *too* angry with him?"

Miyo shook her head in response to Hazuki's slightly misconstrued advice.

"That's not it. Kiyoka didn't do anything wrong; it's all my fault."

She had been so happy that the wedding was on the way, but after last night, everything had gotten so painfully awkward between them. No amount of regret would be enough.

"...Because I accidentally started crying."

When Miyo had disclosed the truth, Hazuki gently took Miyo's hand in hers.

"Was there something that bothered you? About Kiyoka?"

"No. It's absolutely impossible for me to ever feel disgusted with him. But I just... My head and chest felt so full."

She suddenly realized she was crying again. Her emotions had gotten the better of her and could no longer be contained.

Hazuki gently hugged Miyo across her shoulders. The warmth helped relax her stiffened body a bit, bringing her some relief.

"I get it. Right before the wedding, all that hope and happiness, along with the anxiety and nerves, surges in all at once, doesn't it? Especially when it's about a gentleman you fancy. I was wrong to stick my nose into things the way I did, too. Sorry."

"You didn't do anything wrong!"

"No, I did. After all, you have your own pace for things. It wasn't good to urge you on. Take all the time you need. You're not going to be able to immediately change your relationship on the day of your wedding, and it's even more reckless to try changing it right now."

Hazuki's calm voice seemed to permeate into her desolate heart.

"Perhaps there was a part of Kiyoka that felt a bit worried as well. But after he ended up making you cry, I'm positive he's chastising himself for it so severely that he probably wishes he was buried deep in the earth."

"Deep in the earth..."

Miyo couldn't help imagining Kiyoka sinking down into the ground and getting buried. It was such a funny image that she nearly burst into laughter.

Hazuki smiled gently.

"There's no need to worry if you offended Kiyoka or not. Even that obstinate fool should understand that all the different emotions you're experiencing have left you bewildered. No one's at fault for anything. Try not to kick yourself too much over it all, okay?"

"...I won't."

"Well then, we'll have to really enjoy ourselves this morning and shake out all the gloom! There aren't too many participants, so there's no need to worry. Act casually, smile, and you'll be fine."

Faced with Hazuki's words of encouragement and her chipper laughter, Miyo felt her mood finally begin to improve.

She was right—for now, Miyo would put her worries about Kiyoka to the side and focus on the cooking class. She couldn't let such a great opportunity go to waste.

Their destination, the Shioze estate, was a two-story Western-style manor that had white outer walls and an oxford gray roof, along with charming arched windows and a terrace.

While it wasn't as extravagant as the Kudou main estate, the garden was

spacious, and the property felt like it belonged to a prominent, affluent family.

The automobile passed through the Shioze estate gate and parked alongside the entryway.

"We've arrived."

The driver opened up the automobile door, and Hazuki elatedly bounced out. Miyo continued behind her.

"Welcome, come on in."

A plump, refined old woman wearing a mellow light brown dress came out to greet them. This was likely Mrs. Shioze.

"Hello, Mrs. Shioze. It has been a short while, hasn't it? Thank you very much for the invitation today."

Hazuki bowed politely in greeting to Mrs. Shioze, who smiled urbanely and nodded.

"And thank you for coming today, Hazuki. I'm so glad to see you."

Mrs. Shioze turned to Miyo.

"Hazuki, may I ask you to introduce me to the adorable young lady beside you?"

"Of course. This is my soon-to-be sister-in-law, Miyo Saimori. I thought it would be a nice change of pace if she accompanied me."

Miyo listened to Hazuki's introduction and then took a step forward, slowly bowing to Mrs. Shioze.

"I am Miyo Saimori. It's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to participate today."

"Oh my, how polite. Allow me to thank you for coming."

Miyo let out a relieved sigh at Mrs. Shioze's cheerful reception and raised her head back up with a slight smile on her face.

Although Hazuki had told her how nice Mrs. Shioze was, Miyo couldn't help but feel anxious about their meeting.

"Now I'll show you right to our kitchen."

At Mrs. Shioze's guidance, Miyo and Hazuki went inside the manor.

The interior décor gave the same impression as the outside; it was far from ostentatious and had a charming, endearing quality that excited the heart.

As they headed to the kitchen, Hazuki and Mrs. Shioze casually chitchatted together.

"How wonderful, the two of you look so close."

"That's true, wouldn't you say, Miyo?"

"Yes. Sis has always been so kind and helpful to me."

Mrs. Shioze broke into a smile at Miyo's meek response.

"I'm jealous, truly. A bride getting along well with her in-laws is a fantastic thing. Oh yes, Hazuki, is Fuyu keeping well?"

"Oh, she sure is. So well, in fact, that she does nothing but cause me trouble every time we meet."

"Oh-ho-ho. The same as ever, then?"

Miyo had heard that the Shioze family was quite prestigious and that it had once contained many Gift-users.

Apparently, one of Mrs. Shioze's grandchildren was undergoing Gift training at the moment, but the number of Gift-users in the family had otherwise dropped dramatically. These days, they tended not to get involved where Gifts were concerned.

While the Shiozes' thoughts on the matter may have differed, as far as Miyo was concerned, their position seemed similar to that of the Saimoris.

That aside, the important thing was that the Shiozes had passed on Gifts through the ages, and they possessed a friendly relationship with the Kudous.

"I believe you have already heard this, but today's class is not very big. I've invited seven other young wives and ladies, as well as you two."

"Tee-hee, I don't suppose I'm the oldest one here then, am I?"

"Oh now, you may just be right." Mrs. Shioze replied to Hazuki's jest with a delighted smile.

If everyone was younger than Hazuki, then it really must have been a gathering of only young women. Miyo might be able to fit in among them, too.

After being shown to a different room to leave their belongings, Miyo and Hazuki entered the kitchen.

The Shioze family's kitchen was completely different in every way from the ones Miyo knew.

It was equipped with the latest gas-powered cooking stove and a large oven that looked like it could bake anything. The brass water faucet sparkled bright, and the walls and floors were covered in new tile. The room itself was spacious enough to fit ten people at a time.

Inside the kitchen, there were already five young women, dressed in aprons and cooking wear, genially chatting among themselves while they waited for the class to begin.

"Oh?"

One of them broke from her conversation and looked over at Miyo and Hazuki after they entered the room. Following her, the other women all turned in their direction.

"Would these be the ones, Mrs. Shioze?"

Mrs. Shioze nodded at the woman's question with a smile.

"Yes. Allow me to introduce them. This is Hazuki Kudou, and this is Miyo Saimori."

Together with Hazuki, Miyo bowed and greeted the group. From there, Shioze offered the other five women an opportunity to introduce themselves.

The five women had the same mild-mannered and soft air about them as Mrs. Shioze, and this somewhat calmed Miyo's nerves.

However, when Mrs. Shioze departed the kitchen to be a proper host for the class's instructor, the women encircled Miyo in the blink of an eye.

"Ms. Saimori, you're getting married very soon, yes? Congratulations."

"Y-yes, thank you."

"To the Kiyoka Kudou, no less. How lovely—I can't help but be jealous."

"A truly joyous occasion, isn't it? Why, it's the whole talk of the town lately. Everyone is saying how it's sure to be a wonderful ceremony."

"Th-thank you very much."

Miyo grew flustered as they leaned right in close and pressed her spiritedly.

However, as expected of their proper upbringing, there wasn't any harshness or nastiness in their tone, and Miyo could sense that their reactions stemmed from pure curiosity.

"We all grew so excited when we learned we'd have the chance to meet you here today."

"We want to hear everything, okay? I want to brag to my friends all about it later."

"Okay."

Miyo nodded in bewilderment. This alone was enough to delight them.

The fact she felt so uneasy, when she should've been overjoyed to receive such honest blessings like this, made Miyo feel foolish and spoiled.

The truth was, she was currently experiencing the most happiness she'd ever had in her life, and though she had her doubts and her worries, it wasn't like she'd had an argument or a disagreement with Kiyoka, either.

"Thank you all very much. It makes me very happy to hear your warm wishes."

Miyo looked over at the women who'd spoken to her and thanked them with a well-mannered smile and bow.

"Oh my."

The women looked at Miyo and let out a gasp of admiration.

"Of course, it's only natural to celebrate such a joyous occasion. Isn't that

right, girls?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Naturally, indeed. You're quite conscientious, aren't you, Ms. Miyo?"

All the women seemed to have a favorable impression of her. The mood in the room instantly lightened.

After this, Hazuki joined in, and Miyo enjoyed chatting with everyone for a while.

During their conversation, the curious women asked her a great many things, but she responded happily to them, not especially bothered by it.

As the time for class to start approached, another missing participant arrived.

The last woman to come in entered right as Mrs. Shioze signaled it was time to call in the chef.

"Forgive me for being late."

She was thin and wore a kimono dyed in a single mellow color that featured a beautiful and finely detailed pattern, giving her a clear aura of frailty. The woman's eyes were slightly downturned, making her look even more fragile.

"Oh no, it's still not time to start yet, so there's no need to stand on ceremony. Everyone, this is Kimio Nagaba."

"Hi, everyone. Forgive me for making everyone wait. I look forward to our class together."

Kimio drew in her body and bowed. Miyo felt guilty just looking at her.

More than that, however, there was something that seemed to stick in Miyo's mind.

Kimio... I feel like I've heard that name somewhere...

The name flickered somewhere deep in the recesses of her mind, among faroff memories.

Miyo's social network wasn't very expansive. However, she had spent so much of her life isolated that she wasn't sure if the name belonged to a forgotten acquaintance or someone she had read about in a magazine or a newspaper.

As Miyo racked her brain, Hazuki whispered in her ear, "Is something wrong, Miyo?"

"Oh, no. It's nothing."

"Really?"

Despite the curious weight on her mind, Miyo dismissed her feeling about the woman as a trick of her imagination. It was nothing worth consulting Hazuki about. Hazuki didn't belabor Miyo's reply, and with that, the topic was dropped.

All the participants had gathered, so it was finally time for the class to begin.

The person who Mrs. Shioze guided into the kitchen was a novel sight—a large foreign male chef with a thick beard.

Miyo couldn't help gawking when she first laid eyes on the man, who was dressed in a pure white, double-breasted cooking uniform, along with a tall, equally white hat.

From what Hazuki had told her, all chefs abroad wore such clothes.

Though there was something that surprised her even beyond that.

Does this mean Mrs. Shioze will be able to interpret for him?

Sure enough, Mrs. Shioze listened to the words of the European chef, who was unable to speak the language of the Empire, then translated and relayed what he'd said to the rest of the group.

She eloquently spun the foreign words of the chef's country herself, and she seemed quite at home in the conversation.

*Incredible...* 

Mrs. Shioze was so vastly different from Miyo, who could barely introduce herself in another language. She was deeply impressed.

"Now today, Monsieur Jérôme here is going to teach us several dishes from his homeland. Why don't we jump right into a demonstration?"

At Mrs. Shioze's cue, Chef Jérôme began his cooking demonstration.

From the start, and for a long time afterward, Miyo was rapt with amazement.

Beginning first from his skills with a knife, Chef Jérôme used his hands in ways that seemed completely different from everything Miyo knew. The ingredients and the way he utilized them were unfamiliar to her as well.

Round bulbs of cabbage, vividly green asparagus, parsley, onions, and more, all changed shape one after another before her eyes.

Cheese quiche baked with vegetables and bacon over a *pâte sucrée* dough, made with plenty of cream and eggs.

Pot-au-feu made with vegetables and meat, seasoned with salt and spices and cooked over a slow, low simmer. Galette using a variety of ingredients encased in a thinly baked buckwheat flour dough.

A wonderfully delicious smell wafted up from each of the dishes, accompanied by hot wisps of steam.

Since Miyo and the other women were unfamiliar with foreign cooking, the chef had intentionally chosen dishes that they would find easy to grasp.

She and her fellow participants were all engrossed in the demonstration, peering at the chef's hands and fervently jotting down the steps in their notebooks.

When something difficult to understand came up in the middle of cooking, Mrs. Shioze would carefully explain it to them as necessary, and the pages of their notebooks rapidly filled up.

"It looks delicious."

"It really does. If only I could cook... Oh, how frustrating," Hazuki replied to Miyo with chagrin.

No matter how simple the dishes may have seemed, they would be very difficult to learn for someone like Hazuki, who had a hard time just boiling *somen* noodles.

I have to make up for it.

Miyo swore to herself that she would learn them all to please Kiyoka and

Hazuki.

"Now then, everyone, why don't we sample a bit of each at a time?"

The sample dishes were divided into small portions to ensure no one would get too full, then they were passed around to everyone there.

When Miyo finally got to sample the food, she found that it was unlike anything she had tasted before. The flavors were somewhat mysterious, yet delicious all the same. Miyo, Hazuki, and the other participants were so deeply impressed that their exclamations didn't even form into words.

It wasn't only the cooking, either. They took their time with the taste testing to turn it into a bit of a break as well. Mrs. Shioze served some black tea she had obtained for the occasion, to which everyone let out another modest cry of elation. Mrs. Shioze's tea appeared to be well regarded for its taste.

I'm happy to hear everyone's well-wishes, but it's a bit tiring...

After Miyo managed to weather the barrage of questions for the time being, Mrs. Shioze, Hazuki, and a few of the other women began pleasantly chatting among themselves, and Miyo took a seat on one of the chairs set along the wall, finally able to catch her breath.

Due to her lack of sleep the night before, her body felt heavy. It also took a toll on her nerves to be constantly surrounded by so many people's voices.

This tea truly is delicious. It goes well with the food, too.

She rested for a moment, absentmindedly sipping the fragrant tea and taking bites of the foreign cuisine. After a brief period, Kimio Nagaba came up to the chair beside Miyo.

"Um, would you mind if I sat here?"

"Not at all."

When Miyo nodded, Kimio looked relieved and thanked Miyo before sitting down in the chair.

Did she have something to say to Miyo?

Once again, Miyo began to analyze her nagging feeling that she knew Kimio.

But ultimately, she didn't need to dig out the answer from her memories, as Kimio instead revealed a clue that helped lead her to the answer.

"Saimori...Miyo, I believe?"

"That's right."

Miyo's reply to the sudden question brought a pleased and cheerful look to Kimio's face.

"I knew it! Um, do you remember me? I've married into the Nagaba family, but my maiden name was Hongou."

"Miss Kimio...Hongou."

"Yes, that's right."

Miyo felt the answer beginning to rise up in her throat. Still, it didn't clearly come out like she wanted it to.

Kimio's way of speaking suggested that they were old acquaintances.

In which case, the only time when Miyo had the opportunity to get to know anybody would have been when she was still allowed to come and go from the Saimori estate—her elementary school days.

Elementary school?

It was at that moment it finally flashed in the back of her mind. Of course. She remembered that a girl by the name of Hongou had been in her class.

"If I'm not mistaken, we were classmates in elementary school. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's correct! I never would have thought we would meet again here."

The previous meek and fragile-looking Kimio clapped her hands and clearly expressed her joy.

Strangely, once Miyo remembered who Kimio was, the memories of her time attending elementary school came flooding back into her mind.

Among those memories was an image of a young Kimio.

"It really has been a long time! You've become such a lovely gentlewoman that, at first glance, I wasn't confident if it was you or not. But I'm glad it did

turn out to be you!"

"It's good to see you again, Miss Hongou! It's wonderful to see you're just as calm and mature as you were back then."

Kimio broke into a smile, laying bare that she was truly and deeply delighted.

In all honesty, Miyo and Kimio hadn't been especially close with one another.

At home, Miyo's relationship with her stepmother and her half sister had always been bad, and she had struggled often, which meant she wasn't very cheerful even at school, and she lacked any true friends of her own.

On the other hand, the Kimio she remembered had a meek personality and acted a bit more mature than the other kids in some regards, so Miyo recalled that she hadn't made a lot of friends, either.

Basically, both Miyo and Kimio had spent a fair amount of time by themselves in the classroom, so they didn't have much in the way of contact with each other.

Still, Miyo also believed that the only reason she was able to remember Kimio a decade later was because they'd experienced similar things inside the classroom.

The cheerful kids in class seemed to live in a completely different world... Even if I was reminded of their names, I probably wouldn't be able to remember any of them.

Miyo was profoundly touched, learning for the first time that these sorts of connections were out there now that she was freely able to go outside. She felt an ever so slight bit of nostalgia for the time when she was young.

"You see, I actually learned about you a bit already," Kimio began quietly.

"Oh...are you talking about my wedding?"

"That's right. I read an article somewhere—maybe it was in the newspaper—about Mr. Kudou's wedding. It said he was marrying a Ms. Saimori, and I thought, Maybe they're talking about my old classmate."

"That makes sense, then... Miss Hongou, or rather, Kimio, when did you get married?"

Miyo questioned, prompting Kimio to laugh.

"Oh, two years ago. Right after I finished girls' school. Though the actual marriage talks happened while I was still at school."

A complete change came over Kimio; she averted her eyes and grew vaguely melancholic. Her demeanor reminded Miyo of how ashamed and timid Kimio had looked when she first stepped into the kitchen.

Something about her seemed exhausted.

"I think this may be a bit rude of me to ask, but...," Kimio prefaced, before continuing, "You haven't been having any difficulties with your fiancé, have you? After all, there aren't many good rumors about Mr. Kudou, are there? It sounds like there are plenty of young noblewomen who pine for him, but I've heard there are just as many he's sent home in tears."

In spite of herself, Miyo was at a loss at how to answer.

She could immediately deny the first part. While there had indeed been many troubles with her engagement to Kiyoka, the root of them all, if anything, had been Miyo herself. And she was sure that she wouldn't have been able to overcome them all if Kiyoka hadn't been by her side.

As for the second part, however...

It was true that there were many bad rumors about Kiyoka, and it was just as true that he had reduced many women to tears.

Hazuki had said that half of the rumors were deliberately started on purpose, but that meant the other half were simple facts.

"No. I have been...treated very well."

Miyo replied, choosing her words carefully, and Kimio's eyes widened.

"Really? He doesn't say or do awful things to you, does he?"

"No. He's a very kind man, so there's been nothing of the sort."

From the moment they first met, Miyo had never once thought that Kiyoka was actually the cold person the rumors made him out to be. She nodded firmly at Kimio as she felt her cheeks naturally soften into a smile.

When she did, she could have sworn that the look in Kimio's eyes darkened slightly.

"Then I'm sure he must love you very much... I'm jealous."

"Kimio?"

"So actually, I know a charm that's perfect for newly married couples," Kimio said, looking out of sorts for only a moment before her cheerful expression immediately returned.

"A charm?"

Of course, Miyo knew about the existence of such charms, and she understood they were often popular with young women.

But she had never actually had any experience with them, so she cocked her head in confusion as to what Kimio meant.

Kimio looked at Miyo's reaction and began to explain this "charm" in a breathy voice.

"That's right. It's getting around that newlyweds who use this charm will grow happy, get along well, and enjoy a blissful married life together."

"Really..."

"They say that calm follows a storm, don't they? I heard about this when I got married, too, and it really did go well, so I'll let you in on the secret. You just need to listen to the tale I'm going to tell you."

"Just listen to you?"

"That's right. The story I'm about to tell, well, it's a bit like an old story, a fairy tale of sorts. But all you have to do is listen to it, and good luck will come to you."

Miyo doubted that a charm that convenient really existed, but if all she had to do was listen, she supposed it would be strange to decline.

There should be no harm in hearing her story.

Charms were apparently a type of jinxing art.

However, this wasn't necessarily always the case. If anything, most charms

didn't have any magical properties at all and were little more than childish pranks.

This was what her cousin, Arata Usuba, had taught her, regarding Gifts and arts.

"Can I begin?"

"Yes, please do."

Above all else, Miyo didn't want to bluntly refuse Kimio's feelings of concern for her safety and her joy at their reunion.

After Miyo gave her the go-ahead, Kimio happily began to tell the old tale.

"A long, long time ago, there was a terribly infamous lord..."

The story was a relatively short one.

The lord was tyrannical and cruel, without any redeeming qualities whatsoever. One day, he discovered a very beautiful young lady.

The lord decided he wanted her at all costs, abducted her, and kept her at his side as his wife.

Of course, the young lady cried every night, wishing to go home. At a loss over what to do, the lord...decided to kill both of the young lady's parents, burn their manor, and erase any place for her to return home to.

"...Um, I'm not really sure how to take this."

In the middle of Kimio's story, Miyo interjected.

Surely this story was a bit too frightening to tell a newlywed. At the very least, the way it was going made it very hard to imagine it would have a happy ending.

"I get it," Kimio said with a strained smile, "but it's just a simple charm, that's all."

From there, she continued to relay the story.

The young lady learned that the lord planned on killing both her parents.

To prevent this, she convinced the lord that she would end her life if he killed

them.

Unable to endure the prospect of her dying, the lord canceled his plans and rescinded his orders.

When the young lady entreated him never to consider such a thing again and appealed to him to consider the pain of others, the lord had a change of heart and went on to become a proper sovereign.

The young lady stayed at the lord's side and continued to support him.

"And they lived happily ever after. The end."

Miyo could only manage a complicated reaction to Kimio's tale.

That wasn't happy in the slightest...

Her first impression of the story had been right. No matter how you spun it, nothing seemed happy about the conclusion.

If there was a single bright spot, it was that the subjects who had been oppressed by the lord were saved in the end. But the young lady remained forever unrewarded. After all, she was still forced to be the wife of the man who had planned to kill her parents.

A numbness, like a tingling pain, ran through Miyo's chest.

"That poor young lady," she murmured.

"...Yes, I feel the exact same way," Kimio agreed.

Despite finishing with a "happily ever after," Kimio seemed to share Miyo's opinion of the story,

"It's awful, isn't it? I mean, people don't change that easily, do they? Surely the lord's cruel, tyrannical disposition stayed the same. When I think about the young lady having to live her whole life in fear of him, well..."

Kimio lowered her eyes, and her complexion seemed to grow much worse, perhaps due to the lighting.

The teacup in Miyo's hands had completely lost all its warmth, and the black tea inside it had gone cold.

There are all too many examples of that type of relationship in real life.

Miyo couldn't say what would have happened to her if Kiyoka had turned out to be the man he was rumored to be. It was possible she wouldn't still be alive right now.

"I'm sorry. I brought up this weird story and spoiled the mood. Now that I've actually said it out loud, I realize it was a much more upsetting story than I had thought."

"Please don't let it bother you. These things happen."

Kimio lowered her head in regret, so Miyo tried to say something to cheer her up.

Charm or otherwise, Miyo found it exciting to get an opportunity to casually chat like this with a former classmate.

It was almost as if she had reclaimed some of the time in her youth that she hadn't been able to spend with any friends.

"I'm just really happy that I got the chance to chat with you, Kimio."

"R-really?"

"Yes. Back when I was in elementary school, I never got the chance to converse with anyone else like this..."

Miyo's world had been all too narrow and constrained when she was young. Since she'd needed to do everything in her power to protect herself, she didn't have any energy to spare.

She was delighted that things had truly changed from how they were back then.

"I feel the same way. I've always wanted to have a conversation with you, Ms. Saimori. Getting a chance to see you again and chat together feels like a dream come true."

Just then, Mrs. Shioze called Kimio's name from elsewhere in the room. Kimio acknowledged her summons and stood up from her seat.

"Until next time."

An unceremonious end to the conversation. Miyo let out a sigh.

Short though it was, the time she'd spent with her had been fulfilling. She hadn't expected for a moment that she would be reunited with a former classmate on this outing. It put her in a strange mood.

Like Kimio had mentioned, there was something dreamlike about the encounter. Somehow, it had been a bit like the sensation of Dream Sight.

My classmates... I'm sure they've all grown up into splendid people.

What about Miyo herself, then? She didn't feel she was splendid. She was still constantly at the mercy of her own emotions, and nothing went how she wanted it to.

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"Miyo."
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"Sis."

Hazuki had finished chatting with the other women and approached Miyo.

"It sounds like it's finally time to practice making these dishes ourselves. Go on and give it a shot."

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"Okay, I'll try."
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Now that Miyo was able to attempt foreign cooking for herself, anticipation began to swell inside her chest. Just the thought that this would please Kiyoka filled her to the brim with motivation.

Just wait, Kiyoka.

She was going to redeem herself from her failure of the night before. To do that, she would learn how to prepare new dishes and bring that knowledge back home with her.

"Someone's raring to go... By the way, Miyo, you and Mrs. Nagaba were certainly chatting together for long time, weren't you?" Hazuki asked with a slightly dubious look on her face. Miyo waved lightly.

"Oh, no, we weren't talking about anything important really... It's just that, Kimio was a former classmate of mine."

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"Really now, is that so? From elementary school?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes."

"Isn't that great?" Hazuki said after Miyo nodded, first looking surprised and then getting a gleam in her eyes.

"How was it? Did you enjoy catching up with an old classmate?"

"Yes! It felt very refreshing."

She'd had another novel encounter that filled her with all sorts of new feelings.

One that she would have gone her whole life without experiencing if she were still with the Saimoris, and if she still hadn't changed at all.

Miyo became instantly engrossed in cooking practice once it got underway.

She had always enjoyed learning new things, and her hunger for knowledge was even more intense when it was related to a task that she enjoyed doing every day, like cooking.

"You are quite accustomed to preparing food, aren't you, Ms. Saimori?"

"Look at those practiced hands! How wonderful."

While it was a bit embarrassing hearing the women around her praise her like this, Miyo couldn't deny that she was full of energy.

Conversely, despite her stubborn insistence earlier that she wouldn't allow herself to participate in the kitchen, Hazuki ultimately crumbled against the pressure and put her cooking skills on display...

"Eeek!"

Tremendous shrieks erupted immediately.

"Oh no! The ingredients have all turned to mush!"

"The oven's smoking!"

"The galette dough is in pieces!"

Scarcely any time had passed before Miyo began to hear the other women cry out in grief and panic.

"I'm sorry! Ugh, I knew I shouldn't have tried to do anything."

At the same time, she caught Hazuki's words of apology and regret.

Miyo, who had been anxiously watching the situation as soon as she heard Hazuki was going to participate, could manage only a wincing smile at the fully anticipated chaos.

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That night, it was still too chilly after sunset to open up the veranda windows and enjoy the moonlight.

Having finished her bath, Miyo was wearing only a thin *haori* coat over her shoulders on top of her sleepwear. She cracked open the sliding paper door and looked up at the sky.

Just for a few brief moments, to make sure she didn't feel too cold right out of the bath.

The moon shined bright, and the countless stars twinkled uninterrupted. She felt renewed awe at the beauty of the nighttime sky.

"Miyo."

Suddenly hearing her name called, she turned around to find Kiyoka lingering there quietly.

While he didn't exactly look sad, there was a tinge of unease on his face, probably because of the events of the previous night.

During dinner earlier, they had both been busy gauging each other's feelings and weren't able to hold a proper conversation.

Miyo might have unconsciously avoided talking with Kiyoka before and after dinner to prevent another situation like the one from the night before from happening.

"Kiyoka...yesterday, I..."

Should she apologize? Or should she explain herself?

As Miyo's gaze wandered, Kiyoka walked right up beside her, getting close enough for them to touch, then he went still.

"I trust your words."

"What?"

Taken by surprise, Miyo looked up at Kiyoka. He was staring down at her intently.

"...You said you liked me very much, didn't you?"

"I-I did..."

Having him reaffirm what she said went far beyond just embarrassment or shame.

Upon being reminded that she had given in to her impulses and said something so outrageous, she was seized by the urge to immediately cover her face with her hands and crouch down where she stood.

Kiyoka seemed somewhat embarrassed himself, and he turned slightly to the side.

"So, um, I wanted to, well, let you know that I understood... That you had gotten your feelings across clearly."

Miyo didn't know how to respond.

As ashamed as she'd felt about telling him that, she couldn't be happier if Kiyoka was going to accept her feelings.

"K-Kiyoka."

Why was it that she couldn't get her words out? Her heart was pounding faster and faster, almost painfully so.

"Can I hold your hand?" he asked.

"Huh...?"

As she stood there frozen, unable to say yes or no, he slowly began to reach out to her. He placed both of his hands on Miyo's own.

That instant, her throat, tongue, and lips all moved of their own accord.

"I-I...I lied."

She couldn't fathom what was happening. Her body seemed to be moving by itself, operating under a will other than her own.

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"About what?"
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"Wh-when I said, that, I l-liked you, very much..."

Kiyoka's eyes widened to their absolute limits. His stunned bewilderment was written all over his face.

She hadn't wanted to say that at all. She had been telling him nothing but the truth yesterday.

What? Wh-why am I saying this?

Her mouth kept moving of its own accord.

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"...In fact, I...I h-hate you...!"
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"What...?" Kiyoka mumbled in confusion. The strength left both his hands, and they fell limply to his sides.

Why? How could I say such a thing?

It was inconceivable that she would use a word like *hate* toward Kiyoka, now and for the rest of her life. She was in complete disbelief that those words had slipped from her own mouth.

Miyo felt unrest, shock, guilt...along with her anger at herself, and dejection. Her negative emotions all blended together, swirling and filling her heart.

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"I'm angry."
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She didn't feel the slightest bit of resentment toward Kiyoka. If she was angry at anyone, it was only herself.

Yet that didn't stop statements that completely contradicted her true feelings from flowing right out of Miyo's mouth, one after another.

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"I didn't take you for being so lecherous!"

"L-lecherous?!"

"You're shameless! I can't believe it!"

"...Sh-shameless..."
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"I—I cannot...d-do such things with you!"

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"Is that so ...?"
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Kiyoka's voice gradually grew softer, and his shoulders began to slump.

Unable to stop the stream of words that had never once crossed her mind from spilling out, Miyo finally covered her mouth with her hands.

Why, why, why?!

Miyo didn't understand how she could be saying things that would hurt Kiyoka, like calling him "lecherous" or "shameless."

Her thoughts and emotions were blending into a chaotic mess, far worse than they had been last night. As she completely lost her cool, Miyo's eyes spun in circles, and her vision went out of focus.

She could freely move her legs and feet. So why, then, could she not control her mouth?

Nearly in tears, Miyo abruptly turned around and ran off like a fleeing hare.

## **₩ CHAPTER 2**

## **Heart Flutter**

Kiyoka simply stood there motionless, completely devastated.

He was unable to chase after Miyo as she turned and ran from the room, as if the soles of his feet were glued to the floor.

How? How could this happen?

Since the previous night, Kiyoka had asked himself over and over again how he could possibly resolve things, and now he was again unsure what to do.

"Well, obviously you're not being sensitive enough of her feelings, Commander."

Earlier that day, Godou had started spouting unsolicited advice, but Kiyoka had found it convincing and decided to make an effort to compromise little by little.

He was confident that he and Miyo's feelings for each other had deepened to this point.

Kiyoka had asked Miyo for her love, and she had answered him.

"I love you, darling."

That moment had made him so happy that it was like a dream come true. He was even embarrassed by the sheer elation he'd felt.

However, he also understood that his and Miyo's relationship didn't at all resemble that of lovers or married couples.

The farthest they'd gone was a childish kiss. From there, hugging and holding hands. They had maintained their overly chaste relationship—on par with children's playtime—ever since.

He didn't need someone like Godou to remind him of this; Kiyoka was worried that even after the wedding ceremony, they may not ever take the next step.

Which was exactly what had led to his blunder.

"Gaaah..."

Kiyoka held his head in his hands, heaved a heavy sigh, and crouched down.

If anyone saw him looking like this, he knew he would be teased about it for the rest of his life. Yet this was one moment where he couldn't bear not to.

Last night was a huge mistake.

He had been too hasty. He had rushed things—it was all he could say. She'd had every right to say she hated him and to condemn him for being a shameless lecher.

Miyo hadn't forgiven me after all, then.

If only he hadn't acted so forcefully with her.

"...In fact, I...I h-hate you...!"

Her rejection stung deep in his chest.

Lecherous, shameless—she was completely correct. He had no excuses. He wanted to cry, but he didn't deserve to.

After being tormented by his regret for a spell, Kiyoka rose vigorously to his feet. Then he quickly headed to his room and wasted no time in taking off his sleepwear and putting on his work uniform.

After roughly running a comb through his long hair, still slightly damp from the bath, he quickly tied it together with his light blue hair cord.

Then Kiyoka finished getting himself ready to head to work and left the house, as if to escape.

It was just like he was deserting under fire. A miserable, shameful retreat.

"So you spent the whole night here in the station? Yikes...pfft."

Kazushi Tatsuishi wrinkled his brow before bursting into a guffaw. He'd arrived around noon, well after the sun had risen high in the sky.

Although he wasn't a part of the military, he was a Gift-user and worked under Kiyoka, so he often had reason to visit the station.

Next to Kazushi, Godou was also clutching his stomach and struggling to suck in air.

"D-don't laugh at him... *Pfft, hyuk-hyuk...* Th-the commander's really serious here."

Godou's shameful attempt at reprimanding Kazushi brought Kiyoka's irritation to its peak.

Kiyoka hadn't confessed to Godou the details of what was troubling him.

But when his subordinate showed up that morning to hear the troops on the late shift talking about how the commander had suddenly turned back up at the station after going home that night, and how he'd holed up in his office and worked until sunup, Godou was able to connect the dots.

After that, Godou took things a step further by revealing it all to Kazushi once he got there later, leading to Kiyoka's current predicament.

...Should I strangle him? No.

He didn't have the energy or endurance for that.

Last night, Kiyoka had left the house, returned to the station, and spent the whole time at his desk. But he hadn't been able to concentrate on anything and wound up accomplishing nothing.

Worse still, whenever he would grow a bit absentminded, the things Miyo had said to him would fill his mind in a matter of seconds.

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"...In fact, I...I h-hate you...!"
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"I didn't take you for being so lecherous!"

"You're shameless! I can't believe it!"

Just remembering this tore at his heart. But after reflecting deeply once more, he'd concluded that his conduct warranted such a biting reaction.

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"Haah..."
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When Kiyoka heaved a tremendous sigh, the laughter of his two subordinates

grew more intense still. It was more grating than he could bear.

Above all else, Kiyoka was disgusted with himself.

"I'm angry."

The image of his fiancée as she told him this flashed through his mind: her black, slightly teary pupils, and her upturned eyes and brows. Her lips, tightly pressed in a pout. And her glare, lacking any punch whatsoever, projecting vulnerability.

While Miyo had raged, a thought had impudently crossed Kiyoka's mind: that she was adorable, lovely.

There's something wrong with me.

It was clearly rude to think someone cute when they were truly irate.

But instead of feeling sad, or being tormented by pain, Kiyoka had felt only those inexcusable emotions, along with regret, after seeing Miyo look purely angry for the first time.

In fact, he'd even felt a bit touched to see that Miyo was secure enough to get angry at him.

As he ruminated on this all through the night, these emotions had simply circulated over and over through his head.

"I have to say, Commander, if you're troubled, you don't look it."

Godou pointed this out while wiping away his tears from laughing too much.

"Oh, I know what it is. His love for his fiancé is overwhelming, even when they're fighting, is that it?" Kazushi declared, nearly hitting the nail on the head together with a shrug of his shoulders and an exasperated sigh, to which Godou nodded.

"Right, just a lovers' quarrel."

"Yup, a lovers' quarrel indeed."

Despite normally getting on like cats and dogs, Kazushi and Godou had moments of being in perfect, exasperated sync. At this point, Kiyoka was too exhausted to be irritated by every little thing they said.

The phrase lovers' quarrel did indeed apply here, but...

Even still, for her to get so angry like that...

He was happy that Miyo had gotten angry with him; it was testament to how trusting their relationship had become. But when he asked himself if it was in Miyo's character for her to act this way, the answer was no.

In other words, he had hurt her so badly that she had been driven to behave completely unlike herself.

"You two."

This time, Kiyoka resolved to put his pride aside.

Fully aware of the sullen look on his face, Kiyoka reluctantly asked a question of Godou and Kazushi, who, if their sly grins were anything to go by, already seemed to know they were in for something juicy.

"... What's an effective way to apologize to a woman?"

Needless to say, the price he paid was being forced into sharing with them a topic that was going to condemn him to a lifetime of teasing.

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Two days had passed since the night when Miyo had unleashed one outrageous remark after another on Kiyoka.

Things were still awkward and stilted between them.

This was because Miyo would end up saying things that didn't reflect her true feelings whenever she went to talk with Kiyoka. Hence, the only option was to avoid conversation altogether. Now she was avoiding coming in contact with Kiyoka as much as possible.

She couldn't hope for the situation to improve under such circumstances.

What in the world happened to me...?

She felt physically fine, and nothing about her body seemed abnormal. Furthermore, she could still engage in conversation normally with everyone other than Kiyoka.

"What's wrong with me, Yurie?"

"Hmmm, well."

Appearing at Kiyoka's house for the first time in several days, Yurie lent an ear to Miyo's concerns, looking deep in thought.

"Are you sure you're not just feeling a bit nervous with the ceremony on the horizon?"

Her exceedingly reasonable explanation left Miyo silent.

If that was what someone with far more life experience than her like Yurie was saying, then maybe there was nothing more to it. Still, would mere nervousness cause her lips to move on their own?

"...I can't believe I would say such terrible things to Kiyoka and not even be able to apologize."

Whenever she tried to apologize or convey anything approaching that sentiment, her throat would immediately seize up and her voice wouldn't come out.

Yet nothing untoward happened at all when she spoke with Yurie like this.

"Oh, it's almost time for the master and mistress to arrive," the old woman commented, happening to look up at the clock.

Kiyoka's parents, Tadakiyo and Fuyu, were scheduled to come visit today. The two had never been to his house before, but as they would be staying in the imperial capital for the wedding, Tadakiyo had asked if they could come by.

Incidentally, Kiyoka had simply replied to their request with an offhanded "Let them do what they want."

Regardless, Kiyoka was at work again today, so he wouldn't be there to see his parents.

Just before noon, when it had grown warmer from the thin rays of sun peeking through the cloud cover, Tadakiyo and Fuyu both arrived by automobile.

"Hiya—koff, koff... Good to see you."

A middle-aged man dressed in several layers, as though it were still the dead of winter—Tadakiyo Kudou—got out first, giving a casual wave.

His constitution was as poor as ever.

Next, a woman wearing a dress with a thick shawl over her shoulders grabbed Tadakiyo's hand and stepped slowly out of the car. It was Kiyoka's mother, Fuyu.

She looked much the same as when Miyo had seen her a few days prior; she was wearing an expensive dress and had a stern look in her eye.

"Quite a shabby shack, isn't it?" Fuyu spat out at the first opportunity, putting her fan up to her mouth.

N-no surprises there...

"Welcome, we've been expecting you," Miyo said, chuckling dryly on the inside.

Fuyu had never made any attempt to come to Kiyoka's house up until now.

That was probably because it was located in a peaceful rural suburb, slightly outside the center of the capital, and she had learned through hearsay about what sort of house Kiyoka had bought for himself.

Even Miyo was able to get a rough idea beforehand about how Fuyu, with her taste in Western furnishings, and lavish, eye-catching items, would react to seeing a house so completely opposed to her preferences.

Although this quality of hers made her seem shallow and superficial, Miyo now knew that there was much more to her than that.

"Come now, Fuyu."

"It's the truth. It's honestly appalling that the head of the Kudou family would be living in such a meager hovel."

Fuyu was undaunted by Tadakiyo's scolding.

After laughing at her response and putting on a chipper smile that made it impossible to tell what he was thinking, Tadakiyo turned his eyes to Yurie, standing at Miyo's side.

"Oh, hello, Yurie. Fuyu's kept me informed somewhat, but it's good to see you again. I'm glad to see you in such good health."

"Pardon me for going so long without keeping in touch. As you see, I'm still happily working as the young master's servant."

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"Oh, no, it's fine."
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"Please, come in."

Tadakiyo and Fuyu inside the house.

Waiting for the right moment once the greetings were finished, Miyo urged

But as they passed through, Tadakiyo came to a halt and stared curiously at her.

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"Miyo."
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"Yes?"

"Hmm." He nodded once as if convinced of something. Miyo unconsciously blinked in confusion over why he'd addressed her.

He then slipped right through the narrow entryway as if nothing had happened.

What was that all about?

Miyo turned to face Yurie, and they both cocked their heads, but neither of them could figure out what he'd meant by it.

While Yurie went to the kitchen to get the tea and snacks, Miyo showed Tadakiyo and Fuyu to the living room alone, offering them each a floor cushion.

The entire time, Fuyu continued to voice her displeasure.

"Why, there's not a shred of dignity to this place. Nothing of the sort. Do you not agree, Tadakiyo?"

"Now, now, don't say that. I'm sure...Kiyoka probably considered all the options at the time and thought this would be best."

"How naive."

The living room seemed small now that Tadakiyo, in his thick layers, and Fuyu,

sharply dressed in Western fashion, were there. Ignoring her future mother-inlaw's dissatisfaction, Miyo turned her thoughts to Kiyoka's past.

A fair bit of time had gone by since she had started living with Kiyoka.

And during their days together, Miyo had heard a few things about his past, fragmented though they were.

Kiyoka...must have been very hurt.

Apparently, he had begun considering this house when he'd decided to join the military, then he moved in right after graduating from the imperial university.

It was, needless to say, the death of Godou's father that had prompted him to join the military.

Kiyoka was a kind man. As a Gift-user, as a military officer—and as the head of the Kudou family. He felt the weight of all his different responsibilities, and to meet them, he'd gotten hurt, had suffered, and had pushed through again and again.

With so much weighing on him, he had wanted to at least enjoy a quite private life, one that wouldn't be threatened by a large number of people.

And he'd wanted to marry a woman who could adapt well to this lifestyle.

"...Kiyoka bought this place with his own money, not the family's, so you should accept his thoughts on the matter," Tadakiyo said, a far-off look in his eyes. Miyo wanted to nod vigorously in agreement.

Kiyoka had purchased the house with his own funds, reward money he'd earned from taking down grotesqueries as a Gift-user during his university years. It was clearly an expression of his resolve.

Fuyu glanced at Tadakiyo and simply huffed through her nose.

"Thank you for waiting."

Yurie appeared in the living room, carrying a tray.

From there, the conversation turned largely toward reminiscing about days long past. The time when Tadakiyo, Fuyu, Yurie, Kiyoka, and Hazuki had all lived

in the Kudou main estate.

Fuyu claimed that talking about the past was boring, and she chose to remain silent and sullen, but the conversation between Tadakiyo and Yurie grew quite lively.

"I was never really in the house very much, so I ended up relying on you all the time, didn't I, Yurie?"

"Oh, come now, Master, you're far too kind."

"If it wasn't for you, I doubt Hazuki and Kiyoka would have grown into the respectable people they are. I'm really grateful for all you've done."

"...You have some complaints about how I educated them, then?" Fuyu quipped.

"Ah-ha-ha. Come now, Fuyu, you didn't show the children very much attention, did you?"

As Miyo listened on pins and needles, her face stiffened.

Hearing these stories from the past was fascinating and fun, but Tadakiyo could be quite biting, despite the smile on his face. He was especially unrelenting on Fuyu at various points in the conversation.

The same thing had happened when Miyo had first gone to the Kudou family villa. Tadakiyo was always smiling, so it was easy to get the wrong impression, but he wasn't a very kind person.

That was why Miyo was impressed that Yurie could brush him off, looking quite accustomed to it all.

"You were always focused on me instead of the children, after all. Heh-heh, cute, isn't she? That's another part I love about her."

"T-Tadakiyo! What do you think you're talking about?!"

Fuyu's eyes goggled in shock, and she hurriedly tried to stop Tadakiyo. However, her husband remained aloof and unperturbed.

Miyo couldn't help feeling pity for Fuyu.

In the end, Fuyu stood up, unable to bear another second of it, and left the

living room, saying she was going to go see the rest of the house.

Yurie then offered to guide her, leaving just Tadakiyo and Miyo alone together.

There was a brief silence.

From beyond the screen doors left open in the living room, she could see the verdure of the lush flowers and trees in early bloom, looking slightly hazy from the dry spring dust.

She heard the warbling of birds and the rustle of an intermittent breeze.

As the inside of the quiet room filled with the sounds of nature, Miyo felt a presence about Tadakiyo that reminded her of Kiyoka.

...Father and Kiyoka really do look alike.

Her fiancé's personality and his paleness took after Fuyu. Nevertheless, as she silently sat across from Tadakiyo, she noticed that the air felt like it did when she was with Kiyoka.

Like a sharpened, taut string, accompanied by a slight chill, yet with some amount of softness...that sort of atmosphere.

"Miyo," Tadakiyo said abruptly. She stared back at him.

"Yes?"

"So where exactly did you pick up that curse of yours?"

Her breath caught in her throat. She couldn't immediately grasp what he had said to her.

Tadakiyo's words were so at odds with his demeanor, using his elbow on the table to prop up his cheek, spoken with an elegant bearing and look in his eyes, as if idly chitchatting, that Miyo's thoughts continued to go around and around in her head.

"Huh...?"

The only thing she managed to force out was that single sound, hard to distinguish from a normal gasp of breath.

Tadakiyo gave Miyo an amused look. Apparently, he found the situation

funny.

"There's a curse on you right now. Calling it a curse is a bit excessive, though...
Pretty amateurish work."

"C-curse...? Um, on me?"

Her heart thumped with an ominous tone. Sweat began to seep from her hands.

Curses, or hexes, were a type of arts used by arts practitioners. Anything that produced a particularly negative result, even among other arts, was given this moniker.

Miyo had heard that as long as one went through all the steps and offered up the right price, even an amateur could potentially kill someone with them.

She'd struggled to get her question out, but Tadakiyo wore a cool smile and nodded.

"That's right. It's been bothering me since we've arrived. Have you not noticed it?"

"N-not at all..."

It was obviously a complete shock to Miyo. While she had studied them a little bit, her knowledge of arts was essentially zero, so she hadn't realized it was there. The same was true for Kiyoka.

"K-Kiyoka didn't say anything, either..."

No matter how awkward things may have been between them, curses were a serious matter. Miyo had a hard time believing that Kiyoka would purposefully ignore one on her.

Tadakiyo's smile broke for the first time this visit. He blinked at her in shock.

"Really? Kiyoka really didn't say anything about it to you?"

"That's right."

"I don't believe it. Then, this must be his doing... No, what am I saying? Kiyoka would never use such a sloppy hex, especially not on his beloved fiancée of all people," Tadakiyo mumbled to himself with a hand on his chin, deep in thought.

As he did, Miyo grew anxious.

What should I do? What if this curse is something serious or life-threatening? Am I going to die?

"Hold on now," Tadakiyo said, his gentle smile returning. "You don't have to worry about this at all. It's just a crude charm really—calling it a 'curse' makes it sound worse than it really is. It certainly isn't powerful enough to cause any lifethreatening damage, and it won't harm you physically, either."

"It-it won't?"

"Yeah. It's an itsy-bitsy hex—doesn't even need to be dispelled right away. It's just powerful enough to make you say some unfortunate things."

"Unfortunate things..."

There were all too many examples. Tadakiyo had also described the curse as a "charm"; that brought something else to Miyo's mind.

She found it hard to believe, but there was no reason for Tadakiyo to lie.

In which case, who had cast the curse on her...?

Looking at Miyo break into a cold sweat, Tadakiyo started to chuckle.

"That said, I can't believe that Kiyoka of all people didn't notice. He may be my son, but I can't help laughing. Hee-hee, hah-hah-hah! Koff, koff!"

The situation clearly striking him as comical, Tadakiyo clutched his stomach and guffawed, convulsing with enough laughter to fall flat on the table. Then he broke into a coughing fit.

"U-um..."

Miyo, wishing to ask what exactly was going on, waited for Tadakiyo's nonstop laughter to subside.

Finally, Tadakiyo managed to adjust his posture, take a few wheezing breaths, and turn to Miyo.

"The curse on you is very light and weak, but it's also clumsy enough that the average arts practitioner should have been able to spot it with a bit of attention. Yet Kiyoka didn't say a word about it?"

"That's right."

When Miyo nodded, Tadakiyo looked on the verge of bursting into more laughter, only to quickly cup his hand over his mouth, before stating his view of the situation.

"I think it's likely that Kiyoka didn't notice the curse."

"What? But..."

If the hex was something even an average arts practitioner could pick up on, then how could someone like Kiyoka—who had a first-class command of their Gift and arts—have failed to notice? How could that be?

Tadakiyo answered Miyo's question frankly.

"Too much excitement and joy."

"...Excitement."

Who was excited about what? He couldn't possibly mean Kiyoka, could he?

That can't be...

There wasn't any other word less applicable to Kiyoka than excitement.

Of course, there were times when he was in a good mood. But he never once got carried away with it. At least not that Miyo knew of.

Tadakiyo slowly shook his head at her bewilderment.

"He must be really looking forward to your wedding. Overlooking such an amateurish curse is proof enough. He's so excited, he's not keeping a close eye on what's around him."

"Kiyoka is...?"

It sounded far-fetched. But when she considered the possibility that Kiyoka was strongly anticipating their wedding, Miyo suddenly felt heat come to her cheeks.

That makes me so happy.

He, too, felt the same intense joy as Miyo.

A warm sensation filled her chest—the warmth that Kiyoka had gifted her up

until now. It was all swelling up inside Miyo, threatening to burst forth.

"... That's a nice look on your face. I wish happiness to you both."

Miyo could no longer see the coldness that was usually in Tadakiyo's eyes. Instead, there was only affection, and it seemed to envelop her.

With her heart so full, Miyo could only nod in response to his observation.

She was happy. About anything and everything. Even this curse had showed her a new, unexpected side to Kiyoka, so she couldn't bring herself to hate it.

It now seemed like all her torment from a short while ago had been but a dream.

Tadakiyo and Fuyu left shortly after noon, without taking lunch.

Miyo had consulted with Yurie about feeding them both, but as usual, Fuyu was stubbornly against the idea.

"I'd say it would be quite poor manners to expect me to eat a shabby meal in such a shabby hovel like this, wouldn't you?"

After seeing Fuyu's sharp glare, Miyo knew she had no hope of keeping them.

And so, Miyo fixed a simple lunch with Yurie, then made preparations for dinner. Yurie headed home once the sun had started to dip.

Orange evening sunlight streamed through the window.

While it hadn't been perfectly clear weather today, the laundry Miyo had set out was completely dry. She neatly folded up the freshly gathered clothes and breathed a sigh of relief.

A charm... Perhaps Kimio knew something about it?

She found her thoughts drifting to what Tadakiyo had told her about curses.

There was one thing in particular that she was fixated on: the story Kimio had told her during the cooking class. Kimio had definitely called it a "charm."

And that same night, Miyo had started saying inflammatory things to Kiyoka against her will.

The coincidence was too great to ignore. Plus, Kimio's charm lined up with

Tadakiyo's explanation.

In which case, had Kimio knowingly placed a curse on Miyo, or had she simply brought up the story to her as a bit of fun and nothing more?

When Miyo thought back to Kimio's demeanor at that time, she couldn't find an answer.

Regardless, I need to talk about this with Kiyoka.

Miyo made a fist and quietly psyched herself up.

The curse hadn't been lifted. Tadakiyo had told her that if she wanted to dispel it, she should make Kiyoka do it. Miyo assumed this was Tadakiyo's way of telling her to work things out with his son.

Given the effects of the curse, he must have realized that Miyo and Kiyoka's current relationship was a tad awkward.

It would require courage to talk to Kiyoka while she was still under the hex.

She was also still terrified that she might accidentally hurt Kiyoka again, so she couldn't help balking at the task.

However, Miyo convinced herself that if she was simply explaining the curse to him, there wouldn't be any problems.

It was totally dark outside. Once Miyo had finished preparing dinner, the sound of an automobile engine echoed, and Kiyoka returned home.

"I'm home."

"W-welcome back..."

"Thanks." Kiyoka seemed somewhat stilted as he replied to Miyo's timid bow. "Father and Mother came by today, right? How was that?"

Kiyoka brought up the subject in passing, just as he had taken off his shoes and stepped beyond the entryway, prompting Miyo to steel herself and turn to him.

"Um, Kiyoka?"

"Wh-what is it?"

Although he had backed away slightly, Kiyoka matched Miyo's gaze back down to her.

"Father told me something: Apparently, I've been cursed."

She would never forget the look on Kiyoka's face when he heard this.

His expression was somewhat inscrutable: a combination of dumbfounded, deflated, and slightly foolish.

"Uh, what? You're cursed?"

After standing there flabbergasted for a moment, Kiyoka returned to his senses and quickly looked Miyo over from top to bottom.

"Really...? A curse?"

A pitiful look came to Kiyoka's face. He seemed at a total loss and appeared ready to sink into the floor at a moment's notice. Imprudent it may have been, Miyo found it adorable, and she tried desperately to stop a smile from coming to her lips.

"R-right, then! We need to dispel it, right aw—"

"Kiyoka."

Miyo straightened up and quickly called out to Kiyoka again.

This was a golden opportunity. By asking the right questions of Kiyoka, just as Tadakiyo had said, Miyo could stop things from being so awkward between them.

"Kiyoka, have you been letting your excitement get the better of you?"

Perhaps due to the effects of the curse, her voice had a prickly tinge to it. But Miyo didn't let this trip her up and stood firm.

Kiyoka immediately stopped moving and froze up once more.

"E-excited? Me?"

"Yes. Father said it himself. That you didn't notice this curse because you're so happy about the wedding."

"Wh-what are you—"

Kiyoka began to object before falling silent. All of the sudden, his cheeks were redder than she had ever seen before, and he was furling his bangs.

"That... He might be right...," Kiyoka said in a voice so fragile that Miyo questioned if she'd actually heard him or not. Her stoic fiancé was beside himself with embarrassment.

A tone somewhere between a moan and a grunt escaped his lips as he alternately opened, then closed, his mouth, until finally, he let out a long sigh of resignation.

"Haaah. I don't really have any excuses here... That's right. I was probably too excited. Too overjoyed at the prospect of marrying you."

"Kiyoka."

"God, I'm pathetic... Condition critical. Honestly, you could say just about anything to me right now, and I wouldn't get the slightest bit angry..."

Kiyoka didn't say the rest. The next moment, however, he took Miyo in his arms.

He was bent over slightly, and it felt as though he was enveloping her entirely.

"If you don't like this, then tell me."

Miyo didn't mind. She tried to say as much but remained silent.

The curse hadn't been dispelled yet, so if she opened her mouth right now, she would verbally berate Kiyoka again. She was totally fine with his hug, but she knew she would accidentally say she hated it.

The hex seemed to come into effect every time she tried to make her feelings clear to Kiyoka, forcing her to say the opposite instead.

So instead of answering him, she simply wrapped her arms around his back.

The broad, sturdy, and dependable back of the man who had fought for, protected, and shielded Miyo on countless occasions. What could she possibly dislike about brushing against him like this?

"I can assume what you said about hating me was the work of the curse, then?"

*"……"* 

She neither agreed nor disagreed with him. She didn't even nod, just wrapped her arms around him a bit tighter.

"And I can trust what you said about liking me?"

"Everything from the past two days...is the fault of the curse."

After Miyo finally gave Kiyoka a brief answer, he smiled at her with relief.

"That's enough, then. I won't ask you to forgive me for being careless, spineless, and not noticing the danger you were in."

Miyo lightly closed her eyes.

There wasn't anything to forgive him for. If her life had truly been in danger, then she was sure Kiyoka would have noticed. That was the type of man he was.

He held Miyo dear and showed her more tenderness than anyone else.

I like you... I love you.

Though she couldn't say it right now, as soon as this curse was dispelled, she wanted to convey her feelings again, this time without any shyness or embarrassment. Though she might not adapt to calling him "darling" right away, she wanted it to eventually become second nature.

As Miyo gave her body over to the warmth being exchanged between them, Kiyoka whispered.

"Even if this was all the work of this curse, I was glad to see you get angry."

"Huh?"

"Um, well, you just look so cute when you're mad."

"…"

How was Miyo supposed to handle this confession of his? She was seriously perplexed.

Was there anything to find cute about someone being angry? Did he mean to tell her that he'd always been thinking about how adorable she was, even when he'd worn that look of utter shock during their fight?

I-I'm not so sure about that.

Now in a rather complex state of mind, Miyo smoothly freed herself from Kiyoka's embrace.

"Miyo?"

"Th-there really is something off with you, Kiyoka!"

Letting the words of the curse escape her lips, she fled from Kiyoka. However, there were no longer any dark clouds lingering in her chest.

The only thing that remained was her fondness for him.



The next day, Kiyoka and Godou met with their direct superior, Masashi Ookaito, in the station reception room.

They took a seat at a pair of sofas separated by a table: Kiyoka and Godou on one and Ookaito on the other. The major general looked conflicted.

"Sorry for coming out of the blue."

"Not a problem, sir," Kiyoka replied to Ookaito's frowning apology.

Kiyoka had only just arrived at the station when he got word from Ookaito that he would be coming over to discuss a slightly troublesome matter.

The sheer abruptness of his request had made it clear to Kiyoka that it was something serious.

This was how Kiyoka and Godou had ended up sitting across from their superior.

"So what did you want to discuss?" Kiyoka asked, leading Ookaito to nod once and begin.

"Are you tied up this afternoon?"

"No, not particularly."

"Pardon how sudden this is, but there's a request for assistance that I'd like you to take on. It concerns grotesqueries, of course."

This was all way too sudden—the words rose up in his throat, but he gulped them down.

With how humble and grateful his superior was acting, Kiyoka had no room to criticize him any further. Ookaito himself must have known perfectly well how absurd this request of his was.

The general seemed to sense Kiyoka's thoughts. His harsh look tightened with even more regret.

"I'm sorry... The inquiry came from a married couple in the Nagaba family."

"The Nagabas? They have quite a deep relationship with the military, don't they? If I'm not mistaken, they have ties to the General Staff Office, too," Godou remarked, and Ookaito affirmed.

"Right. That's why it was really hard to refuse... Sorry for the trouble."

"That's not a problem, but what makes it so urgent?"

Kiyoka's question was met with a deep, deep sigh.

"The other party in question insisted on consulting with you as fast as possible and forced it through. I tried to negotiate on my end of things, but then they started vaguely threatening to crush the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit if I didn't respond immediately."

High-handedness from the top brass of the military was nothing new.

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit had been established to incorporate Giftusers, a potentially powerful weapon, into the military to be part of their fighting force.

But it had been several decades since it was founded.

The goals and views that had inspired its inception were growing faint.

As a result, there were many people—even among the top brass—who ascribed to their own arbitrary evaluation of the unit. Some called it a thorn in their side, others were adamant it was unnecessary, and still others disparaged it as the do-nothing unit.

In essence, this was proof that their society was relatively peaceful, since the

Gift-users did not need to be utilized as weapons.

Nevertheless, even Kiyoka hoped that the unit would be spared from being forced into these unreasonable circumstances going forward.

Might be a good idea to really drive it home before I quit.

He was going to be out of the military soon either way.

In which case, it wouldn't have been a bad idea to push back against the top brass and try to create a better environment for Godou when he took over.

"I've been told this request stems from someone in the Nagaba family being haunted by a grotesquerie. This is your area of expertise, though, so I don't necessarily have a full grasp of the situation."

"I see," Kiyoka said with a small sigh. "Not a problem. If that's how it is, we don't have any choice but to accept the request. We'll be in trouble if we complicate our relationship with leadership. That said, can you promise that we'll have discretion to handle the response ourselves?"

They wouldn't know until they heard the full details, but it would likely take more than Kiyoka and Godou to do an actual investigation.

Ookaito agreed with Kiyoka's point and nodded.

"That works for me. I'll relay the message."

"Thank you."

With their business wrapped up for now, Godou heaved a large, exaggerated sigh.

"Major Generaaaal, am I reaaaally going to be the next commander?"

As the conversation shifted from business to private, Ookaito's expression softened.

"If you don't want to, then come up with someone else."

"Major General, I don't believe it is good to coddle Godou so much."

"Sorry. We go way back. Just can't shake the old habits."

Ookaito looked apologetic at Kiyoka's candid comment.

As evinced by his previous engagement and marriage to Hazuki, the daughter of the Kudou family, Ookaito had been expected to serve as a bridge between the military and the Gift-users from a young age.

He'd been connected to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit even before he rose to the rank of major general and was installed as their overseer.

In fact, his relationship to the detachment went back to the period when it was headed by Itsuto Godou.

"But if you really don't want to be promoted to commander, make sure to tell me soon. In all likelihood, I'll need to start thinking about restructuring the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit once Kiyoka's gone, along with the second unit, too."

"So that really will be necessary, will it?"

"Of course. You're leaving some big shoes to fill. Now, obviously, I'll have you working as a collaborator even after you leave the military, but things aren't going to be the same."

Kiyoka intended to spare no effort in collaborating with the unit, not as a military officer but as a simple Gift-user.

Nevertheless, as Ookaito said, his absence would be acutely felt. They would need to reexamine the personnel of the organization to figure out how to fill the hole he was leaving behind.

The second unit in the old capital was filled with many skilled Gift-users as well.

Based on that, they would likely have to decide on new adjutants and squad leaders below the commander as well.

Things are going to change a lot around here.

Kiyoka felt a slight hint of sorrow when he reflected on his workplace and the extended period he'd spend there.

Given the urgency with which he'd contacted the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, Ookaito was unable to talk for long and left quickly after that.

Kiyoka attended to his usual workload with Godou and waited for the

afternoon appointment concerning the incident they would be attending to.

The Nagabas arrived at the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station. They came across as rather stern.

"...I'm Nagaba. Appreciate the help."

A kimono-clad man wearing a hat and carrying a cane, and a similarly graceful woman. The two appeared around Kiyoka and Miyo's age, respectively.

While Kiyoka certainly wasn't one to comment on such matters, Mr. Nagaba's sullen, unfriendly countenance and brusque tone stood out at first glance.

The man's wife, standing behind him at an angle, modestly introduced herself as Kimio. Despite the smile on her face, she looked frightfully frail.

"I'm the commander of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, Kiyoka Kudou. This is my aide, Godou."

"Godou, at your service."

After Kiyoka and Godou had introduced themselves, Nagaba gave a *hmph*, while Kimio averted her eyes and bowed her head as she responded with a grateful and apologetic "Thank you very much for your assistance."

Though Kiyoka felt a vague note of discomfort in the air, he guided the two to the station reception room.

"Now then, can you explain in detail what you wished to discuss with us?"

After everyone had sat down, Godou took the initiative and drove the flow of the meeting.

Nagaba parted his sullen lips with a somewhat reluctant look.

"Before I explain anything, this is an extremely shameful matter for our family. It will be an embarrassment if it becomes widely known. I assume you will keep this all secret?"

"But of course. Protecting confidentiality is a basic part of our work. There'll be no undue leaks of information, I assure you," Godou replied. It was impossible to tell if he was flashing an ingratiating smile or his usual flippant one, prompting Nagaba to send him and Kiyoka a dubious glare.

"I wonder about that... Should anything happen, don't expect to survive with your jobs intact."

"Yikes... Yes, we understand."

The amusement vanished from Godou's eyes.

Godou, clearly repulsed by Nagaba's comment, had said "Yikes" in a quiet enough voice that only Kiyoka could hear it next to him. Kiyoka could sympathize.

Nagaba's relatives at the General Staff Office had pressured Ookaito to set up this meeting, and it appeared the man in front of them was cut from the same cloth as his family.

Beside him, Kimio scrunched into herself, completely shrinking away.

Nagaba's issue was a very simple one: "My mother's behaving strangely. Something's haunting her, and I want you to exorcise it." He continued to explain. "She's acting like a beast, letting out bizarre growls and greedily devouring her food. She doesn't seem to understand what we say to her, and when her condition is the worst, she'll try to bite anyone who approaches her."

Nagaba frowned with bitter disgust.

"Right now, we've managed to shut her away in one of the rooms of our manor, but this is obviously a terrible stain on our reputation, preventing us from carrying out our normal activities. I also grow concerned for my mother's health, given her age. I want this taken care of quickly," Nagaba concluded.

Godou replied in a grave, concerned manner, "I understand. From what I've heard, it would seem she's being possessed by a low-level animal spirit. Though this is all just based off of what you've told us, so I can't say for absolute certain yet."

"Really. So can you do something about it?"

"Yes. First, we'll send some of our people to investigate the situation. Then we'll be able to say for certain whether this is the work of an animal spirit or not. If we can deal with the situation on-site, we'll have them take care of it... Does that sound good, Commander?"

At Godou's inquiry, all the eyes in the room fell on Kiyoka.

Although they couldn't be too sure, the Nagaba family's case did not seem as critical as Kiyoka had anticipated. For something of this level, Godou would be reliable enough, so Kiyoka likely wouldn't get involved.

"Yes. That's fine."

"While I was informed that you, too, might now be investigating yourselves ahead of time, is that really the wisest idea? I heard that the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit valued its members' abilities over all else. If that's true, then wouldn't it be best to have you two—who I'm assuming are the strongest people here—conduct the investigation?" Nagaba ranted, looking a bit irritated.

He could complain all he wanted, but Kiyoka and Godou had their hands full right now. With the wedding on the horizon, Kiyoka had taken a few days off work to prepare for it, which meant that Godou would have to pick up his slack.

Besides, they needed to give other members of the unit opportunities to develop experience as well.

"Forgive me, but that won't be possible. However, you can rest assured that our men are all well-trained arts practitioners and Gift-users. They will have full knowledge of how to address your situation."

"...Well, I'm fine with anything as long as you get my mother back to normal."

After Kiyoka had replied calmly to him, Nagaba looked away in dissatisfaction before standing up, as if to say his business was finished.

"I'll be taking my leave, then. When will you conduct the investigation?"

"Oh, we'll get in touch about that shortly. We'll need a few days, but please don't worry."

Godou got up as he spoke, urging Nagaba toward the exit.

Just as Kiyoka also began to rise from the sofa to see Nagaba off, however, he was stopped by someone unexpected.

"U-um, I, um, have something to speak to the commander about."

It was Kimio, who had sat next to her husband the whole meeting in silence.

Something to say to me?

Kiyoka questioned what she could have to talk about outside of this latest matter, and he didn't feel any need to be kept back.

Just then, however, he saw a shadow and solemnity he couldn't ignore flicker in and out of Kimio's expression, and he thought twice about rebuffing her without lending her an ear.

Kiyoka reluctantly sat back down. Nagaba, looking through the reception room window, said, "Fine, I don't care. I'm heading back," before immediately turning around.

Godou followed him, leaving Kiyoka and Kimio alone in the reception room. Nevertheless, Kimio still cowered as she had before and lowered her eyes.

The sight reminded Kiyoka of how Miyo had looked when they first met.

No actually... Maybe not.

Thinking back to the events of the night prior, Kiyoka felt slightly enlivened. However, he quickly collected himself again and faced Kimio.

"What do you need to talk to me about?"

At his frank question, Kimio timidly shifted her downcast eyes upward and began to speak.

"...Please, I need your help."

"Excuse me?"

"I—I don't know what do to...or what's wrong with me."

"If you've got something to say, come out and say it. I'm a busy man, and I can't be in here talking with you all day."

When Kiyoka gave his matter-of-fact reply, Kimio shuddered, and large teardrops began to spill from her eyes.

"My husband treats me terribly! He says horrible things to me every day, and there have been times where he's hit me."

"...And?"

"The same goes for his mother's situation! He forces me to be the one to subdue his out-of-control mother and simply watches. No matter how much she bites or claws me, he pretends not to notice."

Kimio lifted up her kimono sleeve and exposed her arm. Just as she had said, there were numerous wounds and scars that appeared to come from teeth and nails.

"I just don't know what I'm supposed to do. Please help me!"

Kimio suddenly buried her head in her hands. Kiyoka stared at her with remarkable indifference.

Even he was surprised by how emotionally unfazed he was. A woman was crying in front of him, and he didn't feel any pity or empathy for her.

...Actually, this was how it normally used to be, wasn't it?

Kiyoka wondered why he had forgotten. This was what he had always been like before. He would remain extraordinarily aloof, no matter how much previous marriage candidates who arrived at his home would cry, scream, or rage.

His heart would not be swayed, completely indifferent to it all.

For better or for worse, he'd been through many emotional ups and downs lately, so he had completely forgotten about that.

"I'll ask this first."

Even Kiyoka was surprised by the flatness of his tone. Although he had strived to keep some level of formality with Kimio at first since she was a guest, this, too, had disappeared somewhere along the way.

"Why ask me?" he continued. "This isn't a temple that shelters battered women. There are other places to turn to for help with domestic issues. If you truly want assistance, now isn't the time to ask for it. Understand?"

"Oh... Well, but..."

Kimio looked away as tears welled in the corners of her eyes. Kiyoka fought the urge to heave a tremendous sigh. "Also, you say you want my help, but I can't really do much for you when your request is so vague. If there's something you want me to do, be concrete about it. Then I can at least put in a word with the proper places for you."

This was the biggest compromise Kiyoka could make.

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was one division of the military, and their basic role was to handle matters involving grotesqueries. It would be a problem if they were expected to do anything more than that.

Tears continued to pour from Kimio's eyes unabated.

"I-I'm just so scared of my husband and of the Nagaba household. I can't bear it... Isn't there some way you can make my husband be gentler? No matter how I plead with him, he won't listen to me, but part of me wonders if perhaps he might begin to change if someone else cautioned him..."

"Then ask that of another man. You've come barking up the wrong tree. If you would like, I would be able to get you in touch with the police."

This time, Kiyoka actually got up from the sofa. It would be meaningless to spare any more time for Kimio.

If she were an acquaintance of Kiyoka's, or a friend, he might help her out on his own, but he couldn't entertain her request any further as part of his work.

"I'll see you to the entrance. If you have problems relating to grotesqueries, feel free to come back any—"

"W-wait, please!" Kimio yelled.

A moment later, Kiyoka felt something bump against him as he headed for the reception room door.

He turned his head and found that Kimio was clinging to his back.

Gradually, the touch of her hands and the warmth of her body seeped through his uniform. She was trembling.

"Y-you're, you're the only person I can turn to. Ms. Saimori told me that you were a kind man, and I was sure you could help... That's the whole reason I came here today."

Kiyoka's eyes widened.

"Saimori?"

"Miyo Saimori. I'm a classmate of hers from elementary school... We happened to come across each other the other day, and she looked so happy... and she told me she was being treated well by her fiancé. S-so please."

As Kimio explained the course of events that had brought her here using tearful, unsteady words, Kiyoka's displeasure with her grew stronger.

While he didn't know the full situation, this meant that Kimio had encountered Miyo, heard that her former classmate's fiancé was treating her well, and thought that he might help her, too.

What sort of thought process is that?

Kiyoka wasn't kind to anyone and everyone. If anything, he was more often described as cold, and *unkind*, so then how exactly had the woman concluded that he was someone to turn to?

"Ah."

Kiyoka twisted around, shaking Kimio off him and putting a step between them. Kimio grasped at the air, her hands having lost their place.

Just then, Kiyoka learned something: Being embraced by a woman other than Miyo was a far more loathsome and off-putting experience than he ever would have thought.

"And?"

"What?"

Kimio looked up at Kiyoka in bewilderment when she heard his cold tone.

"You're trying to say that because you were Miyo's classmate, I should be nice to you, too? And save you, too?"

"N-no, that's not it."

As Kimio tried to explain herself in a fluster, Kiyoka stopped showing her any more sympathy.

"Sorry to say this, but I'm not compassionate enough to personally hear

someone out because they claim to be my future wife's classmate, nor do I have that much kindness in me to begin with. Find someone else."

Given how strongly he was casting off Kimio, Kiyoka was sure that she, too, would think of him as an uncharitable and merciless man. But that didn't matter to him.

"I don't really care what anyone says about me...as long the people in my life and my fiancée know the truth."

He remembered what he had declared to Miyo a few days prior. Even though he'd said that himself, he did think that was the perfect way to put it.

Kiyoka wanted to show kindness and concern only to Miyo. As long as she loved him, nothing else mattered to him in the slightest.

"C-Commander."

Kiyoka gently brushed Kimio's hands; she was still reaching out to him despite it all. When he continued out of the reception room and headed for the entrance, she followed after him with hurried steps.

"Is there really nothing you can do to help me?"

"Enough. Our unit will dispel the grotesquerie in the Nagaba household. We won't, however, do anything more. I'll pass on your circumstances to someone who specializes in dealing with routine issues."

Faced with Kiyoka's decisive, curt rejection that left no room for argument, Kimio shed one final tear and departed.

She looked tiny and forsaken as she left, but Kiyoka forced this out of his mind and turned back around.

## **₩** CHAPTER 3 **₩**

## Watched Over by Cherry Blossoms

The spring forest had begun to sprout with new green.

It was still early for the trees to gain new leaves, and the evergreens were covered in a somewhat gloomy verdure. Even then, patches of grass were sprouting up between the brown dirt and dead leaves, and tiny flowers bloomed, giving a small amount of color to the scenery.

Amid this forest, Kiyoka was slowly pulling Miyo by the hand along a rather hard-to-traverse road made of uneven stone.

"Are you tired?"

Miyo nodded in response to Kiyoka's question.

Not long after their nighttime conversation, he had easily dispelled the curse that was on her. Despite that, she hadn't gone back to normal entirely.

I can't believe its effects are still lingering.

Miyo suppressed her unconscious urge to sigh.

In the process of dispelling the curse, Kiyoka had realized that it was the product of an amateur and was therefore extremely slipshod. Consequently, he hadn't been able to completely remove it with the dispelling arts.

On top of that, the experience also raised the question of whether Miyo was easily affected by all arts in general, not just curses, or if there was something about her constitution that made their effects linger.

While he couldn't say for sure, according to Kiyoka, this trait of hers may have stemmed from the sealing arts that had been placed upon her from a young age.

Shortly after Miyo was born, her mother, Sumi, had sealed away her Gift to

ensure it wouldn't be discovered.

The seals placed on her had been so strong that they went unbroken for nineteen years. Kiyoka had said he wouldn't be surprised if there were some lingering effects from this. Or put another way, she had a quirk that made arts work easily on her.

As a result, there was still a possibility that the curse's influence could make unexpected verbal abuse come flying out of her mouth.

And so, Miyo was still trying to limit her conversations with Kiyoka as much as possible.

"We'll arrive after just a bit farther."

Kiyoka turned around and smiled to try easing Miyo's worries. Just then, someone asked him a question laced with suspicion.

"This has been bugging me for a while now...Commander Kudou. Miyo has barely said a single thing to you today, hasn't she? Did you do something to upset her?"

The inquiry belonged to Miyo's cousin, Arata Usuba, who had finally recuperated from his wounds and been discharged from the hospital. Walking next to him was Miyo and Arata's grandfather, Yoshirou Usuba.

This forest was located in the Forbidden Land, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Imperial Household. Right now, they were heading to the graveyard for Gift-users that sat inside its borders—the Burial Grounds.

At Kiyoka's suggestion, the four of them had decided to visit Sumi Saimori's grave.

*""* 

Kiyoka kept walking, his words catching in his throat before he glared at Arata.

"That's a surprise. I take your silence as an affirmation. Did you really make her angry?"

Kiyoka's grimace deepened as Arata expressed his shock with exaggerated, somewhat theatrical mannerisms.

"...Miyo isn't keeping quiet because she's mad at me."

"So you do admit you made her angry, then," Arata countered without a moment's delay, and the wrinkles on Kiyoka's brow grew ever more furrowed.

Not wanting her fiancé to take the blame for why she wasn't talking, Miyo turned to Arata and corrected him.

"That's not it. This isn't Kiyoka's fault. Um, there are some extenuating circumstances, so..."

She wanted to keep the hex a secret, if possible. It would be better not to worry Arata or Yoshirou unnecessarily.

At this, Arata glanced at Kiyoka with dubious, half-narrowed eyes.

"Really? Well, whatever it is, it's enough to keep you from talking to him, isn't it? I couldn't help but wonder if the commander had engaged in an affair of some kind."

"Huh?"

"A-an affair...? Never."

Unlike Miyo, who tilted her head in confusion at Arata's completely unexpected conjecture, Kiyoka looked a bit flustered for a brief moment.

Of course, Arata didn't let this go unnoticed.

"What a suspicious reaction. Miyo, there's something shady about the commander here, that's for sure."

An icy cold smile stretched across her cousin's handsome face. His eyes looked glassy, like that of a savage predator with its prey in its sights.

A disquieting atmosphere suddenly descended over them.

Kiyoka took a breath and exhaled, as if to quell his unrest, then tightened his grip on Miyo's hand.

"Kiyoka?"

She didn't believe he would be unfaithful with her at all.

Between his previous marriage candidates, there wasn't a total absence of

women in his past, but it never concerned or worried her.

Which was all the more reason why Kiyoka's reaction was so completely unexpected. Despite feeling the warmth of his hand, she grew stiff and tense.

"You're misunderstanding this. I haven't ever been unfaithful to Miyo, nor do I intend to be."

"Hmm?"

Despite Kiyoka's refutation, Arata stared at him, making no attempt to hide his lingering suspicion.

"So then why did you look so flustered just now?"

"That's...something I'll discuss with Miyo later."

"With me?" she asked.

"Yes. I think it's something I should probably tell you about."

While it appeared not to be any sort of infidelity, there was still something after all. Miyo nodded obediently, still not fully sure what he meant.

"Okay."

"That's fine then, I suppose."

Arata instantly grew disinterested. Yoshirou winced at his grandchildren's exchange.

While they chatted, they arrived at the Burial Grounds.

At first glance, it wasn't too different from a regular cemetery. Gravestones were lined up in rows across a wide plot of land that opened on a forest clearing.

What drew Miyo's eyes was the wooden shrine that appeared to be watching over the headstones.

It looked quite old, and although the shrine was obviously being maintained, its wood had gone ashen with age, decaying, splitting, and collapsing in some sections.

However, the shimenawa straw rope and the zigzag shide paper streamers

hanging from the eaves still seemed new, albeit with signs of exposure to the elements.

"So this is the Burial Grounds..."

Despite being a totally ordinary graveyard, when Miyo considered that all the people who rested here had either possessed Spirit-Sight, or been Gift-users themselves, a mysterious feeling came over her.

Even if one was born into a Gift-user family, they wouldn't be buried here if they didn't have any powers.

As such, Miyo had been totally unconcerned with it until recently. She never expected to even have the opportunity to enter.

"Where was the Saimori family's gravestone again?" Arata murmured, spinning around to look over the area.

Now that Miyo thought about it, she was the only person here who had any relationship with the Saimoris.

However, it was here that Yoshirou took a step forward.

"This way."

The Usubas hadn't been allowed to exist in the open. Miyo had heard that Yoshirou hadn't even been able to attend his own daughter's funeral.

But looking at her grandfather's unwavering footsteps, Miyo surmised that he had probably come here a great number of times before.

At Yoshirou's guidance, the group continued straight on ahead before reaching the Saimori gravestone.

It was a normal grave. There was nothing special or spectacular about it. A simple resting place consisting of just a headstone with the family name etched into the surface.

The Saimori family grave...

Here was where her mother, and her own Gift-user ancestors, were buried.

She was finally here, twenty years after her birth. Until now, Miyo hadn't ever been able to visit the grave of her mother.

Her throat grew hot, the inside of her nose stung slightly, and she could feel tears well in her eyes.

Why?

It had been over a decade since her mother's passing. She felt so pathetic and ashamed to only be visiting her now that she wanted to jump into one of the other graves here.

Why hadn't she ever been here before?

What in the world had she been doing?

Regardless, Miyo was sure that Sumi, kind as she was, wouldn't have berated her daughter for disappointing her.

"...I really should have come here so much sooner than this," Miyo murmured. Kiyoka gently brought her shoulders in close to him, providing her support. The warmth of his large frame slowly thawed Miyo as she stood there, unable to move.

"Right... Sorry for not realizing this sooner."

"No, it's not your fault, Kiyoka. After all, no one was allowed to enter here up until recently, right?"

"True, but..."

Last summer, there had been an incident here at the Burial Grounds, where it had been dug up under the emperor's direction. The grounds were greatly disturbed at the time, and it took until winter to return them to their original state.

Winter itself had been a whirlwind all its own, so it was understandable that Kiyoka hadn't thought to visit the graveyard. Miyo's own concerns hadn't left her any room to think about it, either.

The simple act of visiting a family gravestone was something that Miyo had never experienced before, so she had never thought to come here.

For a few moments, Miyo froze.

However, she eventually managed to regain movement in her body and

offered the flowers she had brought in front of the gravestone. Then the four of them silently put their hands together in prayer.

Thank you for always watching over me and protecting me, Mother.

During her time in the Saimori household, after she had left to be with Kiyoka, as well as that vital moment at the Usuba estate when she had awoken to the true power of her Gift.

On all these occasions, surely Sumi had been watching over Miyo, lending her a hand.

Miyo believed that it was her actual mother, not some figment of her imagination, who would appear in her dreams. And that it was because Sumi was watching over Miyo that she would intervene to save her when it was truly necessary.

Even if what remained of Sumi was only her soul or the vestiges of her feelings.

Right now, I am so very happy, Mother.

When Miyo announced this inside her mind, a refreshing sensation spread through her, as if a weight inside her chest had been lifted. Just then, she had a realization.

She had wanted to make this report. To her mother. And tell her that she had been able to survive until now and that she was finally able to live in peace.

She'd wanted to tell her. She'd wanted her mother to praise her. To be pleased.

Though Sumi was no longer with her, Miyo felt that if she prayed like this, knowing that her mother had been watching over her this whole time, her feelings would reach her.

For a long while, Miyo kept her eyes closed and her hands together.

Miyo sent all her thoughts to Sumi and spoke to her until her palms grew warm, then finally she opened her eyes once she felt satisfied.

"I'm sure Sumi is very happy right now," Yoshirou remarked to no one in particular. He turned to Miyo.

"Thank you for coming."

"Of course... I've taken so long to come here that it's hard to even face her."

Miyo candidly revealed the first emotion she had felt, but Yoshirou brushed it off with a smile.

"No, no, that's certainly not something you need to worry about. Sumi wasn't one to pay any mind to trivial things like that. She'd just be satisfied to see you smiling, alive and well."

"I hope you're right..."

Miyo turned back once more to face the unassuming gravestone.

At this point, Miyo would never be able to truly know Sumi's feelings regarding the Saimoris or her father. Or whether she was happy to be resting here beneath the Saimori headstone.

I love you, Mother. Thank you so much for all the love you showed me.

Nevertheless, there was no question that Sumi had loved her daughter.

Miyo could only hope that the short period of time they'd shared in Miyo's early years had been as blessed a time for Sumi as it had been for her.

She hoped it would be the same way for her.

Together with Kiyoka, and with her own child she had yet to meet. If she could please Sumi by protecting them and showing them love, then there wouldn't be anything she would be happier doing.

With a warm, gentle sensation spreading in her chest, Miyo naturally broke into a smile.

She expressed her final gratitude to her mother, then walked off together with Kiyoka, who had stood by Miyo in silence the entire time before the Saimori gravestone.

Afterward, they paid their respects to the Kudou family, and then the Usuba family gravestones, before the four then started back home.

"Well then, I suppose we can wrap things up here for the time being and meet again later on?"

Miyo and Kiyoka both nodded at Arata's question.

Later today, there would be a flower-viewing party planned at the Usuba estate.

There was a magnificent cherry blossom tree on their property. But the banquet wasn't just for taking in the beauty of its new blossoms—it would also serve as an advance celebration of Kiyoka and Miyo's wedding, and of Arata's recovery.

Miyo hadn't asked who had come up with the idea, but given it was taking place at the Usuba estate, it might have, surprisingly enough, come from Yoshirou.

The banquet would be this evening. Miyo was planning on bringing a homemade dish to the event, and she had already finished the prep work for some of the cooking.

"...If there's any guilt you feel toward Miyo, please make sure to resolve it all by tonight, Commander Kudou," Arata said, giving a nasal chuckle.

"Shut up. It's none of your business," Kiyoka responded, a vein bulging in his forehead.

A vein bulged in Kiyoka's forehead.

Just then, a brisk breeze blew. The wind rustled the trees of the forest, as if the life beginning to sprout there was speaking out to them.

Miyo felt herself brighten as she listened to Arata and Kiyoka's back-andforth, as though all the fetters constricting her had finally been released.

When dusk approached, Miyo and Kiyoka left the house as scheduled.

After coming home from the Forbidden Land and taking a short break, Miyo got to work on a dish that would let her flex her cooking skills together with Yurie.

In the end, she was able to stuff a four-tiered box set with food.

Although the gathering was only for close relatives, there would still be a fair number of people there, so she was certain that even this wouldn't be enough. Still, the Usubas would be preparing plenty of food themselves, so she didn't need to worry too much about it. Miyo's cooking was nothing but a gift to the hosts, a little extra.

Carrying the cloth-wrapped tiered boxes, Miyo sat down in the back seat of the automobile next to Yurie.

"Isn't this exciting, Miss Miyo? Why, I wonder how long it has been since I last attended a flower viewing."

"It is. This is my first time attending a flower-viewing party, too, so I really am looking forward to it."

Yurie had also been invited along to the banquet. She and Miyo were eagerly anticipating the event.

Kiyoka drove the automobile down the roads of the imperial capital before parking in the open area on the Tsuruki Trading property. He had previously gotten permission from Arata to use it as a place to park his car.

The three of them passed beyond the Tsuruki Trading building and entered the Usuba estate.

"Welcome, we've been waiting for you."

Arata was there to greet them with a respectful bow. His friendly smile and elegant mannerisms were just the same as when Miyo had first met him—and when she had been with him at the Burial Grounds.

During the Usui affair, Arata had been placed in a complicated position, and he ended up both suffering heavy wounds and shouldering the crime of taking Usui's life.

Usui was a criminal abusing his Gift for nefarious purposes, and the Usubas' role was to pass judgment on such Gift-users.

In other words, Arata had stopped Usui, and as ending the man's life was within the purview of his duties, he wasn't actually charged with anything.

Still, it was clear that he had been wounded physically and mentally in the process.

Miyo was still concerned for Arata, and she had regularly visited him when he was in the hospital. By now, it had become a habit of hers to try and gauge how

he was doing every time they met.

But Arata...is fine, isn't he?

He was someone with a firm handle on himself. If anything, he now looked as though a weight had been lifted from him, more so than before he'd gotten involved with Usui.

The same was probably true of Miyo.

She couldn't say that witnessing Usui's death hadn't cast a shadow over her heart.

More than that darkness, however, she felt optimistic. All the problems facing the Usuba family had either been resolved or had a visible path to resolving them.

"Um, Arata. Here."

Miyo handed him the tiered boxes, and her cousin's smile broadened even further as he accepted them gently.

"Thank you. You didn't have to go to the trouble. I'm sure you must be busy with the ceremony so close."

"Oh, no, I like cooking; it's a nice breather for me. Although I don't think I'm any match for the Usubas' chefs, so it's a bit embarrassing..."

"Ha-ha-ha. We'll always welcome your homemade meals, Miyo. We've almost finished preparing everything already, so please go straight into the garden."

With Miyo's tiered boxes in hand, Arata led them through the entryway to the garden.

There, a large tree covered in pink came into view.

It was still early for full bloom, and only about half the buds were open. Nevertheless, the branches of the tree were tinged with red, and the small open petals here and there were a lovely sight.

It was likely only a handful of days away from full bloom.

"It's beautiful..."

Miyo was utterly moved by the sight of the flowering cherry blossom tree, the

same one that her mother had watched herself while growing up here.

A magnificent tree. A tree with a clearly felt history, surely having lived for a very long time.

Miyo hoped that the cherry blossom tree that would be planted in her and Kiyoka's garden would grow to be like this. She couldn't help but daydream about such a future as she looked up at it.

"It's quite splendid," Kiyoka murmured next to her in admiration.

Just as the mood began to take a solemn turn, however, the next guests arrived.

"Good evening. Oh, am I late?"

Entering the garden at the direction of one of the Usubas' servants was Hazuki, along with Tadakiyo and Fuyu.

"Sis."

"Miyo! Your kimono is absolutely gorgeous. The pink is perfect for flower viewing."

"Th-thank you very much."

Miyo grew bashful at Hazuki's unvarnished praise, and she looked down at the ground.

The kimono she had on was among the first Kiyoka had gifted her. She was especially fond of it because its cherry blossom pattern reminded her of her mother.

Although she had worn it once before, the season changed soon after, and she hadn't been able to wear it again.

The hairpin she had on was one she had gotten only recently, and it had a crepe flower attached. Miyo felt slightly bashful at the praise but happy all the same.

"Heya, Kiyoka. Doing all right?"

When Tadakiyo approached with a slightly suggestive smile, Kiyoka stiffened, giving a one-word affirmation before looking away.

He appeared to feel awkward about the curse placed on Miyo.

The fact that he hadn't noticed it himself and had needed his own father, of all people, to point it out must have given him quite the mental shock.

"Really? Glad to hear it."

Tadakiyo seemed to pick up on Kiyoka's state of mind, too, judging by the slightly teasing tone of his reply.

"So this is the Usubas' home, is it? Well, they do have some taste, at least."

"Honestly, Mother, we've come all this way, so can you stop talking like that?"

Hazuki frowned at Fuyu and her typically contemptuous way of speaking. But Fuyu turned a haughty eye to her daughter, wholly unapologetic.

"You can be so mouthy, I swear. Are you sure that's not why you were divorced and had to move back in with your parents? Such an embarrassment."

"Excuse me?!"

"Dearest Father, Mother. It is good to see you once more."

As if to stop Hazuki moments before she exploded in anger, the freshly arrived Ookaito earnestly greeted the couple from behind.

The sudden appearance of Ookaito made Hazuki's voice catch in her throat, and Tadakiyo and Fuyu also turned their attention to the large and stately man.

"Good to see you, Masashi. You've kept in touch, but I wonder when we last were face-to-face together like this."

"I'm not sure... I am truly sorry that I was unable to come by and greet you at New Year's."

"Oh, no, no, I'm sure your family has some misgivings about that. Don't let it bother you."

Miyo could tell from Tadakiyo and Ookaito's back-and-forth that the Kudou family and the Ookaito family maintained a tricky relationship.

"Come, we can't keep you standing here all night."

With the conversation reaching a good stopping point, Arata went to show everyone to their banquet seats. Just then, however, a boisterous shriek echoed in from the direction of the entryway.

Arata immediately headed over there. A short while later, he returned with Godou, wearing a slightly worn-out kimono, and—to everyone's shock—Takaihito, wearing a fashionable suit.

"It's a wonderful night. Lively and merry. What more could one ask for?"

Everyone present, Miyo included, went to drop to their knees, but Takaihito put a stop to it all.

"As you were. Tonight, I am not a crown prince but a guest of the Usubas. Everyone, please be at ease."

His words, characteristic of his openhearted personality and in sharp contrast to his otherworldly appearance, made everyone present breathe a sigh of relief and shift their postures back to normal.

In a moment like this, even Fuyu stowed her usual nonstop complaints, behaving not just obediently, but with the elegant and refined graces of a highborn madam.

Mother really is impressive.

Miyo inwardly expressed her respect for Fuyu.

"Prince Takaihito, please allow me once again to welcome you here. I doubt our hospitality can hope to match what you are accustomed to, but please relax and enjoy yourself."

"I shall do just that," Takaihito replied with a comparatively gentle expression to Arata's greeting.

The tension created by Takaihito's appearance abated, and everyone returned to their friendly conversations once more.

"Was that your scream just now, Godou?" Kiyoka addressed his subordinate, who was lingering as if trying to hide his presence.

"Commander...I didn't hear anything...about Prince Takaihito being here."

"I didn't mention it?"

"Not at all! I ran across him out of the blue and thought my knees were about to give out!" Godou replied indignantly, tears practically in his eyes. The sight was so amusing that Miyo couldn't help but laugh as she listened beside them.

"Miss Miyo, this isn't a joke, okay? This here is an example of the commander's extremely tyrannical behavior."

"Hee-hee. F-forgive me..."

"Hey. Who're you calling 'tyrannical'? Don't insult me like that."

Narrowing his eyes in anger, Kiyoka sent a sharp glare at Godou.

"As fun as your banter may be, would you mind taking your seats now that Prince Takaihito has arrived?"

Arata had been the one to interrupt them. The other guests, who had been gathered around the garden entrance, were now all heading toward the table and spread-out quilts set up near the cherry blossom tree.

"Actually, is that guy coming today, too?"

Godou asked this of Arata after the four of them had started walking over. Miyo had an idea as to who this "guy" Godou had mentioned was.

Arata gave Kiyoka's subordinate a wry smile, immediately understanding what he'd meant.

"Ah, the master of the Tatsuishi family? I invited him as well, of course. He seemed quite excited about the idea, so I would guess he is just running late."

"That Tatsuishi... I'm always telling him to be on time," Kiyoka commented offhandedly, to which Godou nodded along with big swings of his head.

"You're absolutely right! An irresponsible oaf, truly! Though he's not part of the military, so even after you step down from being commander, you'll look after him, right? I won't need to take care of him, will I?"

"...I'm loath to do so, I admit. But I did take him on, so I don't have much choice."

"All right!"

Godou was pleased with every ounce of his being; it was truly an amusing sight.

After that, Kazushi arrived safely before Takaihito could lead the toast, and the banquet began.

Both the alcohol and the food the Usubas had prepared were all first-class, and everyone delighted in all the curious Western-style fare.

The dishes Miyo had brought consisted of standards like simmered foods and pickles, yet they proved surprisingly popular, enough that some of the partygoers—men, mostly—started scrambling for them.

This is so much fun.

Miyo didn't know that a flower-viewing party with people she was close to could be such an exciting affair.

She allowed herself to give in to the pleasant gaiety and relished the merry atmosphere. This alone made her glad she had come, and she thanked Yoshirou and Arata inwardly for planning this occasion.



Takaihito sat in the seat of honor, and as he tipped back his sake cup, he gazed out at the cheerful and merry faces of the banquet participants.

"As I cannot attend the ceremony, this was the perfect opportunity."

It was in large part thanks to Ookaito that the crown prince had been able to sneak out and attend the party incognito.

Ookaito was partly showing consideration for Takaihito, who, for both security reasons and concern for the precedent it would set, would be unable to attend the wedding of his childhood friend, Kiyoka.

Although Takaihito strived not to let himself get emotional, the casual kindness of those around him permeated his heart.

The Kudous—Tadakiyo, Fuyu, Hazuki, and Asahi, attached to his mother's hip—were eating and amusing themselves by swapping the occasional jab. Eventually, Ookaito joined them so they could spend time together as a family.

Godou and Kazushi were arguing about this and that topic, from their work to their personal tastes, pouring sake into each other's cups in an implicit competition to see who could avoid passing out longest.

Miyo was taking bites of her food together with her grandfather, Yoshirou, and her servant, Yurie, enjoying the pleasant conversation. Occasionally, Arata would pop by to join them.

Everyone was watching the flowers, having their fill of food and drink, and chitchatting amicably with one another.

The very peace that Takaihito had sought was there in front of him.

"Prince Takaihito, you're not bored, are you?"

It was Kiyoka who asked this.

Moments ago, he had been by Miyo's side watching over her, but somehow, he had managed to sneak on over to Takaihito without him noticing.

"Not in the slightest. I'm having a wonderful time simply watching you all."

The crown prince had known Kiyoka since childhood, and he had always been exceedingly quiet and unsociable. While he could still show kindness and consideration, he very rarely did so openly.

In fact, Takaihito wondered if Kiyoka had ever deliberately called out to him like this before.

Finding it amusing, he curled his lips ever so slightly into a rare, honest smile.

"As long as you are enjoying yourself," Kiyoka said.

"You've become quite a considerate man, haven't you?" Takaihito said teasingly. Though he expected Kiyoka to sullenly pout in response, the commander merely cocked his head.

"You think so?" Kiyoka said, not looking particularly perturbed. "That means we have her to thank, don't we?"

Takaihito couldn't help but laugh at how calmly his friend was able to give such an honest reply.

Kiyoka's eyes went wide as he watched Takaihito break into a chuckle despite

himself. Alongside him, the other participants also went silent for a moment and gazed at the crown prince in disbelief.

Now that Takaihito thought about it, he hadn't laughed so openly in quite a while.

As the imperial heir, and as the man meant to control the Gift-users and guide the country, he typically did his utmost to prevent excessive emotion from surfacing on his face.

He believed that was the correct way for the emperor, and the country's guiding force, to act, and he hadn't wavered in his conviction.

That being said...

Even with everyone staring at him, Takaihito made no attempt to suppress his laughter.

A little bit of lenience was fine every now and then.

Takaihito still had emotions; he simply tried not to openly show them. And besides, no one would follow a leader bereft of all feelings.

The people believed in him precisely because he possessed a heart of his own.

"Kiyoka."

"Yes?"

"Congratulations on your marriage. Early though it may be."

As Takaihito gave his blessing with a smile on his face, Kiyoka broke into a grin himself.

"Thank you very much, Prince Takaihito."

The crown prince lifted his full cup of sake. Catching his drift, Kiyoka also raised his cup, and the two brought them together in a toast once more.

To celebrate the wedding of Takaihito's best friend.



Before long, the alcohol took its effect, and the banquet reached its height, with almost half the food gone.

Kiyoka separated himself from the clamor of the party, leaning up against the fence that encircled the garden, taking sips of his drink as he gazed at the cherry blossom tree.

He had never been very accustomed to these lively events.

Kiyoka didn't mind them, but after spending a fair amount of time in a noisy place, he would suddenly get the urge to escape for some time in quiet.

"Enjoying yourself, Commander?"

After a short while, Arata approached Kiyoka without him noticing.

At this point, Kiyoka wasn't unsettled by Arata's behavior, but he'd lost track of how many times he'd marveled at how formidable the man was.

"In moderation."

Kiyoka didn't have any fond memories of past flower-viewing parties, where the participants had only ever consisted of irksome social acquaintances.

Compared to those, this banquet was filled only with old and trusted friends, and he had been able to enjoy himself plenty—though he was loath to admit this, and so he had replied with ambiguity.

Arata shrugged lightly before putting about two people's worth of space between himself and Kiyoka, leaning on the fence beside him.

"...Miyo's worried about you."

Deciding he would make sure to say this much to Arata, Kiyoka broached the topic matter-of-factly.

He hadn't talked about it with her in detail. However, his fiancée had made it clear how anxious she was over her cousin.

The man beside him had surely noticed it himself, and Kiyoka may not have needed to come out and tell him. Still, it didn't feel right to leave it unsaid.

"I'm thankful for that. I couldn't be happier to have such a compassionate cousin."

"It's because you're always doing things to make her worry."

"Ha-ha. I can't deny that."

Twisting his mouth in a somewhat self-deprecating smile, Arata looked up slightly.

"Then let me ask you this, Commander: What exactly did you do? The remnants of a curse are lingering on Miyo, but what actually happened?"

*"…"* 

"This isn't the time to worry about someone else, is it? When I mentioned infidelity, you reacted quite suspiciously as well."

Right, so this is what Arata came over here to ask me about, Kiyoka thought bitterly.

He was always smiling and always convivial, yet he never let anyone's unguarded moments escape them. It appeared Arata Usuba was back to normal, his wonderful personality intact.

Kiyoka had thought the conversation had ended after they'd talked at the Burial Grounds, but it seemed Arata wasn't going to let things drop.

He heaved a sigh of annoyance.

"Like I said, I haven't done anything unfaithful... However."

"However?"

"I met a woman who said she was a classmate of Miyo's from elementary school. And she, well, she made a plea to me in tears. That's all."

"Pleaded in tears? Do you mean that she asked you for help, or that she physically clung to you?"

"...Both."

"Oh my. I see."

Kiyoka couldn't see Arata's face, but he was sure he was wearing quite a grimace. Arata cast a quick sidelong glance and scoffed.

"Quite the disaster, wasn't it? Touched by another woman, and while it never crossed over into infidelity, your slightly guilty conscience led you to act suspicious, then?"

Kiyoka detected a note of hostility in the air as Arata continued, "I've thought

this for a while, but you're quite naive, aren't you?" He got the feeling he was being mocked.

"You told this to Miyo?"

"I did."

Following his declaration that they would discuss it later, Kiyoka had reported on what occurred at the station with Miyo's old classmate, Kimio Nagaba, once they'd returned from the Forbidden Land.

Surprised though she was, Miyo had calmly listened to Kiyoka's explanation and showed no signs of dismay.

Of course, Kiyoka apologized after he'd finished explaining everything, but Miyo said that it was fine and that it didn't bother her in the slightest.

Though her reaction still managed to make Kiyoka feel a bit empty.

While Miyo hadn't seemed worried about the possibility of infidelity, it still seemed like something was bothering her after Kiyoka had explained everything. When he pressed her on this, she responded as follows:

"If this is just my misunderstanding, then...I would feel bad for Kimio, but I think my curse might have stemmed from the charm that she taught me."

Kiyoka conveyed this all to Arata.

"A charm..."

"Right. I asked for the details from Miyo, but that seems to be the extent of it."

Curses spread by a story were rare but not unheard of. A simple hex, one even an amateur could perform. Due to its simplicity, though, its effects were weak, and it didn't last for very long—at most a few days.

It truly was just a bit of fun.

As a result, it wasn't clear if Kimio Nagaba had intended to harm Miyo at all, and even if she had, it was hard to understand exactly what she had wanted to do.

Still, this strange feeling I have. I can't quite place it.

The wedding ceremony was only a few days away. Though he wanted to participate free of any apprehensions, Kiyoka couldn't dispel the disquiet in his chest.

"Commander?"

"Sorry, something just doesn't feel right. Hopefully it's just my imagination."

Kiyoka replied to Arata's questioning tone with honesty. There wasn't any point in hiding something like this.

The more people taking precautions, the better. If there was still another person working behind the scenes, and if they were a Gift-user or an arts practitioner, then it would involve the Usubas anyway.

"It's rare to see you seem so unsure of yourself, Commander."

"...That's not true."

However-

It wasn't that he lacked confidence. It was now clear to him what he needed to protect, and the feeling of dread had grown stronger inside him than before.

Usui was partly to blame as well. If a Gift-user of his caliber were to close in more carefully, with more cunning, then Kiyoka might not be able to protect Miyo. This anxiety followed him everywhere.

Obviously, there weren't very many villains as strong as Usui around in the first place.

His Gift was perfect for deceiving Gift-users—anyone, really—and defeating them. A more Usuba Gift than any other. He had used it to evade the imperial family, the state, and even the other members of his family until he finally came out in the open and started doing as he pleased.

That was the type of man Naoshi Usui was—the worst possible enemy one could fight.

But now that he was gone, there weren't any other Gift-users on his level in the country.

Or at least there weren't any among the Gift-users registered with the

government, and it was difficult to believe one might be unregistered, too. It was the exact world that Usui had talked about—where it was growing harder to give birth to Gift-users or those with Spirit-Sight. With their different natures to the vast majority of other people out there, they were quickly spotted when they did appear.

It was nearly impossible for them to remain unregistered.

Even telling myself that, though...I can't shake this sense of foreboding.

Kiyoka didn't know what sort of threat might come. There was no guarantee that Miyo would be spared, either.

Usui's existence had taught this all too well.

"It's not that I'm unsure of myself. I'm merely focused on reminding myself that I can't afford to get careless, even after quitting the military."

"I see."

Gripping down on his now empty cup, Kiyoka straightened up after leaning against the garden fence.

"Commander."

"What?"

When Kiyoka turned around at Arata's address to him, he was greeted with a dauntless smile.

"Do you want to have our promised rematch from last year before the wedding, or after?"

Kiyoka's breath caught in surprise.

He was right. Back then, when he had first come to the Usuba home, Kiyoka had crossed swords with Arata and lost. Afterward, Arata did say something about having a rematch when Kiyoka was in perfect form.

But until now, Kiyoka had completely forgotten about it.

At this point...or maybe because it's come to this point, I guess.

Arata seemed to be questioning him with his eyes—Can you protect Miyo? He was trying to see into the innermost depths of Kiyoka's heart. His fighting spirit,

too.

Kiyoka was being tested, challenged.

For a short while, their gazes met. It was a terribly painful moment, one that Kiyoka had experienced before. Arata was challenging Kiyoka's behavior, silently judging it. This right here would be the last time.

As a man of the sword, Kiyoka was against letting his defeat stand. However...

"I—"

"I was just kidding."

Arata was first to quell the sharp, stabbing urge for battle that nearly pierced right through Kiyoka.

The commander was left deflated; he'd been seriously bracing himself to engage in their long-awaited rematch. Just then, however, Kiyoka realized that Arata's eyes weren't on him anymore but on something behind him, and he followed his gaze.

"Am I bothering you, Kiyoka?"

With the cherry blossom tree shaking in the gentle breeze at her back, Miyo gauged the air between them with a timid look.

She was beautiful, wrapped in her pink kimono and melding with the cherry blossom petals where she stood.

She was delicate and ephemeral. But now she also had a firm, sturdy presence that was far more apparent than it had been a year prior. Miyo looked purer and lovelier than any other.

"No."

After Kiyoka had given this brief reply, his feet carried him toward her of their own accord, as though he was being drawn in.

Suddenly, a thought that any man would be disgraced to entertain—that he was like a bee being drawn toward a pretty flower—crossed his mind.

But what was so bad about that, really?

"You're not bothering us. I'll return to the banquet soon."

He couldn't see it, given he had no mirror, but Kiyoka felt his expression soften. He was certain anyone looking on would find it slovenly.

"... A rematch isn't going to mean anything."

Kiyoka thought he heard Arata's faint voice being carried on the wind. He decided to act like he hadn't.

This would likely be the last time Arata would challenge him. Before long, he wouldn't need to anymore.

We're both going to continue forward.

It was pointless to insist on combat. The only thing they could do was keep on moving forward, without looking back.

Kiyoka stood in front of Miyo.

In the past year, her complexion had visibly improved, and she had gained a healthy amount of weight, so her pale skin was now tinged pink.

"I'd like to do my first nighttime cherry blossom viewing with you, Kiyoka."

"Let's have a look."

Illuminated by the glow of the Usubas' gas lanterns, the garden framed the pink of the cherry blossoms and the black of night with a perfect mix of darkness and light, creating an almost mystical scenery.

"Ah, that reminds me. It think the effects of the curse are growing weaker," Miyo said suddenly. Indeed, she had managed to express her desire to view the cherry blossom tree with Kiyoka without accidentally saying anything to the contrary.

"I'm glad that the worst of it is over."

Gently, as if handling a fragile antique, he wrapped his arms around Miyo's shoulders. When he brought his face close to her hair, a slightly sweet scent filled his nose and swelled in his chest.

"K-Kiyoka! Everyone will see us...!"

He lightly broke into laughter as she turned red from ear to ear and fidgeted in place.

"Then it's okay as long as no one sees us?"

"Wh-why are y-you asking me something like that?!"

Her straight black hair and her gorgeous black saucer eyes. Her smooth cheeks and her tiny lips. The more he stared at Miyo, the lovelier she became. His affection toward her grew stronger and bubbled over.

He recalled the very first time he had seen her break into a broad smile.

Back then, he wouldn't have imagined for a moment that the day would come when he felt such love for this young woman.

However, Kiyoka was sure that even those emotions he'd held back then, though far, far weaker than now, were the same feelings of affection. So perhaps things were always going to end up this way.

"Miyo."

When he gently whispered her name into her ear, Miyo stopped fidgeting and looked up at Kiyoka with eyes that were slightly resentful yet still filled with love.

"Is it all right if I touch you?"

"...You're already doing that..."

"No, I mean more. I don't mean here. Just, from where we left off..."

To speak any more specifically would be putting his desire out on display, and he hesitated. Nevertheless, Miyo seemed to have understood what he meant.

Perhaps at this point, she was no longer completely naive and innocent, either.

Miyo averted her eyes and nodded ever so slightly. She was too adorable for Kiyoka to bear.

I'm mortified by how giddy my thoughts have been.

If someone else could peer inside Kiyoka's brain, they would, without exception, become disillusioned with him and show him disdain.

"But."

Miyo looked up at Kiyoka once more, her cheeks flushed.

"C-can you wait until after we're married...?"

"Of course. I'd like to think I have at least that much common sense."

As he spoke, though, Kiyoka suddenly came to his senses. Was there a chance that he had come off as so greedy that she had started to question if he even possessed a basic degree of decency?

I need to be prudent.

He couldn't endure being seen as a vulgar man who lacked composure. His arm still across Miyo's shoulders, Kiyoka continued to reflect on himself.



The day had been mild, with soft spring sunrays and a thin cloud cover.

Evening was approaching, and the sun was just beginning to set. Miyo went into the living room, finished taking in the laundry, and saw Kiyoka inside.

It was the day before their wedding ceremony.

After tomorrow, Miyo and Kiyoka would at last become husband and wife. She would go from being Miyo Saimori to Miyo Kudou.

Naturally, she found herself totally unable to relax, and her housework was the only thing that kept her mind at peace.

But I feel like that's not entirely it, either...

There was a vague anxiety and disquiet in her chest. For the past few days, an unplaceable foreboding—not merely nervousness about the ceremony—had hung around her incessantly.

What is it? I wonder.

Kiyoka had made sure to take today and the next several days off from work, and he was at the house getting ready for the wedding. However, he was gazing outside at the moment, his mind seemingly elsewhere.

Perhaps Kiyoka feels it, too?

Nevertheless, it was terribly difficult for her to put this nebulous sensation

into words. Miyo didn't think consulting about it with Kiyoka would give her any answers, so she kept quiet about it.

As long as she didn't fully understand it, the only thing she could do was to act like normal.

Miyo called out to Kiyoka.

"What would you like for dinner?"

"Good question..."

Kiyoka turned his gaze sluggishly to Miyo, though he didn't appear to be wholly absentminded.

"Something hearty and filling to help us get ready for tomorrow."

Seeing Kiyoka's nearly expressionless visage soften, Miyo sighed with relief.

The unrest inside her didn't disappear, but his smile put her mind at ease.

"Got it. I'll make a lot of rice and plenty of dishes to go with it!"

Kiyoka nodded at Miyo's enthusiastic response.

Tomorrow morning would be the last time she set out food on the dinner table as his fiancée. That being said, even if she made plenty of food the next morning, they probably wouldn't be able to eat much.

So tonight, she was going to make more food than they could possibly finish or that she could even lay out on the table.

Maybe my anxieties will go away if I fill myself up.

But just as Miyo psyched herself up and was about to start making dinner, a small white object glided in through the window and landed in the room.

"A familiar? It's from someone in the unit."

Kiyoka grabbed the paper familiar out of the air and tried to deduce who had sent it.

When he did, the communication device began eloquently talking on its own.

"Commander, we've got an emergency. Come to the station as soon as you get this... We have discovered a dangerous cursed relic. It's too much for us to

handle on our own."

Miyo recognized the voice. It belonged to Mukadeyama, one of the squad leaders of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit who Miyo was acquainted with.

While the familiar had spoken in his characteristic coolheaded tone, even Miyo could pick up a hint of exasperation and uncertainty in his voice.

Kiyoka acted quickly.

He nimbly rose to his feet and rushed to his room to get himself ready.

As he did, Miyo could do little more than stand dumbfounded and stock-still in place. Her hearth pounded with an unending and unnerving thud.

However, she quickly came to her senses, turned on her heel, and made for the kitchen.

An emergency situation and a trip to the station at this hour meant Kiyoka would mostly likely not get to eat dinner until later.

I need to make something that can fill him up fast.

Given she was only now starting to prepare their meal, she didn't have much of anything on hand. While she had the stir-fried and simmered vegetables and the pickles she'd served at lunch, along with cold rice, she wouldn't have time to reheat them again.

She couldn't ask for too much in times like this.

Miyo placed the leftovers in as many lunch boxes as she could find, forced the lids on the containers, and wrapped them up.

"Kiyoka."

When she returned to the living room, Kiyoka was changed into his military uniform and fully ready to leave for work. A hint of sadness flickered in his lightly colored eyes.

His shapely lips were pursed tight, and his brow was furrowed in a frown.

"I'm sorry, Miyo. I'll do what I can to get back here fast."

"No, please, don't apologize."

Miyo shook her head. She couldn't let Kiyoka fuss over her. She needed to be resolute as she saw him off.

"Give work all you've got. If you happen to have a spare moment, please eat this to keep yourself full."

"Thank you."

When she handed over the wrapped-up boxed dinner, Kiyoka accepted politely, as he always did before leaving for work. It was the same scene that played out every morning between them, yet an incessant commotion still stirred in her chest.

"It pains me that they're just the leftovers from lunch..."

"I don't mind. I'm grateful for any nourishment I can get."

Kiyoka's smile also seemed to waver with restlessness, perhaps because it was colored by the evening sun.

It's okay. It'll be fine. If I come off as anxious, I'll be getting in the way of Kiyoka's duties, so I need to remain calm.

Though it may have been an emergency, that didn't necessarily mean Kiyoka would spend a long time at work. Just in the past year, this hadn't been an unusual occurrence, and he usually attended to time-sensitive matters with surprising speed.

The situation just felt especially pressing because it was the day before their wedding.

"Be careful, and good luck at work."

"Thanks. I'll be off."

Giving her usual good-bye, Miyo watched Kiyoka walk toward the entryway. Nevertheless, Miyo grew restless and went after him.

"Kiyoka."

When she called out to him, he came to a sudden halt.

"Please, don't get hurt. And I don't want you doing anything dangerous... I'll be waiting here for you patiently and making sure I'm mentally ready to make

tomorrow's ceremony a success."

Her words sped up and ran together. Alarm bells blared in her heart, and her breathing grew labored.

In all honesty, she didn't want to be away from him. She wanted to spend a relaxing night with Kiyoka before the ceremony. However, it no longer seemed this wish of hers would be granted.

She couldn't help but feel sad about this, and she felt her eyes starting to get warm.

Crying here and putting Kiyoka in a difficult spot would be the worst possible thing for her to do as his fiancée. Miyo lowered her eyes to prevent her tears from overflowing and desperately gritted her teeth.

Her palms, clenched tightly into fists, felt hot enough to burst into flames.

"Miyo."

The next thing she knew, Kiyoka was standing right in front of her. Then, with a gentle caress, he took Miyo's fist in his hand.

"Don't worry. I'll do everything in my power to ensure nothing obstructs the ceremony. I'm looking forward to it more than anyone, okay?"

"Okay."

"I want us to become husband and wife as soon as possible."

So I'll finish up work in a flash and come back home.

Kiyoka's strong declaration made her tears vanish in an instant.

"I do, too," she said, nodding with a heartfelt smile on her face.

Even after Kiyoka had driven off, Miyo stood at the doorway until she could no longer hear the sound of the engine.

In the end, her anxieties didn't completely dissipate.

The ominous foreboding haunting the recesses of her mind, and the uneasiness in her chest—this situation might have been the source of it all.

However, her belief in Kiyoka was much greater, much stronger than those

feelings, and even if he wasn't at her side, he would still support Miyo as if she were safely wrapped up in his arms.

"Tomorrow is bound to become the happiest day of my life, Kiyoka."

A loud gust of wind blew through. As if being pushed by the gale, which contained both warmth and chill, Miyo went back inside.

She couldn't let herself stand there frozen forever.

In the kitchen, she would make a large meal that would be ready no matter how early Kiyoka came back home. It would be filling and hearty fare, just as he'd requested, more than the two of them could ever finish by themselves.

She readied four servings of rice.

In a large pot, she simmered a heaping portion of root vegetables and a pork soup with plenty of nutritious ingredients. Salt-grilled fish, tempura, and fried tofu.

Then she crushed steamed potatoes to make croquettes, and instead of frying eggs, she mixed them with diced onion to make an omelet.

She remained fully concentrated on her cooking, without a moment's rest, and by the time she piled the food on large plates and readied more dishes than she could fit on the serving tray, the sun had completely sunk below the horizon, and it was pitch-black outside.

"It's already gotten so late," she murmured, despite no one being around to hear it. The living room, illuminated by an electric lamp, was filled with countless dishes whose aromas deliciously wafted into the air.

At times like these, Miyo would usually finish her meal without waiting for Kiyoka to return.

But...

Something didn't seem right about eating on her own tonight, and she wavered. She couldn't bring herself to pick up her chopsticks.

After Miyo had sat staring at the dinner laid out in front of her, she slowly got up, opened the sliding screen, and stepped out onto the veranda.

Cooled by the night breeze, she looked up at the deep indigo sky and gazed at the hazily glowing moon.

Miyo closed her eyes. Filling her lungs with the spring air, she breathed in and out several times before she quietly returned to the living room and picked up her chopsticks.

She would finish eating quickly and go to sleep. She needed to keep her strength up for tomorrow, too.

Despite how much effort she had put into making everything, Miyo was dreary and worried as she forced down her meal. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't feel at ease without having Kiyoka sitting across the dinner table from her as usual.

And so Miyo spent the night before her wedding alone—and the morning after that, too. In the end, Kiyoka never came back home.

## **₩ CHAPTER 4**

## **Marriage Vows**

"N-no...I don't know anything about that horrific thing...!"

A woman shouted in front of Kiyoka, her face contorted in terror. Kimio Nagaba desperately shook her head, unconcerned with her tied-up hair growing disheveled.

Staring down at her was a stern-faced man, his anger and disgust on full display—Nagaba.

Under the darkness of night, the corridor in front of the Nagaba estate's garden had transformed into the stage of an ugly drama.

Kiyoka looked away from the two of them and glanced at the garden storehouse.

The structure's traditional white plaster walls and black tile roof were illuminated in the hazy moonlight.

On a normal night, the garden would be quite picturesque, but with more than ten Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit members in the vicinity and the residents of the Nagaba estate coming and going, the atmosphere was quite tense.

And that wasn't all.

A mysterious, terrifying presence was oozing out from inside the storehouse, one that chilled the body to the core and filled one's instincts with dread.

"It's time to change shifts!"

"The arts are deteriorating. Pay attention!"

"Anyone free needs to rest and eat."

Amid this tense and strained atmosphere, akin to that of a battlefield, the unit members' shouts rang out nonstop. They were clearly directed at the corridor where Kiyoka stood and served only to create more tension in the air.

"Are you trying to make excuses? You're the only one who's gone into the storehouse lately."

Nagaba raised his voice, sending spit flying as he ranted at Kimio. When Kiyoka returned his sights to them, the only colors he saw in Kimio's eyes were those of panic and fathomless terror.

"I-it wasn't me. I don't know, I don't know!"

Kimio continued to shake her head back and forth. She looked pitiful and miserable, but her state did not appear to inspire an ounce of pity or compassion in her husband's heart.

It had been early evening when Kiyoka had gotten the report and traveled to the Nagaba estate.

In addition to Mukadeyama, who had taken command of the case, Godou had also left his post at the station to come here. The scene had been covered in a tense, terrifyingly strange air.

"There's no mistaking it, Commander. That thing, that cursed relic, is one of the Earth Spider's legs."

Godou showed no hint of his usual flippant expression and attitude when he reported the fact to Kiyoka.

It had all started several days ago, when a few members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit were sent to the Nagaba estate to address the family's request for help.

One of the Nagabas was exhibiting eccentric, beast-like behavior.

Based on this information, Kiyoka had surmised that it was the work of a low-level animal spirit, and the unit members proceeded to the Nagaba home. There, they discovered that there was indeed a weak animal spirit possessing Nagaba's mother, and they safely purified it.

But a few days later, Nagaba's mother began acting strangely once more.

When Godou reported this, Kiyoka sent off unit members to the house a second time. Naturally, he also made sure to tell them to plan to alleviate any potential problems with the victim's constitution, and to handle whatever came up if it was discovered that the source of her behavior lay elsewhere, in order to prevent another recurrence.

That had been the situation as of early afternoon that day.

But a few hours later, the situation took a frightening turn.

"There appears to be a cursed relic radiating a terrifyingly dangerous aura in the storehouse."

After getting the above report from one of the unit members assigned to the Nagaba investigation, First Squad Leader Mukadeyama quickly rushed to the scene.

When he went inside the windowless storehouse, he laid eyes on the item that the other unit members had reported to him, and he felt sweat burst from every pore on his body.

Stowed away in a box large enough to hold in one's arms was a single arachnid leg.

The segment of leg wasn't from a normal bug but from an exceptionally large grotesquerie.

That alone would have still been fine. From it poured a strange aura filled with a grotesquerie's power, an uncanniness that made even someone like Mukadeyama—who had gone many places as a Gift-user and gained a wealth of experience—break into a cold sweat and shake uncontrollably.

Instantly judging how dangerous the item was, he immediately dispatched a familiar to Godou, who was in charge of the station, and Kiyoka, who was taking leave from work for the day.

The cursed relic was already powerful enough to feel through the box, but if one tried to touch it directly, their soul would be contaminated—not by the jinxing arts, like what had happened with the spirit from the Burial Grounds, but by the pure essence of the grudge imbued in it.

Even if they kept it in the box, the relic would be difficult to transport, so the unit members at the estate had had no choice but to start sealing it on the premises.

Rushing over, Kiyoka entrusted the situation to Mukadeyama and the others who had already begun sealing it away. After receiving a report from Godou, he then confronted the Nagaba couple, which resulted in the scene before him.

"Mr. Nagaba, I really need to ask about the particulars here and put things in order. Can you save your bickering for later?"

"Tch."

Nagaba rudely clicked his tongue at Kiyoka, who'd gotten between the couple.

The truth was that Kiyoka couldn't afford to get tied up with them forever. Sealing the cursed object required the work of four people at a time, switching over in shifts periodically. That was how strong the cursed relic was. And due to the burden placed on the unit members working on the seal, Kiyoka had added himself to the reserves who would swap in as needed.

Even then, there was no way this wasn't going to be a time-consuming endeavor.

"I—I had no idea, no clue it was a real cursed relic! Please, Commander, please believe me!"

Kimio grabbed Kiyoka's uniform and clung to it, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"But you were the one who brought that box into the storehouse. Isn't that right?"

"...Well."

"We've gotten testimony about it from the servants. I need you to be honest about exactly where you got it from, or we can't do our jobs."

Under the current circumstances, her excuses were worthless. He had no interest in hearing them.

The only things Kiyoka needed to know were who had given her that cursed

relic—a leg of the Earth Spider, of all things—and where it had come from.

Back then, I definitely made sure its heart stopped... As long as it's still pierced through with that thing, it shouldn't be able to move, or be moved at all.

The Earth Spider. It was a powerful grotesquerie, born when the country had still been ruled by a military government.

This very grotesquerie was also the fateful foe that Kiyoka had fought desperately to seal away for taking the life of Godou's father.

His slight irritation grew more severe. However, there was someone who was obviously far more irritated and indignant than Kiyoka there, so he couldn't let his own feelings show.

"Stabilize the arts! Lose focus for a moment, and the sealing process will be for nothing!"

Godou's orders rang clear across the garden. Usually, Godou would always confront his enemies with his typically irreverent attitude, no matter how strong they were...

...Provided he wasn't up against one specific foe in particular—the Earth Spider.

Right now, Godou was lacking in composure and presence of mind. He was bellowing orders at his terrified unit members without a moment's hesitation.

If that keeps up, he's going to get the other men unreasonably worked up.

Though, given what they were up against, it meant they wouldn't let down their guard, which wasn't necessarily a problem.

"Hurry up and talk. Depending on the details, we might need every second we can get," Kiyoka stated coldly, brushing away Kimio's hand from his sleeve. At this, Kimio's shoulders jolted in fright before she reluctantly began to speak.

"A traveling priest...paid a visit to our house."

"A priest?"

"Yes. He wore a woven hat and carried a ringed staff... He was wrapped in vestments and a *kasaya* stole. However, he had this, well, very sinister and

suspicious aura about him."

"And?"

Urged to continue, Kimio covered her own face with trembling hands.

"He said he would make my wish come true, and that I just needed to make whoever I hated touch the contents of that box... He also told me that charms would become more effective as long as it was on the premises, and that I should try those as well. But no matter what I did, I couldn't bring myself to touch what was inside the box."

That was why she'd made her mother-in-law, who had normally treated her harshly, touch it, Kimio explained.

Now Kiyoka was convinced. The charm Kimio had mentioned just now must have been the one she'd cast on Miyo. It hadn't been anything powerful, and it was strange that an amateur could invoke a charm like that in the first place, merely by making another listen to a story.

But the power of the Earth Spider's leg had been enough to make Kimio's weak charm effective on Miyo.

For the first time in his life, Kiyoka felt an almost murderous rage swell inside him, directed at Kimio.

"Where did this priest go?" Kiyoka inquired, stifling his strong emotions. However, Kimio simply said she didn't know, shaking her head in tears.

At this point, there was no more information he could get out of her.

Reaching this conclusion, he practically scowled at Nagaba and Kimio.

"Your punishment will be decided later. I advise you not to do anything stupid. Try anything funny, and I won't show any mercy when the time comes."

"W-wait, please! A-am I being charged with a crime? N-no, th-that can't be... You'll help me, right? I—I didn't do anything."

"Enough. You would do well to reflect back on yourself and what happened. Just be grateful that I won't be the one to sentence you."

Kiyoka left the garden without turning back. Behind him, Kimio's eyes went

empty, cloaking a quiet malice.

At some point, the sun had climbed above the horizon, enveloping the estate in the mild warmth of spring.

There wasn't a cloud in the slightly hazy sky, and its blue seemed to refresh the heart as it sank into the eyes of everyone who had been awake through the night.

Kiyoka sighed. Facing away from the azure sky, he turned to the large storehouse behind him.

Although the terrifying aura was slowly weakening from the layered seals, there were still vestiges of the potent power hanging in the vicinity.

Half a day had passed since the unit members at the estate had turned their full attention to sealing up the storehouse.

The shadows of exhaustion were carved into their faces, and their movements were dulling.

Weaving in and out among them were the Nagaba servants, rushing around bringing food, drinks, and towels to wipe down with.

The seal would be finished in just a little while.

But while the work here was almost finished, they would next need to escort the cursed relic to an appropriate location.

Visibly fatigued, Godou said to Kiyoka, "Commander...the seal will be finished soon. You should head back home."

Kiyoka was feeling similarly worn out, though not on the level of complete and utter exhaustion. Nevertheless, he thought that being the only one to abandon the scene was out of the question.

He turned to his aide and shook his head, wearing an uncharacteristic frown.

"No, I can't leave here."

"But today's the wedding! Miyo must be feeling really anxious right now. Don't tell me the groom is going to ditch the ceremony!"

Godou's words made Kiyoka imagine how Miyo must have been feeling at the

moment.

Last night, there had definitely been a bit of uneasiness on her face when he left her behind at the house, but she made sure not to say a word of about it, or shed a single tear, and merely watched him depart with a determined look in her eyes.

The image Godou described, of Miyo being unable to do anything but anxiously wait for Kiyoka to return, didn't come to mind.

She would believe in him. Kiyoka was sure of it.

Moreover, he couldn't entrust everything to Godou, agitated as he was. Mukadeyama was here with him, but he was also tired from the sealing process, and Kiyoka was concerned that some unforeseen situation could occur if he handed the reins to them in their state of discomposure.

I'll absolutely make it in time for the ceremony.

There were still a few hours left before the ceremony began. If he hurried, he should be able to slip into the venue in time.

He was losing focus. If he didn't keep concentrating, he felt like his mind would drift elsewhere. He didn't need to hear it from anyone else—Kiyoka, too, hoped to rush to Miyo's side as soon as he could.

Yet he couldn't.

"Calm down, Godou. We still have time."

"I am calm. If anything, I'm wondering how *you* can be so composed right now, Commander."

Kiyoka didn't answer. Just then, it came time for the people working on the seal to switch out.

"You need to rest. I'll swap in with the others on standby."

"Commander!"

As Kiyoka turned around, he was hit with Godou's outburst hot on his heels, but this was one thing he couldn't back down on.

In the end, they finished sealing everything after another half hour. The

cursed relic, the Earth Spider's leg, had been bound all over with talismans, and the unearthly aura it radiated had grown weak. Their all-night seal would stop it from immediately posing a threat once more.

But it was already late morning. There wasn't much time until the start of the ceremony.

"From here, we'll escort the cursed relic to the station. Carry it carefully and ensure that no one touches it, no matter what!"

"Yessir!" the unit members responded in unison, wearing tense, strained looks on their faces.

From here on out, Kiyoka, Godou, and half of the other members would be tasked with escorting the item, while the remaining men, under Mukadeyama's direction, would settle matters at the Nagaba estate and continue questioning witnesses and investigating.

"Commander, you can't push it any closer, right? Leave this to me and get a move on," Godou said to him, running over. Kiyoka glanced at the clock. At this point, his absence at the venue was probably creating a stir.

If he headed over instantly and changed straightaway, then the ceremony might barely be able to start on time.

An intense impatience had taken root in Kiyoka's chest with the break of dawn. However, his sense of obligation still won out, and he refrained from turning toward the exit.

"Don't make me repeat myself. I can't do that."

"Are you insane?!"

"Godou."

Kiyoka quietly addressed his shouting subordinate. Though indignant, Godou immediately choked back his words.

"I can't entrust the entire escort to you right now. I don't need to tell you why, do I?"

"It's not your fault. I'm not my usual self, either. Not after finding something like that. That's why it's better for me to stay right now, if only so we can keep an eye on each other."

"...I'm perfectly levelheaded."

"Do you really think so?"

When Kiyoka asked this, Godou went silent.

He couldn't possibly have been levelheaded. The fact that he kept on insisting otherwise itself proved it. If Godou had been his normal self, he would've responded differently.

I definitely won't make it in time for the ceremony if I end up escorting the cursed relic from here.

Kiyoka clenched his fist hard enough for his nails to dig into his palms.

Just how much embarrassment would Kiyoka experience, and how much anxiety would he cause Miyo, if he didn't make it in time? The mere thought threatened to turn his sights black with despair.

"Commander, are you really okay with this?" Godou asked once more, forcing the words out. Without Kiyoka noticing, Mukadeyama had come up to see how he was doing.

Kiyoka's footing became unsteady.

This was his final chance. No one would blame him for abandoning his duty here. But if he did so, he would be dogged by fears and worries.

The mission was simple yet vital. He couldn't abandon it.

I'm sorry, Miyo.

An apology wouldn't suffice for this. The fact that he'd abandoned the ceremony would likely scar Miyo for the rest of her life.

She wouldn't denounce him for it, but there was no question that she would be hurt.

He shut his eyes and gnashed his teeth.

*I...* 

He urgently steeled his resolve with his wavering heart. It was at that moment, when he was going to say it out loud, his lips trembling—

"Ummm, so... We came to provide some backup, but do you actually need us?"

"C'mon... Don't ask it like that!"

"I—I mean, what else am I supposed to say? Besides, why am I saying this? Shouldn't you and the other experienced members be the ones to speak up here?"

One of those voices sounded strangely familiar. He looked up to find a group of several people in military uniforms marching noisily into the Nagaba garden.

Their uniforms resembled that of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit but with slight differences. They were...

"The Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit?"

Kiyoka locked eyes with the person standing at the front of the group, who was clearly inexperienced and looked rather unreliable.

Kiyoka had seen him before. His breath caught in surprise.

"You?"

"I-it's good to see you again."

The man flashed what looked to be a smile. Bashfully bringing a hand up against the back of his head, he bowed slightly in greeting.



In the middle of a comfortable, light slumber, Miyo stood absentmindedly in an empty space.

Though there wasn't anything there, she thought she heard a faint voice.

"...You do not need to worry. The contents of this box shall solve your troubles."

"Really...? It will really grant my wish?"

"But of course. It is a miraculous item. I am sure it will erase your worries and

make your wish come true."

When she slowly approached the direction of the voices, she could vaguely make out the gate to someone's home.

A man dressed as a traveling priest and a woman were talking together. Neither of their faces was clear, and she couldn't determine their identities.

However, Miyo did get the sense that she had heard the woman's voice somewhere before.

The woman accepted from the priest what appeared to be a wooden box, big enough to fit in both her arms, and she bowed her head over and over again before closing the gate.

The priest looked up slightly at the shut gate before walking off, his ringed staff in hand.

Against her will, Miyo's eyes followed after the priest, who was striding along with firm steps.

At some point, however, the priest she'd thought she was following was replaced by a woman wearing a tattered kimono.

What...?

When did they exchange places?

As her sleep-addled mind reeled in confusion, her eyes continued to follow the departing women, ignoring that she was in a dream.

The woman continued walking without any break.

The scenery was cloudy and indistinct, and Miyo couldn't clearly feel the passage of time. However, she got the feeling the woman had been going for quite a while now.

At some point, the woman passed from a townscape into the mountains, progressing down a wild game trail.

Without ever losing her footing in the overgrown brush, she continued on to her destination with steady steps.

Waiting there was—

"Hnh..."

Miyo's consciousness rapidly came to the surface, and she raised her heavy eyelids. Her familiar room began to illuminate, and she could tell the sun had already begun to rise.

Sluggishly raising her body up, Miyo stretched out her arms wide.

"What a strange dream."

She cocked her head at the dream she just saw. But ultimately, she had been unable to see where the woman ended up, so she wasn't entirely satisfied with how it had concluded.

Miyo got the sense that her Dream Sight was at work here, but she couldn't really understand the meaning behind her vision.

More importantly, though...

The night had ended.

And the morning of her wedding had arrived.

She wondered just how much time had passed since she started waiting on standby in the dressing room with Hazuki, Yurie, and Fuyu.

Miyo had finished getting herself ready a great deal earlier, and all that was left was to wait for the groom to arrive. But there was no sign of Kiyoka.

The scheduling had been set up with plenty of leeway, but that extra wiggle room was already being exhausted.

"I'm sure it's fine, but he's really cutting it close," Hazuki murmured, her arms crossed and lips pursed in a pout.

Although Hazuki was being considerate and not letting her emotions show too much, Miyo could sense that all three of them were starting to fret.

Was there a chance Kiyoka wouldn't make it in time?

Whenever doubt would appear on their faces, Miyo would pretend not to see it. Nevertheless, she was fast approaching the limit of her ability to ignore it.

As she distracted herself by chatting idly with Hazuki, Yurie, and Fuyu, the time came.

I can't shrink back now. I know Kiyoka will make it in time.

She dauntlessly faced forward. She couldn't let this be enough to upset her. After all, from here on out, she was going to be the wife of the head of the Kudou family.

Clinging to her scant, single drop of hope, she tried not to pay any heed to her anxiety-filled heart.

"Well, here we go then. Get it together."

"Okay. Let's go."

At Fuyu's encouragement, Miyo exited the room with a smile.

From here, the four of them would move to the waiting room. All the relatives who would be attending the bridal procession should be there.

Quietly, Miyo's group continued to walk.

As they crossed the corridor connecting the dressing room to the waiting room, Miyo looked out the window.

A breeze picked up some cherry blossom petals, sending them into a swirling dance down atop the rock path below, then blew them away again.

Cherry blossoms past their peak bloom, destined only to scatter from here on out.

Their forlornness seemed to reflect Miyo's sadness at having been left to walk alone on this magnificent day, and she felt a bitterness well in her mouth.

Her head, decorated with a wig, several sparkling-gold floral hair ornaments, and a bridal silk headdress, felt heavy enough to break her neck. Her multilayered, pure white kimono weighed on her shoulders, and she was beside herself with worry that her obi sash would come undone, and she couldn't help fretting over the turned-back hem of her kimono dragging long past her.

It feels like my feet are locked in place.

She had tried every trick in the book to walk this far. However, the closer the waiting room, and the ceremony itself, grew, the more her ability to stay positive waned.

The wedding ceremony, the joyous day she had looked forward to so much, was making Miyo's heart sink heavy and deep.

It was a Shinto wedding of only relatives. She was sure that they would be understanding and have sympathy for her if Kiyoka didn't make it in time, without her having to explain anything. Miyo understood perfectly well that there was nothing she could do when it came to Kiyoka's work. Nevertheless.

"Kiyoka..."

If she was really going to spend the rest of the day alone without conducting the ceremony—what exactly was she supposed to do with herself?

She couldn't let herself cry, or her makeup would run. Despite the thought, her vision blurred. It felt like tears would well up and slide down her cheeks at any moment.

Please come quickly, Kiyoka.

Dragged down by her heavy heart and outfit, Miyo at last managed to reach the waiting room with Hazuki and the others.

"Miyo..."

The first people to come to see her were Yoshirou and Arata, who had come here as her family members.

"You look very pretty, Miyo."

"Indeed. I'm proud to be your grandfather."

The ceremony hadn't begun, yet Yoshirou's eyes were watery. Seeing the two of them looking just like always, without any hidden implications in their expressions, brought Miyo the slightest bit of calm.

"Thank you very much, Arata, Grandfather."

Unable to bow her head very far, Miyo politely thanked them both instead, prompting Yoshirou to gently pat her on the shoulder, partly out of encouragement.

Afterward, Tadakiyo came up to her as well, saying Miyo looked beautiful, giving her simple, straightforward praise with his usual twinkling smile.

"Thank you very much, Father."

As Miyo talked to everyone, suddenly—

"May I?"

Someone addressed her.

A man and a woman came up to her.

They appeared to be married. The man looked to be in his thirties, tall and dressed in formal military attire. He had a masculine, almost feral, visage and a scar under his sharp eyes. The way he walked with a limp caught Miyo's eye.

The woman was tiny by comparison, looking a few years past twenty, and she was slightly shorter than Miyo—a neat and clean beauty with a composed, mild-mannered aura about her.

Hazuki tactfully introduced the two as they approached Miyo.

"Miyo, this is Mr. Koumyouin, and his wife, Setsu. They'll be mediating the ceremony."

"The name's Koumyouin. Nice to meet ya."

Miyo bowed slightly upon hearing Hazuki's introduction, feeling overwhelmed by the vaguely boorish air about the grinning Koumyouin.

"Th-thank you very much for your help with the ceremony."

"I am Koumyouin's wife, Setsu. I apologize for arriving right before the start of the ceremony when we're acting as the mediators. We were supposed to arrive much earlier so we could introduce ourselves," Setsu said, her eyes frowning with regret. Hazuki responded to her with a smiling shake of her head.

"Nothing you could do about it. Mr. Koumyouin must not be able to easily get away from work, right? After all, he's the commander of the Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit."

"Hearing you put it so kindly like that does make me feel a bit more at ease."

"I can't say anything," Hazuki said. "My little brother's the groom, and he still isn't even here yet."

Miyo was left dumbfounded as she listened to Setsu and Hazuki chat and

secretly looked at Koumyouin.

The Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

The other military group that shared the same duties and scale as the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, based in the old capital. It was also the original unit of Kaoruko, who had been assigned to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit for a period of time.

The old capital was where the emperor had resided before the Restoration. It was also a place where many grotesqueries ran rampant. Miyo was told that, as a result, powerful and skilled Gift-users still resided there. It was practically a mecca for the country's Gift-users.

The Saimoris, the Kudous, and the Tatsuishis had all moved from the old capital when the emperor left, but there were several Gift-user families who had stayed behind.

Miyo couldn't help but be curious about Koumyouin, as it was his job to unify the enlisted Gift-users in the old capital.

Noticing that she was staring, Koumyouin matched Miyo's gaze with hers.

"See, I acted as an adjutant in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit back when Commander Godou was still in charge. I was ol' Kiyoka's boss and mentor at the time. Our relationship's what led me to act as mediator today. Normally, Major General Ookaito would be the better choice, but seeing as he's unmarried and all..."

The mediators needed to be a husband-and-wife couple. Given that Ookaito was divorced and had no new wife at the moment, he couldn't fulfill that role.

Understanding this, Miyo nodded.

"Really screwed up my leg here, so it might be a bit inconvenient, but I hope you'll overlook it."

Smacking his left thigh, Koumyouin gave a big guffaw. He appeared to have a powerful, though slightly crude, personality. Despite his handsome, well-shaped features, Miyo saw something slightly animalistic in him.

However, she didn't find him disagreeable in the slightest. Relieved that he

was so straightforward, she released the tension from her unconsciously tightened face.

"I'm sorry about him. I'm sure my husband's uncivilized manner comes as a bit of a shock. Don't worry, though, I'll keep a close eye on him during the ceremony to make sure he doesn't screw anything up."

"Hey, Setsu. That's a real awful way to talk about your husband, y'know that?"

"Am I wrong?"

The back-and-forth between Koumyouin and Setsu was cheerful and familiar, like an exchange between friends. Just listening to them, Miyo could clearly tell that they trusted each other.

Miyo's mind began to wander to her absent fiancé.

If, by any chance, Kiyoka didn't make it in time...

Even if the ceremony didn't proceed, they would still be able to become husband and wife. She understood that much, but she still couldn't stop herself from catastrophizing, imagining that they might be unable to come together in the same trusting relationship as the one she saw before her.

Miyo's uneasiness swelled as she maintained her polite smile, and Koumyouin gently narrowed his eyes.

"Must be discouraging that Kiyoka ain't here yet."

"...It is."

"It'll work out, I bet. Heard that the situation's a real hairy one, see. Seems like it would even take a guy like him a long time to take care of, but I sent some reinforcements from the Second Unit to help before I got here."

Miyo's eyes widened.

"You did?"

"Yup. There's an unreliable new recruit mixed in with the bunch, but there's some of my best with 'em, too. Enough for Kiyoka to slip out and still be okay, I'm sure," Koumyouin said with a shrug of his shoulders. Miyo felt the slightest

bit of hope in his words.

Once everyone had finished exchanging greetings, a grave mood settled over the room because of the groom's absence.

Although people tried to kill time and lift the mood, there were not many topics to discuss right before a wedding. The conversation exhausted itself in no time, and the stretches of silences grew longer and longer.

"...Commander Kudou."

Arata's quiet murmur reverberated extra loudly in Miyo's ear. The single lone whisper brought with it a sense of hopelessness as it reached her.

Kiyoka.

Was it already past the point of no return? They had gone a bit past schedule. A shiver ran through her as she imagined the Shinto priest announcing that they couldn't wait any longer.

Miyo lowered her eyes and clutched her hands.

I need to find my resolve.

She lifted up her downcast face. She clenched down on her hands with even more force to quell their trembling.

If she let her head hang with tears in her eyes, she would be no different from her past self. She certainly wouldn't be fit to be Kiyoka's wife if she made everyone fuss over her.

After all, I'm going to be the wife of the head of the Kudou family from today on.

Miyo gathered strength in her stomach and stood up straight. Then she opened her mouth to address everyone in the waiting room.

It was right at that same moment...

Suddenly, she saw someone in the distance rushing over in a flurry.

"This way, hurry!"

She heard the shrine worker speak with impatience.

## Could it be—?

Before she could think about it any further, her anticipation sent her flying out of the waiting room.

"Miyo?!"

"Where do you think you're going?!"

She heard Hazuki and Fuyu call after her. But her feet didn't stop. Even though she was dressed in a heavy white kimono that made every movement laborious, she rushed headlong down the corridor.

Kiyoka, Kiyoka, Kiyoka!

Her heart eager, she simply ran and ran, trying her best to avoid tripping over herself.

She probably hadn't gone very far. However, when she ran to the end of the corridor, that felt long enough to make her feel faint...

...she came face-to-face with Kiyoka, his eyes wide and breathing ragged.

"Sorry for being late."

Had Miyo ever seen Kiyoka look as panicked as he was now, his shoulders heaving with each breath?

Her tremendous relief outstripped the faint suspicion that this was all in her imagination. The feeling swelled in her chest.

"K-Kiyoka..."

The tears she had worked so hard to fight threatened to spill out, and the strength in her legs waned. She felt like she would collapse at any moment.

"Miyo!"

Kiyoka leapt to support Miyo's body as she began to sink down. The hand he clasped tightly in his own was trembling and cold. All the courage Miyo had worked up had crumbled away in an instant.

She was overjoyed, and yet it was as though she had relapsed into fear.

"Thank goodness. I'm so glad, Kyoka... I—I truly didn't know what I was going

to do..."

In her relief, the anxieties she had kept down escaped her lips one by one. Her throat quivered, and her voice didn't come out right.

She hadn't felt so anxious, or so relieved, since reuniting with Kiyoka after he was imprisoned underground. Despite the fact that not much time had elapsed since that moment, Miyo never imagined she'd feel the same rush of emotions come over her again.

"...But I believed in you."

When she gave him the biggest smile she could muster, Kiyoka grinned back, his cool eyes softening.

"I knew that you'd trust me and wait, too... You're beautiful, Miyo."

Her cheeks grew hot at his whisper, filled with affection. Yet right now, even this slight bashfulness felt comfortable to her, dissolving into joy.

"When I saw you running, I was startled by how pretty you are."

"You're quite handsome yourself, Kiyoka."

"...I spent the whole night in a whirlwind, so I don't think I'm very presentable right now. I haven't gotten my disheveled look in order yet, either."

Kiyoka's face subtly contorted, and his lips arced into a frown. Miyo smiled at his adorable mannerisms.

"Then please hurry over to the dressing room, change, and get yourself in order. I'll be waiting."

"Got it."

Miyo waved slightly as she watched Kiyoka race off once more toward the groom's dressing room. In a complete reversal of the night before, when she had watched him from the entryway, her heart was exhilarated, filled with hope and anticipation.

I'm really so glad...truly.

The brief wait she would have until Kiyoka finished getting himself ready was nothing. It was all too easy compared to the fearful and anxious hours she had

endured before he showed up.

They had finally gotten this far.

Feeling radiant, Miyo watched the cherry blossom petals outside dance on the wind in the light of the sun.



The sound of ancient *gagaku* court music resonated loudly beneath the brilliantly clear blue sky.

The cobbled path stretching out through the grounds reflected the sun, and light pink pedals slid off its surface.

In front of her was her younger brother, dressed in his formal military garb and being guided by the priest and the shrine maidens toward the shrine's inner sanctum. At his side was her younger sister-in-law, dressed in a white kimono and holding a bright red umbrella open behind her.

Though they were simply walking along the bridal procession, she already felt tears coming on as she gazed at the pair.

Those two...will finally be able to become husband and wife.

It had been close to a year since Kiyoka had asked Hazuki to be Miyo's mentor. She, along with Yurie, had been at her side longer than anyone else.

It had been nonstop turmoil.

Hazuki had felt agony watching them from the sidelines. It had seemed to her as though the gods were conspiring to keep them apart, so she was sure that it must have been much more agonizing and difficult for Kiyoka and Miyo themselves.

And their trials had continued right up until the moment of their union. Hazuki had been worried that Kiyoka might not make it, and she'd almost felt her strength give out when he finally arrived.

But despite their many challenges, the two had never let go of each other's hands, looking ahead without giving up, to overcome everything. Just how much emotional and physical strength had been asked of them?

Hazuki knew very well.

The spectacle of the cherry blossom trees planted outside the grounds, scattering and raining down their petals like snowflakes over the bridal procession, was exceptionally beautiful and touching. It was as though their union was finally being accepted.

Slow and unhurried, the procession reached the inner sanctum.

The interior of the main wooden shrine, its history palpable, was enveloped in a solemn air.

In the center of the building was an altar with offerings of sacred sake piled around it almost up to the ceiling. Seats for the bride and groom were right in front of it, and the seats along the sides for the attending relatives were laid out in regulated order.

First, Miyo and Kiyoka took their seats in the middle, followed by the mediators, the Koumyouin couple, who sat beside them, before lastly, the relatives all filed to the left and right to take their places.

Still unable to take her eyes off the bride and groom, Hazuki found her seat on the groom's side of the room, to the right of the altar.

Silence fell over the interior of the shrine.

The wedding solemnly progressed under the direction of the master of religious ceremonies and the shrine priest.

Hazuki couldn't see Kiyoka's and Miyo's expressions from where she sat. Were they feeling nervous, or were they overflowing with joy?

...Whatever the case, I'm sure they both have smiles on their faces.

After all, Hazuki was just Kiyoka's big sister, and even her chest was swelling with emotion.

Hazuki's own ceremony had been held at a shrine like this. But thinking back on it, she hadn't been as content as she felt right now.

She had been nervous, of course, but her elation was far stronger. The most accurate way she could have described herself at the time was probably "giddy."

Back then, Hazuki had been young, naive, and inexperienced; she hadn't understood anything.

However, Miyo and Kiyoka probably felt different. After everything they had been through, they were surely being buffeted by a flood of emotions.

That was precisely why Hazuki was so deeply struck by the scene in front of her.

As a smile played on her lips, she gently dabbed the edge of her eyes.



A purification rite, then the ceremonial food offering to the gods, followed by the ritual prayer addressing the god of the shrine.

The wedding ceremony was progressing smoothly.

Miyo found it hard to endure each passing second. She kept her head down at an angle the entire time, not moving a muscle. She was nervous and totally unsure about how she was supposed to convey on her face all the emotions flying through her head.

It took everything she had just to stand and sit as indicated by the master of religious ceremonies and follow the flow of the ritual.

Her one saving grace was her bridal headdress.

It covered her head entirely, perfectly screening Miyo's eyes and ears from her surroundings, so she managed to get through things without being conscious of the attention on her.

Her white kimono was ever present in her sights as she sat with her eyes lowered.

It was made of pure white silk and was embroidered with an auspicious design of a Chinese phoenix and peonies in gold silk. While this first-class garment was heavy, she felt like she had the support of its past wearers, Fuyu and Hazuki, which brought her relief.

Yet despite everything, as the ceremony got underway, she also felt a bit like this was all happening to someone else.

It's strange, really.

It didn't feel like she and Kiyoka would be husband and wife from today forward.

Still, this didn't bother her.

A short while ago, when Kiyoka had finished his mission and rushed to the shrine, Miyo's heart had felt plenty full. Just having him with her already made her happy.

The ceremony was a necessary formality, and she already long trusted in the connection they shared together.

Right after that thought crossed her mind, a large hand suddenly extended out from beside her and gently gripped her own.

She couldn't lift her face, but the feeling of his hand, almost wrapped over her own, put her at ease, and she gently closed her eyes.

Kiyoka's hand is warm.

Although it was through his gloves, she could clearly feel his body heat come through to her. That alone seemed to light a small fire in Miyo's heart, instilling her with a sense of security.

At some point, she acclimated to the stiff yet solemn atmosphere in the main shrine building, and her tension and anxiety disappeared completely.

The ritual continued, and it came time for the nuptial exchange of sake cups.

The master of religious ceremonies put down the sacred sake before them, telling them that with this exchange of three nuptial cups, they would have exchanged their vows of marriage. It was difficult for her to stay calm when she thought about what it all meant.

First, Kiyoka slowly took the first sake cup and finished it in three sips.

It's my turn...

A shrine maiden poured the sacred sake into the cup Miyo held with both hands. It wasn't a large amount. So little that she worried she might drink it down all in one sip.

She had been told in advance that she only had to pretend to drink the sake. Miyo was easily affected by alcohol, and there was a chance that even this small amount could negatively influence things later on.

The transparent sacred sake quivered inside her cup.

When she looked at the faint reflection of her own face within, Miyo felt a tremendous urge to cry.

Ah, once she'd drunk it all, she would become Kiyoka's wife.

The almost superficial wedding ceremony had reached the nuptial sake cups stage, and her heart thronged at the fact it was finally becoming reality.

From today forward, Miyo Saimori would become Kiyoka Kudou's wife. She was going to become Miyo Kudou.

She wasn't a fiancée anymore. She was one half of a romantic partnership, of a family who lived together. Husband and wife—that was what Miyo and Kiyoka's relationship would be called from this day onward.

Miyo had been imprudent to think that this ritual was nothing more than a formality.

The shape of all the feelings she'd held until now would change drastically, into the shape they would hold from here on out. She felt the transformation with painful reality.

Putting her cup to her mouth, she pretended to take three sips of the sacred sake.

Once they had both taken three sips of the sacred sake from each of the three cups, their marriage vows would be complete.

Miyo was sure that even if she could hold her liquor, drinking her cup wouldn't have been easy. Desperate to fight back her tears, she choked up completely.

When they had finished their nuptial cups, Miyo cast a slight sidelong glance up at Kiyoka.

Their eyes met.

Ah, it really had happened.

Miyo and Kiyoka had become actual husband and wife. They would live out their days standing at each other's side, until death parted them.

Kiyoka stared at her with gentle eyes, brimming with even more love than normal.

I love you.

Even without vocalizing it, Miyo thought she could hear him tell her that.

Me, too.

Had she been able to get it across to him? This love she felt. And this happiness.

After the wedding ceremony had finished, a whirlwind of activity was in store for Miyo.

Due to Kiyoka's late arrival, the remaining schedule for the day had been pushed back greatly, meaning that she had almost no time to spare before the celebratory banquet following the ceremony.

Notably, while the ceremony had been attended only by relatives, there would be a large number of guests beyond just family invited to the banquet. If they were late at all, they would be causing a great deal of trouble for the attendees.

The Kudou family was very prestigious, so the guests were all of high social status, and many were very busy, making it extra vital to get there on time.

Between changing and moving venues, Miyo didn't even have a spare moment to sigh with relief.

Naturally, there was also no time for her to feel embarrassed or match gazes with Kiyoka and bask in the wedding afterglow.

Miyo simply followed Fuyu and Hazuki's instructions, since they had planned today's ceremony, and went with the flow. When she came to her senses, she found herself in the Imperial Hall's banquet room, sitting in her bride's chair.

"Are you okay? Worn out at all?" Kiyoka asked her from the groom's seat

beside her, looking concerned. After nodding at him, Miyo gave a strained smile.

"Yes...a little bit. But I'm okay."

"Good."

Kiyoka's expression slacked a little. He looked relieved.

The spacious, luxurious banquet room in the Imperial Hall quickly filled with a crowd of over one hundred people.

The Imperial Hall was a facility built a few years prior for social events, and it had become one of the most popular upper-class wedding venues, along with the Imperial Hotel.

The still new building was almost blindingly brilliant and beautiful, with high, ornately designed Western ceilings, sparkling chandeliers, and tables covered in snow-white tablecloths.

The Kudou family had privately booked the room, which was spacious enough to use as a dance hall.

The feast was truly focused on luxury, so as not to bring shame to the prestigious family.

The guest list was filled with leading figures in the government and military who had relations with the Kudous, and while Miyo didn't recognize many of them, there were also many faces she was familiar with.

She saw Arata and Yoshirou Usuba, her relatives who had also joined the ceremonial procession at the shrine. Also present was Ookaito and his son, Asahi, as well as Hana, the servant who had taken good care of Miyo when she lived with the Saimoris, and her husband. There was Sasaki, the butler at the Kudous' villa, and his wife; the doctor Unan, as well as the members of the Special Anti-Grotesque Unit; the Tatsuishi family—now under the command of the Kudou family—and other Gift-users.

Normally, servants would never be invited to an event like this, so Miyo thought it was broad-minded of the Kudou family to allow them to come.

It seemed like most of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit hadn't arrived yet,

and though their numbers were currently few, the rest would still make sure to show up, even when they were so busy that Kiyoka himself had almost failed to make it to the ceremony in time.

While it did make Miyo happy that so many people had come to her wedding, the strangeness of it was overpowering.

When she candidly conveyed this to Kiyoka, he chuckled slightly.

"You have a point there. Even if they have some connection with the Kudous, there are still a lot of guests here I'm not too familiar with myself. It's not unreasonable to feel a bit overwhelmed... I'm not exactly the best with superficial socializing, either."

"Right."

Miyo wasn't at all surprised by Kiyoka's confession. Given his personality, she imagined he wasn't very good at handling the surface-level relationships that developed between families and people in his position.

If Miyo compared when she first met Kiyoka to how long she'd known some of the guests, she likely would have come across as a newcomer. There were many people here who had known him long before she ever had.

Still, she didn't feel any sense of inferiority about it.

In this past year, Miyo had spent a long, intimate, and profound time with Kiyoka. While she couldn't claim to know everything about him, she believed she had come to understand a small part of him.

Above all, she knew her heart, full of affection for him, wouldn't be bested by anyone.

"You were beautiful in your white kimono, but this one looks great on you, too."

"Tee-hee, thank you. Mother and Sis specially picked it out thinking that it would complement me."

The colorful wedding kimono she was wearing for the banquet started as light pink at the shoulder and gradually darkened into red at the end of the sleeves, the shade a sublime combination of cuteness and charm. The pattern embroidered on the garment, which featured two white cranes, cherry blossoms, and flowing water, was brilliant as well.

Fuyu and Hazuki hadn't told Miyo how much it had cost, but she was sure that it had been quite expensive.

Miyo felt so happy that she was now able to hear that such a brilliant and beautiful kimono suited her.

In the past, even when praised, she hadn't been able to sincerely show her gratitude.

Not that I completely believe all the compliments I receive, either.

Miyo smiled bashfully at Kiyoka.

With a toast, the banquet began.

Lavish Western dishes were brought out one after another, and the guests were treated to more liquor than they could possibly drink. However, Kiyoka and Miyo were focused solely on greeting the guests, so they barely had a spare moment to taste anything themselves.

They exchanged pleasantries with ministers, assemblymen, military generals, young men, middle-aged men, elderly couples, and many others. No matter who they were, each was high in rank and title, so Miyo found interacting with them anything but easygoing.

It feels like my cheeks are going to cramp...!

When she'd attended a high-society party before, she had neither been the hostess nor played a major role in the proceedings, so there had been some time for her to breathe.

However, things would not be that way today.

Since Miyo and Kiyoka were sitting in the most conspicuous seats of all, there was a line slowly forming in front of their table of people coming to greet them.

Greeting everyone wasn't just a mental strain—it was also a physical one. She needed to maintain her posture, hold her smile, and politely thank each guest... all without a spare moment to relax.

"Congratulations to you both."

After she'd managed to struggle through the greetings and well-wishes from the nonstop flow of guests, Ookaito came over to them, bringing Asahi along, with a slightly wincing smile.

"Thank you, Major General," said Kiyoka.

"Thank you very much," said Miyo.

They were relieved to see a familiar face.

"C-con...congratulations."

"Thank you."

Asahi averted his eyes in embarrassment as he spoke; it was a heartwarming sight. Miyo let a genuine smile spread across her face as she thanked him.

After Ookaito, the Kudou family approached them in a casual, relaxed manner.

"I'm so relieved you were able to get married, Kiyoka," Tadakiyo said with a laugh. It was unclear whether he was joking or he truly felt this way. At this, Fuyu said—

"You were taking it all so leisurely that Kiyoka almost let marriage slip him by, you know."

—with a cutting tone while hiding her mouth behind her fan.

"Huh? Really? I worked pretty hard at it, I think. Set up a lot of marriage offers, for one..."

"Except you didn't breathe a word of the Saimoris' proposal to me at all."

"Well, that was because I figured you'd immediately reject the idea if I did."

"Excuse me? Why, you say it like I was the one preventing Kiyoka from getting married."

"Come on now, you two. Can you stop bickering in front of the happy couple, and all the guests and relatives, too? It's disgraceful."

Hazuki caustically put a stop to Fuyu and Tadakiyo's dispute as it started to

heat up. Neither appeared able to offer any sort of rebuttal and fell silent.

"Commaaaander!"

Once the conversation with Tadakiyo and Fuyu was interrupted, Godou suddenly stepped forward with a glass in hand. His face was beet red, and he was clearly drunk.

Kiyoka frowned.

"Godou...you've definitely had too much to drink, haven't you?"

"It's fine! After you left, I had a hell of a time with the escort work, okay! We handed it off to the Ministry of the Imperial Household's arts practitioners for the time being, but everyone was all worn out after being on edge for so long."

It appeared that the Special Anti-Grotesque Unit members, led by Godou, had rushed over to make an appearance at the banquet as soon as they'd finished their work.

"The Ministry's arts practitioners aren't going to be able to handle it themselves."

"Well, we've spared some of our own personnel to help, and if it really is too much, they'll send another request for support anyway. But unlike us, the Ministry of the Imperial Household has the accommodations to store shady items like that, so I'm sure it'll be fine."

Kiyoka's brow furrowed even deeper as Godou shrugged and comically made himself sound irresponsible.

"Don't go drowning your worries in booze now."

"...I know."

Miyo certainly felt concerned about the gloom she briefly saw flicker across Godou's face, but this wasn't a situation where she could speak up, so she silently watched how their conversation played out.

"Hey there, got a minute for me, you two?"

Koumyouin casually raised his hand and called out to them. Kiyoka courteously bowed to the man.

"Thank you very much for acting as our mediator today, Commander Koumyouin."

"Oh yeah, congrats to ya both. Y'know, Kiyoka, even I never woulda thought the day'd come when I'd be acting as a mediator at your wedding. *Ah-ha-ha!*"

"I agree. I was surprised to learn you have a family of you own in the first place."

"You never change, do ya?"

Kiyoka and Koumyouin engaged in some friendly banter. Between Setsu and Kiyoka, Miyo had to assume that anyone familiar with Koumyouin would crack jokes with him like this.

Koumyouin quelled his hearty laughter before he moved off to the side and said, "Some of my folks insisted on saying hi."

Two people then appeared from behind him. A man and a woman, each dressed in a military uniform.

Miyo's eyes widened the most they had all day.

She had known that they had both been invited. However, she hadn't thought that they would appear in front of her like this.

"Kaoruko... Kouji..."

The woman dressed in uniform was her friend Kaoruko Jinnouchi. The man was her childhood friend she hadn't seen since parting ways a year prior, Kouji Tatsuishi.

"It's good to see you again, Miyo. Congratulations on your wedding, truly."

"H-hey there, Miyo. Er, rather, um, Mrs. Kudou. Congratulations."

Miyo was dumbfounded by Kaoruko, congratulating her with faint tears in her eyes, and by Kouji, wearing a slightly stilted smile on his face.

"U-um...th-thank you, both. Er, Kouji...you joined the military?"

"Huh? Oh, right, I didn't say anything about it. Yeah, th-that's right. Right now, I'm a new recruit in the Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit..."

Miyo and Kouji both grew somewhat awkward and stilted.

She would have never imagined that Kouji would join the Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit. She found it hard to fully comprehend.

However, standing in front of Miyo was the very same childhood friend with whom she had spent all those years.

His gentle looks and mild-mannered tone hadn't changed in the slightest from back then.

But...

The weak unreliability he'd had about him had fallen by the wayside, replaced by a dignified aura. His appearance was well kept, and he wore a military uniform well.

He was the same as the Kouji of the past, yet different. He had changed after what happened as well. Just as Miyo had herself.

"I decided to undergo training. I'm going to give this my all."

Just like he had declared to her back then.

As Miyo sat there in silence, too taken aback to say anything, Kaoruko tapped Kouji lightly on his shoulder.

"Kouji joined up with the Second Unit a little bit before I came out here temporarily, and now the senior unit members are really putting him through the wringer."

"Hrk... Well, that is true. Just remembering it all makes my stomach turn."

In contrast to Kaoruku, her voice filled with cheer, Kouji pressed down on his gut with a haggard hand.

However, from their responses, Miyo could clearly tell that Kouji was doing a good job in the unit.

"You really helped out back there, Kouji Tatsuishi. Thank you."

Kiyoka let out a sigh as Miyo gave him a look of confusion.

"The Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit got sent over to take care of the escort work for me. It's thanks to them that I was able to make it to the ceremony in time."

Apparently, several people, including Koumyouin, Kaoruko, and Kouji, had come from the Second Unit's base in the old capital to lend Kiyoka backup.

Save for Koumyouin, they had just barely arrived in time, taking over the extremely important, dangerous, and urgent duty Kiyoka was charged with and carrying it out in his stead.

Thanks to this, Kiyoka had been able to just barely slip into the ceremony on time. Kaoruko and Kouji, plus Godou and the other unit members who'd stayed, had rushed to the banquet immediately after finishing up their mission.

Miyo couldn't possibly thank them enough for doing everything in their power for her and Kiyoka's wedding.

"Thank you... Truly, thank you so very much, Kouji, Kaoruko."

"You're very welcome, though that's a bit weird to say, really... We were just doing our job, for one, and you're my childhood friend. Of course I'd lend a hand."

Kouji laughed awkwardly, his brows downturned; he was exactly as she remembered him. Kaoruko nodded along firmly as well.

"You've got that right. I'll help out as much as I can if it's for my friend."

"Thank you..."

Her connections had become so strongly linked. They weren't relationships built with such purposes—to come to her aid, or to support her when she needed it—in mind.

Nevertheless, when Miyo thought of how all these people with whom she had built up trust and sincerity had reached out a helping hand in her moment of need, an almost unbearable happiness filled her chest.

I'll be there to give it my all when they find themselves in trouble, no matter what, she vowed. She wouldn't forget this debt. No matter how many years later it may be, she wanted to repay them for it.

"Anyway, I'm doing fine and dandy myself. My Gift's still weak and all, but right now, I'm trying to master some techniques to take advantage of it in battle. It's just like the commander told me—it's not about the Gift you have,

but how you use it."

"Aye. Kouji, you're a weak-kneed wreck, but there's some promise in ya. Got plenty of options available."

Koumyouin agreed, smacking Kouji on the leg.

"Ow, um, Commander...please don't call me weak-kneed."

"What's this? Trying to look cool in front of your childhood friend, eh?"

"D-don't say that sort of stuff, either...!"

Pleading with his superior, his face bright red, Kouji then seemed to come to his senses, neatly adjusting his posture, clearing his throat with a cough, and turning back toward Miyo.

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"U-um, Miyo."
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"Yes?"

"I've been holding on to this for you. Though I'm a bit unsure if it's something I should be giving you during a celebration like this..."

Miyo straightened her posture upon hearing Kouji stiffly announce this to her with a conflicted look on his face. Looking down at what he handed her, she asked what it was, then she widened her eyes in surprise.

# **₩ CHAPTER 5**

#### What Happiness Is

The sun had been strong enough during the day to make it feel almost hot, yet once night fell, a sudden chill arrived.

Warm and flushed from her bath, Miyo cooled herself in the cold air of the hallway as she walked toward the living room.

The wedding ceremony was over, the banquet had finished...and the physical and mental strain had left her utterly fatigued, from the very top of her head down to the tips of her toes.

Her soak in the hot water of the tub had only made her feel it more acutely.

However, compared to the heavy white kimono, the colorful banquet kimono, and the dress she had worn earlier, she was pleased by how lightweight and easy to move in her nightwear was.

Ever since they had gotten home, though, her mind had been on something other than the events of the day.

"I've been holding on to this for you."

Kouji had handed her a single sealed letter. When she heard whom it was from, her heart had pounded in her chest.

She hadn't read its contents yet. She hadn't nearly enough courage to open it on the spot and read it, nor was it the right setting to do so. Consequently, she had simply taken it with her and returned home.

Before heading to the living room, she stopped by her room. Taking the pure white letter that she'd left atop her writing desk in hand, she again headed toward the living room.

"I just finished my bath, Kiyoka."

Kiyoka was sitting there in his nightwear with his hair down, having already taken his bath for the evening. He was reading a book over a cup of tea. However, his eyes were going back and forth over the same section again and again, and he had stopped turning the pages completely.

"Got it."

"Um, may I ask you something?"

Miyo held the letter up to her chest and sat down in front of Kiyoka.

"Sure, but...what's wrong?"

"Well, it's just, I don't really have the courage to read this alone."

"...I get it."

"Will you sit at my side while I read it?"

This letter was far too significant for her to read alone in her room.

"What is this?"

Accepting the pure white letter, with neither a destination nor an origin address written on it, Miyo had cocked her head, prompting Kouji to quietly tell her:

"It's from Kaya."

Her fingertips had trembled. For a brief moment, she couldn't tell if she was breathing at all.

Now that she thought about it, however, this revelation had been far less impactful than it would have been in the past.

If she'd received this letter back when she had just left the Saimori estate, she likely would've been left unable to move at all, as if doused in freezing water.

Those who knew her circumstances—including Kouji, Kiyoka, and Hazuki—were all concerned for Miyo and watched over her with worry.

She couldn't possibly have read the letter in such a situation. The emotions it would bring up in her were certainly not suitable for a celebratory banquet.

Kouji had worn a look of regret.

He was still engaged to Kaya. While it was uncertain what the future held, they still wrote to each other occasionally.

Her most recent letter to Kouji had contained an attachment meant for Miyo—the message that was now in her hands.

"I don't mind. I'll be right here while you read that letter."

"Thank you."

Miyo felt relieved when Kiyoka closed his book with his usual sulky expression. She carefully stared once more at the letter she held against her chest.

In all honesty, she found the prospect of reading its contents terrifying.

It could contain terrible words of resentment, all manner of abuse, or potentially, something entirely different instead.

Just imagining it made her hesitate, and her mind went blank.

She took a single deep breath.

Miyo steeled herself, and slowly, little by little, she neatly undid the seal and took out the letter inside. Then she opened it up and ran her eyes over the short lines.

Dispensing with preliminary formalities—Miss Miyo Saimori, congratulations on your marriage.

The first words she saw were unexpectedly sensible, as well as overly formal and distant. However, from the next line on, that pretense completely disappeared.

I will not refer to you by any other surname than Saimori. Just remembering the events of last year makes me furious, despondent, and miserable.

Kaya had spelled out her feelings with flowing and orderly handwriting that was far beyond Miyo's capabilities.

However, as long as I keep you out of mind, I find my life peaceful and satisfying, filled with a reasonable sense of accomplishment. Sounds nice, doesn't it? Given you're engaged to Master Kudou, you must obviously be

having a terribly tough time, so I'm positive I'm living several times better than you are right now.

Miyo couldn't help but let out a chuckle at this.

Kaya had written everything in absolute seriousness, and hadn't been trying to make Miyo laugh, but it somehow seemed as though there was a merriness to her brushstrokes.

Though Miyo did find it strange that she was able to feel this way.

Kiyoka's imprisonment had been written about in the papers, so there was a chance that Kaya had heard about it. If she had known that and written that she was living a life several times better, more peaceful, and more satisfying, then Miyo couldn't raise any objection against her sound argument, and its perfect mix of sarcasm.

Her half sister was still acting as a live-in servant for an infamously strict family.

Miyo never imagined that Kaya would grow to think positively of her new life, despite the circumstances.

Since I was born far cleverer than you were, this servant work isn't difficult for me in the slightest. So, I would suggest you focus on doing what you can to lead an enriching new life of your own. I pray for your happiness. Yours sincerely.

Just as Miyo started to think that Kaya was going to write out a long sprawl of both words of encouragement and words of scorn, the letter abruptly ended, as though its author was curtly turning up her nose at her.

She flipped the letter over, but there was nothing else written on the back, either.

Miyo released the tension in her body and let out a sigh.

"How was it...? You looked ready to laugh in the middle there."

"Yes, well," Miyo briefly replied to Kiyoka's suspicious questioning, before she put a hand to her cheek and thought for a moment.

"How do I put it?"

When she thought back, a smile spontaneously bloomed across her face.

"That letter was biting, but she seemed to have taken great pleasure in writing it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Miyo didn't really understand what she was saying, either, but this was the only way she could express it. While the letter had been filled with sarcasm, she felt almost none of the nastiness and twistedness in it that Kaya had demonstrated before.

The Kaya she was familiar with would have never even sent a congratulatory letter in the first place.

"The letter really made it clear that Kaya's enjoying her days to the fullest."

"...That's surprising. I'd have guessed it would be filled with nothing but whining and complaining."

"Kaya is honest to her core. Very earnest, too. Otherwise, she wouldn't have worked so hard to learn how to use arts, just because she has Spirit-Sight."

It was possible for women to actively work as Gift-users, but they were a minority. Women like Kaoruko, who mingled with the men to fight, were rare.

Even if girls were born with Spirit-Sight or a Gift, they didn't really need to learn to wield their abilities if they didn't plan on doing battle. The only thing their families cared about was that they possessed abilities they could pass down to their children.

Unlike Gifts, which were especially influenced by the nature of one's birth, arts needed to be learned and practiced, or they couldn't be utilized.

So the fact that Kaya could use arts showed the efforts she had taken to hone them.

Which makes it all the more likely that Kaya dealt with her own pain and hardship, too.

Even if she were on her deathbed, Miyo didn't know if she would be able to forgive Kaya for what she had done. The wounds she'd suffered at her half sister's hand were still etched into her chest, and there were times when she

would suddenly remember the things Kaya had done to her and feel terrible.

If Miyo ever heard Kaya call out to her in the way she used to, she knew for certain it would shake her, and whenever she saw a young girl who resembled Kaya, Miyo would unconsciously curl into herself.

Although she couldn't forgive Kaya and might never be able to see her faceto-face again, Miyo had been able to accept her feelings through a letter.

She didn't know why, but right now, that fact gave her immense solace.

Perhaps it's because I know...that I'm moving forward myself.

Kaya wasn't the source of all Miyo's mistreatment. The years that her father and stepmother had stolen from her would never be returned. Miyo would be lying if she said she never rued the loss or felt angry about it.

Nevertheless, she was moving forward. Because she knew that her old self, who had only yielded to her family's violence and abuse, was no longer anywhere to be found.

"Kaya was seventeen, right? If she's taking things seriously, she's still young enough to do things over," Kiyoka murmured, looking far off into the distance. Miyo nodded.

"Yes. Even in just a year, people really can change."

"Because you've changed yourself, right?"

"I think you have, too, Kiyoka...," she replied modestly.

Kiyoka paused for a moment before a chuckle escaped his lips, and he broke into a smile.

"You might be right."

The precarious light from the electric lamp flickered, and silence filled the living room.

Both of them said no more, and as myriad emotions bubbled up and faded, Miyo slowly put away the letter, trying to conceal her awkward restlessness.

With the outstanding issue of Kaya's message to her now resolved, her mind drifted in a different direction of its own accord.

"C-can you wait until after we're married...?"

The thing she had asked of Kiyoka a few days prior came back into her mind.

Until after they were married.

They had been wed. Miyo was Kiyoka's wife. Which from here meant...

"U-um...! K-Kiyoka!"

When Miyo addressed him, Kiyoka suddenly fixed his eyes on her.

"D-de... Dear."

It was mortifying. It was normal; it was something that almost all wives called their husbands, so then why? Why did she feel so embarrassed?

She was sure that her face must be so crimson right now that it was unbearable to look at. Her whole body felt hot enough to be on fire.

She timidly opened her eyes. They met Kiyoka's own, swaying as he stared at her, out of either happiness or surprise.

"Miyo."

"K-Kiyoka Kudou...?"

"That's not right, is it?"

The inside of her burning head, like the ingredients in a boiling pot, softly began to melt away. Her senses dulled, as though she were dreaming and had left her own body.

Her mind faltering, she stared at Kiyoka.

"M-my love?"

"Oh yes, that's good, too. But there's something I like even more than that."

Miyo knew what exactly he was looking for.

Kiyoka slowly brought his hand around Miyo's back like he had that night. She was now sitting face-to-face with him, a hair's breadth away.

"D-darling..."

Right as she gave the correct reply, his handsome face closed in.

A soft, sweet sensation fell on her lips. Her consciousness and her senses all grew dim and faint, as though she were intoxicated, yet the feeling alone came through vividly.

Miyo closed her eyes at the kiss, longer and deeper than any other before it.

How much time did they spend like that? Long enough that their lips seemed reluctant when they finally parted.

"...You didn't hate that, did you?"

"...No."

It was no use—Miyo had no idea what sort of expression was on her face.

Her strength gradually faded from her body, like sugary syrup heating up and melting away. Still, she didn't feel any desire to fight it.

Kiyoka stood up, lifting her gently in his arms.

"Darling...?"

"Let's take this somewhere else."

It was difficult for her contemplate the meaning of his words. Miyo simply wrapped her arms around Kiyoka's neck and clung tight.

The light went out.

Their first night of marriage. Time spent in sweet bliss, enveloped in faint darkness and the glow of the hazy spring moon.



In the blink of an eye, the whole city transitioned into the tender verdure of spring.

The green leaves now stood out far more prominently on their former blossoms, which the cherry trees had eagerly scattered, and the rays of the sun had started shining a bit stronger.

A few days had passed since their wedding.

Kiyoka's military work had grown extremely busy, with his time away from the house becoming awfully long.

The day after the ceremony had been busy; Miyo and Kiyoka had visited the Kudou estate to pay their respects once more, then gone to the Usuba's to thank them for acting as Miyo's family in place of the Saimoris.

However, once all that was settled, Kiyoka grew so busy that he barely had time to sleep, swamped with work related to the mission he'd slipped away from on the day of the ceremony.

So despite being newly wed, Miyo spent her days in the house alone or with Yurie, tending to the daily chores just the same as always.

"Spending time like this... It makes me remember last year when I was taken back to the Saimori estate," Miyo murmured as she walked with Yurie toward the capital with a parasol open behind her.

"Miyo. I mean Mistress. Please, don't make me remember that time. It put such a strain on my poor heart. You'll shorten what little life I have left."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That wasn't my intention at all."

Miyo smiled awkwardly and apologized to Yurie, who was still looking wideeyed and slightly angered.

Miyo was carrying a multitiered food box wrapped up in a cloth. Yurie had one as well.

The two women were on their way to deliver a homemade pick-me-up meal to Kiyoka, whose health they were worried about because he'd been staying out until late and leaving at sunrise, only ever coming home to sleep.

Around this time last year, they had both gone on a walk to visit the station much like they were now.

Kiyoka had given Miyo a protective charm, but that day, she had accidentally forgotten it at home, and an awful situation had developed as a result. Ever since then, Miyo had taken extra care to bring the charm with her whenever she went out.

It was in the purse around her wrist at that very moment.

She wasn't sure what sort of mechanism was at work, but the charm with her now felt quite a bit heavier than the charm she'd had a year prior. It must have been an expression of Kiyoka's concern for her that each new protective charm she received felt profoundly heavier than the last.

Given the recent curse she had been afflicted with, it seemed like it would grow even heavier before long. Incidentally, when she had been cursed, the purse containing her protective charm had been in another room, so it hadn't been able to protect her.

"Still, time truly does fly. It seems like just yesterday when you first came to our door, Miss Miyo."

"...It feels a bit strange to me. Both long, yet like no time at all."

As it occurred to her that a year had already come and gone, she thought back on the chaotic and tumultuous days that had passed.

Though it had been a far shorter stretch of time than her years of stagnation in the Saimori home, when she recalled everything that had happened since her engagement to Kiyoka, it seemed so bewildering and hectic that she felt fortunate to have weathered it all in one piece.

Yurie's bright smile peeked out from underneath the shade of her parasol.

"You've become such a splendid wife, Miss Miyo."

Yurie's evaluation of Miyo was as high as ever. A year on, Miyo was able to calmly accept her compliment.

"Thank you very much. But I've still got a lot to learn. It's only been a few days since the wedding."

"Come now. You don't need to be so modest. Anyone can tell just by looking at the two of you—you and the young master make a wonderful couple."

As they conversed, they came a few streets away from the center of town. The density of pedestrians on the street increased, and the surrounding area grew livelier.

The dazzling city never failed to awe her.

Heading down the familiar road, they went straight for the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station.

When they arrived, the guard at the front of the gate appeared to remember Miyo and readily let them pass through without a word.

"Oh, Miyo...er, Mrs. Kudou."

Just as they had passed through the gate, a voice suddenly called to her. She didn't need to look to know who it belonged to.

She saw Kouji waving slightly, having just emerged from the station entrance.

Miyo quickened her pace and came up right beside Kouji, catching her breath.

"Hello, Kouji. Are you here for work?"

"Yup. I return to the old capital tomorrow, but there's a bunch of stuff to help out with here. Why are you here, Miyo...er, Mrs. Kudou."

It was her first time seeing Kouji since the banquet on the day of the ceremony. As she had thought back then, she couldn't help but find Kouji's new way of addressing her amusing.

"Tee-hee."

"D-don't laugh. I still can't get it to come out right away. I mean, I shouldn't be referring to another man's wife so casually."

"Thank you for being so considerate."

"No, honestly, I think it's more about self-preservation than anything. I'm worried about what Kiyoka would say if I was overly familiar with you."

Kouji paused there and then looked down at the box in Miyo's arms.

"Bringing some refreshments to Kiyoka?"

"Yes. I know that he can have a delicious meal in the cafeteria, but I thought he could help himself to these when he was feeling a bit hungry."

"Kiyoka is a lucky man to have you go to such lengths for him like that."

Kouji squinted a bit, his eyes faintly tinged with shadow, yet at the same time, concealing a strong resolve that hadn't been there before.

"Kouji..."

"Oh, don't worry. I didn't mean anything by it. I'm living out each day with a

real strong sense of satisfaction. I can really feel myself getting stronger every day, and while I've had plenty of tough times, I'm glad I joined the Second Unit," he said before opening the station entrance with a smile and urging Miyo along. "You should hurry and give that to the commander."

Thanking Kouji, Miyo stepped inside the station with Yurie.

She had a perfect knowledge of the station, having spent every day there herself for a period of time, and she started by searching for someone who could call Kiyoka to see her, greeting the unit members she knew with a bow as she went.

"Oh, Miyo."

Godou had come over to see her.

He had looked a bit dispirited the other day, despite his flippancy, but today, he was back to his usual self.

Miyo bowed politely and greeted him.

"Hello. Thank you for your wishes the other day."

"Hello. And of course, you're very welcome. What's brought you here?"

"I wanted to come bring Kiyoka a pick-me-up of sorts."

When she told him her reason for visiting, for a moment, his expression took on a slight note of awkwardness.

"Ahh... The commander's, um, seeing a guest? Or rather, interrogating someone... But I think he should finish up soon."

"In that case, I'll leave the food for him here. Could you hand it to him afterward?"

She didn't need to hand Kiyoka the boxes herself. Though her husband was busy, he was still coming home every night and making sure they got to see each other.

She knew that he was doing just fine, so as long as he got her gift, that was plenty.

"Still, though." Godou frowned when he heard Miyo's response, crossing his

arms.

"The commander will be awfully disappointed to hear you came all this way without being able to see him. Oh, I'll put these over here for now, okay?"

Godou plucked the cloth-wrapped food boxes out from Miyo and Yurie's hands, and after placing them on a nearby table, he turned around.

"Well, I'll go check how the commander's doing. If it looks like he'll finish up soon, could you wait a bit?"

It happened right after Miyo watched Godou run off.

Her ears caught the sound of a woman raising her voice, although it was somewhat muffled; perhaps it was coming from inside a nearby room.

She couldn't really tell what the context was, but based on the words she could make out—"Why?" and "How could you say that?"—it sounded like someone was being reproached.

Just then, the door to one of the rooms burst open.

"I'm sorry. I'll be taking my leave for today, thank you," a kimono-clad woman declared, her voice choking with tears, and exited out the open reception room door. Miyo called out to the woman in surprise upon realizing she recognized her.

"...Kimio?"

Kimio appeared to notice Miyo herself and turned her eyes, red from crying, in her direction.

"Miss Saimori..."

Murmuring, Kimio walked past Godou, who'd halted in the middle of the hallway, and ran over to Miyo.

"Miss Saimori—oh, except it would be Mrs. Kudou, wouldn't it? Congratulations on your wedding."

"Thank you very much, Kimio."

Miyo was stunned to see Kimio talk to her like normal despite the traces of tears still on her cheeks.

Then Miyo remembered a fact that, up until that very moment, she had shoved into a corner of her mind, too preoccupied with the wedding.

That's right, Kimio put a curse on me.

Although the hex was weak and never amounted to anything serious, Miyo had been cursed by this woman all the same. She unconsciously braced herself and gulped.

"Hey, do you mind if we talk a bit? I want to hear about your wedding."

"But."

Kimio looked pitiful, her brow sagging and her nose and eyes pink.

Miyo didn't know what had happened, but it made her want to answer Kimio's request.

She was dealing with a powerless woman, and despite the matter of the curse, Kimio was also a former classmate. Deciding it was probably all right, Miyo took her eyes off her...and in that brief moment—

Kimio produced a small, sharp piece of glittering metal out from the sleeve of her kimono.

"Huh? Kimi-"

"I'm sorry."

Her voice was indifferent, completely emotionless. Kimio aimed the item in her hands at Miyo's chest without any hesitation.

"Miss Miyo!"

Standing nearby, Yurie was the first one to shout. Next—

"Stop!"

Godou's angry scream echoed through the hallway.

Everything that happened next seemed to unfold very slowly. Miyo realized that the item in Kimio's grip was a foldable dagger, but also that she couldn't move away in time, and that she had no way to stop Kimio.

"Miyo!!"

She heard Kiyoka's voice. He flew out of the same reception room that Kimio had left, his face red with rage. But the swing of Kimio's dagger was faster, of course.

"Ah..."

Miyo could only watch as the tip of the dagger sank into her breast.

She didn't feel any pain. However, the sudden, slightly backward momentum tied up her feet, and she collapsed on the floor.

"You little—!"

Godou reached Kimio ahead of Kiyoka and pulled her down, bloodcurdling and murderous ire radiating from every inch of his body as he restricted her movement.

"Eeeek!"

As Kimio let out a short shriek and was pinned to the floor, the dagger fell with a soft clang. Its blade was free of blood.

Sensing the abnormal situation, unit members flooded the station corridor one after the other, and in the blink of an eye, commotion began to spread.

"Miyo, Miyo! Are you all right?"

Rushing over with a frantic look in his eyes, Kiyoka lifted Miyo up in his arms. She touched her chest in confusion.

Nothing happened?

There wasn't a single scratch on her upper body, and even her kimono was undamaged. Naturally, she didn't feel any pain, and she cocked her head, baffled by what was going on.

"I'm fine. I just fell over...but how?"

"You're carrying your charm, aren't you?"

As Kiyoka said this with a deep and profound sigh of relief, everything clicked for Miyo.

This protective charm, which Kiyoka had improved and strengthened over and over, was different from the one a year prior. Now it responded not only to

threats from grotesqueries, Gifts, and arts, but also to attacks from regular people.

Thanks to this, catastrophe had been averted.

She would have been seriously wounded if she'd actually been stabbed. If the dagger had struck the wrong place, she might have even died on the spot.

Her terrible heart palpitations wouldn't stop. When she imagined what would have happened if she had forgotten the protective charm, as she had before, a chill rushed down her spine.

"Why?!"

Kimio's sharp scream pierced everyone's ears.

"Why, why, why...? Why are you the only one who gets to be protected, who gets to be happy...?!"

Kimio was crying. She wailed as she turned into a mess, tears streaming from her eyes and her hair becoming unkempt.

"It's not fair, Miss Saimori, not fair at all! Why am I always treated so coldly, never shown any love, and never protected by anyone? I mean, even that curse! I had no idea that it would turn out like that. I—I didn't know anything about it! Why am I being blamed for everything?!"

"Kimio..."

"Wh-what was I supposed to do? I didn't decide to be married into that family. Even then, I worked so hard for my husband and mother-in-law. Yet despite that, everyone's cold to me, and no one shows me any kindness!"

Bewildered, Miyo held her tongue.

On the day of the cooking class, Miyo had sensed that Kimio wasn't very happy.

However, Miyo couldn't possibly have done anything for her, as Kimio was merely a former classmate, and not one she was particularly close to, either, whom she was seeing again for the first time in a long while.

Even now, Miyo didn't have the slightest idea what she could say to her.

As she sat with her gaze wandering aimlessly, Kiyoka, still holding her in his arms, cast a cold, contemptuous glare at Kimio.

"...And I believe I told you that I would put in word with the proper authorities to have them help you. You can't ignore that and then claim no one's there to protect you, now can you?"

After Kiyoka spat out those words in disgust, Godou let out a rough sigh as he constrained Kimio.

"At the very least, we've been lending you a hand after the spirit disturbance, so you haven't been 'treated coldly' at all. Your persecution complex is out of control. Though I understand why you might feel so desperate."

"No, no, but-"

"I don't want to hear it. That little stunt of yours was attempted murder. Just because you've been hurt yourself, that doesn't mean you have the right to turn around and harm someone else."

Kimio's face warped and wrinkled at Godou's words. An intense wail reverberated through the hallway.

Everyone who had witnessed the scene wore a grim, sour look, seeming a bit uncomfortable.

Miyo's heart ached to see her old classmate cry and shout.

The next thing she knew, Miyo was getting down on her knees and rubbing Kimio's back.

"Kimio. I was really very happy to get the chance to talk with you during that cooking class."

Anything Miyo could say to try to encourage or soothe her would likely just make Kimio feel worse and stoke her anger. There was only one thing Miyo could say to her.

"Let's both participate in another class together. That, and I'd like...to talk a lot more with you."

Miyo didn't know if she had properly expressed herself to Kimio, who crouched down on the floor, lay flat, and cried.

However, unless Miyo had simply been seeing things, she thought she saw Kimio nod her head ever so slightly.

"You really aren't hurt at all, right? Um, that charm's power is flawless, but I just want to make sure."

"Kiyoka, you worry too much. I really don't have a single scratch on me."

While Kimio was hauled off, and the people in the station went back to their normal routines, Kiyoka remained at Miyo's side, worrying over her endlessly.

No matter how many times she answered that she was fine, his grip around her shoulders never weakened.

Yurie had been so shocked by the events that transpired that they'd needed to sit her down in a nearby chair to rest.

Kiyoka furrowed his brow, looking almost tearful, and cast his eyes down.

"...I thought I would die."

"Um, what...?"

Miyo was the one who thought she might die.

As Miyo wondered what her husband was saying, the question practically on her face, Kiyoka gently touched her cheek with his fingertip, as if handling something fragile.

"In that moment, when I thought about what would happen when you died, I imagined what would happen to me afterward...and I concluded that I probably wouldn't live much longer after that."

"Wh-what in the world are you saying?"

Miyo's eyes widened.

She was finally settling down from having almost been killed, and yet now she found herself flustered for a different reason entirely.

Kiyoka dying was absolutely preposterous. Of course, she wasn't planning on dying any time soon, either, but if he dared to try following after her, her spirit would be overcome with sadness and irritation.

Above all else, she knew she could never bear the fact that she might cause

Kiyoka to devalue his life.

"It's a relatively obvious conclusion. Anyone other than you would probably agree."

"Y-you can't do that, okay? If I saw you do anything of the sort, I'd haunt your dreams...and, um, chide you every night."

"If you showed up in my dreams every night, then maybe I'd be able to live a little longer."

"I-I'm not joking here; I mean it."

Seeing Miyo speak so emphatically, Kiyoka finally cracked a smile.

Miyo thought she saw the color returning to his blanched cheeks. Her complexion was probably in a similar state, too. She'd been scared to death.

"I'm glad that you're all right."

"...I'm sorry for worrying you."

"No, all that matters is you're safe," Kiyoka said, plopping a hand down on top of Miyo's head, before at last, he removed the other hand from her shoulder, with which he'd been holding her close.

"Let's call for Yurie. I'll show you to the entrance. I can't escort you back to the house, but—"

"It's okay. This charm will protect me."

As Miyo broke into a smile, Kiyoka's eyes softened as well.



After accompanying Kimio as she was taken away and making sure she was handed over to the police, Godou returned to the station.

There, he happened to catch a glimpse of his superior, Kiyoka, accompanying his wife to the gate.

Even from a distance, the looks on their faces were peaceful and brimming with happiness, like flowers in bloom. It didn't seem like anyone could hope to interfere with them.

The commander really has changed.

This metamorphosis certainly wasn't an unpleasant one, even for Godou, and it made him feel a bit jealous, too.

Before Kiyoka had met Miyo, that handsome face of his had always betrayed a heartlessness, and there had been a harsh and stern air about him.

Nagaba showed almost no interest in Kimio, treating her with cold indifference.

If Kiyoka had never met Miyo, and he had taken some other arbitrarily selected woman as his wife instead, he would have likely turned out to be the same type of husband himself.

Godou could scarcely believe how Kiyoka's face had thawed and gentled.

Everything about him—his eyes squinted in affection, the upturned corners of his lips, the affection in his voice—spoke volumes about how much he loved his wife,

"Gaaah... I'm happy, sure, but it still makes me feel a bit empty..."

If only Godou could someday find such a well-matched partner for himself. Despite this hope, though, it was clear that things wouldn't go so smoothly.

More importantly, though...

If that thing is going to cause trouble, then there's no way marriage is on the table for me until I do something about it.

The Earth Spider. The cruel grotesquerie that could shape-shift into the bodies of multiple people, use them each for different purposes, and perform acts of evil, was tormenting others once again.

"I can't cause trouble for the commander when he just got hitched. I have to act carefully."

Godou's thoughts turned to his father's killer.

For a time, he had resented Kiyoka for not saving his father. However, after learning that Kiyoka carried his own profound feelings of remorse and regret, Godou realized it was pointless to blame him.

This time, I'll end it for good, by my own hand.

Godou couldn't ignore the black haze festering in his breast. He clenched his uniform, pressing down right above his heart.

Gazing from a distance at Kiyoka while enveloped in a soft, cheerful air, Godou curled the corners of his lips in a smirk.

# **©** EPILOGUE **9**

The warm end of spring. The clear days of the approaching early summer continued, and the park, covered in vivid green, was bustling with a fair number of people.

As she sat on a bench with a parasol shading her, Miyo's eyes dropped down to her lap.

Kiyoka looks very comfortable.

Using Miyo's lap as a pillow, Kiyoka had nodded off to sleep.

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, believing a strong grotesquerie that could potentially harm others seemed close at hand, had been in utter chaos day in and day out—gathering information, holding meetings about how they should respond going forward, and how they would confront said grotesquerie should it arrive, all on top of carrying out their normal duties.

This situation had continued from the day that Kimio tried to attack Miyo, all the way up to now.

Kiyoka was finding it hard to take a break, and he wanted to relax and talk together during his lunch hour for a change, so they rendezvoused in the park at noon.

Sitting side by side on the bench, they ate the lunches Miyo had brought with her, and they had only just found a moment of respite, but...

Soon after Kiyoka suddenly put his head down on her lap, he began to rhythmically breathe in slumber.

"Enjoy your nap, darling."

Addressing him with the pet name she was finally able to use without issue, Miyo gently brushed away Kiyoka's silky hair from his face with a caress.

Even then, not a single one of his long eyelashes twitched at all.

The exhaustion had really built up, just as she thought. It was understandable.

For no particular reason, she gazed up to the sky. The blue was gradually growing deeper and more vivid, getting ready for summer. The fresh greens and the blue sky were layered against each other, and just gazing at them made her feel refreshed and invigorated.

The warbling of the nightingale that occasionally came to her from somewhere in the distance had gotten much more sonorous, compared to the faltering chirps of springtime.

It must almost be time for him to go back.

After this, Kiyoka would return to the station and work late into the night.

Miyo couldn't bear to wake him when he looked so comfortably asleep; however, it was unavoidable.

"Darling."

Miyo quietly called out to him. Then, this time gently and softly caressing his head, she said it again.

"Darling, please wake up."

His eyelids quivered. He slowly opened his eyes, meeting hers.

"Good morning."

"...Yes, good morning."

She found him so precious, returning her greeting in his hoarse, waking voice. Despite spending every day together, she hadn't grown accustomed to her feelings of love, and instead, they only deepened day by day.

Every time she learned a new side of Kiyoka, her heart would pound, and she fell further in love with him.

Even the cold comments he had thrown at her when they first met, when she looked back on them now, seemed endearing and adorable to her, proving that her feelings of love were out of control.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Only about ten minutes. Were you able to get some rest?"

"Yeah... That lap of yours is dangerous. If you hadn't woken me up, I would've stayed fast asleep."

After blinking his eyes several times, Kiyoka abruptly roused himself, let out a sigh, and stood up. Then he held out a hand toward Miyo.

"Let's go. I'd feel bad for everyone if I was out of the station for too long."

Miyo took his outstretched hand without a moment's hesitation and gripped it to stand herself up.

However, after she had stood, her hand was pulled lightly, and the distance between her and Kiyoka instantly narrowed. Then, a very brief, light kiss came down onto her lips.

"K-Kiyoka! N-not, not in a place like this!"

She never guessed he would do something so bold, outside and in broad daylight. In spite of Miyo's unrest, Kiyoka grinned, making no attempt to hide his glee.

"Let's go."

"W-wait a moment."

Naturally, they both brought their hands together.

"When work quiets down, do you want to go on a honeymoon?"

"...Yes. I would love to."

"Go ahead and think of where you want to go, then."

Miyo and Kiyoka walked off beneath the pleasantly breezy sky as they conversed about simple, trivial things.

Enveloped in more happiness than she had ever experienced before, Miyo broke into a broad smile.

# **§ AFTERWORD §**

As usual, a year has passed since I last spoke to you. How have you all been doing?

With the subtly increased frequency with which I've had to introduce myself at this stage, and having looped back to regretting that I should've chosen a much prettier, cuter, easier-to-remember pen name with pizazz—it is I, Akumi Agitogi, once again.

If I knew I was going to have a chance to debut as an author, I would've put a bit more thought into my pen name...

Just as I announced last time, this volume ended up happy and joyful.

After five years of publication, beginning with the web novel, the story's finally been able to live up to its title.

I figured that previewing this volume by saying "they finally get married" was a bit too grand and direct of a spoiler, so I tried expressing it in a more roundabout way (and ultimately failing) by connecting it with the title and calling it a "happy volume." I hope you all picked up on that.

I touched on this briefly in the last volume, but all sorts of things happened in the lead-up to this wedding.

Much like Kiyoka and Miyo's trials, and the tumultuous developments of the story, there were often times when I found myself struggling to write.

However, if this series hadn't continued as long as it has, then I probably wouldn't have depicted the scene of their wedding, and the moment that the two of them finally became husband and wife, with as much detail as I did. If things had played out as I'd first planned, and the wedding had happened right after Volume 2, I likely would have wrapped it up in a single sentence—"They held a wonderful ceremony, received everyone's blessing, and became husband

and wife"—and that would have been it.

But in reality, I was able to continue the series, one episode after another, and cleanly follow the process as Miyo and Kiyoka's feelings for each other bloomed. I think that is truly what triggered my change of heart, to not accept a half-baked wedding ceremony and instead properly live up to the title.

As such, I can't begin to thank everyone who has supported this series enough.

To return the support from so many of you the best I can, I ardently hope you were able to enjoy this volume like a tasty dessert.

Now then, I believe by the time this volume goes on sale, the anime adaptation will have already started airing. I am so grateful for the surge of adaptations, from the live-action movie in the spring, to the anime adaptation in the summer, and I've been genuinely enjoying them as a viewer.

The live-action movie was truly, truly wonderful... The anime is being made with *such* an extreme amount of care and attention, it's been very touching.

All the people who have gotten involved with the adaptations have shown so much respect for the original work, and I constantly feel how fortunate I am to be blessed with meeting such great people.

Rito Kousaka's ongoing manga adaptation features as much beautiful artwork as ever, and it's really getting some rave reviews! Even knowing the plot, I end up thinking, "Oh, it's so sad... It's too much to bear... What's going to happen to them?" while reading. Then I end up distraught—I'm serious. It's so lovely, the only feedback I can ever come up with is "I think it's perfect!"

Finally, I would like to thank all the people who have helped me with the making of this latest volume.

To my editor, who supported me in every possible way as I wrote, howling nonstop about all the adaptation work the whole time: Thank you so much for everything. I surmise I will be causing you a considerable amount of trouble from here on out, too... (I'm sorry).

To Tsukiho Tsukioka, thank you for the exquisite and gorgeous cover illustration you've provided for this volume. Each and every illustration is

always so wonderful, I find myself at a loss for words, but this latest work was a whole other, tremendous level of devastating...! All I can do is silently cry and applaud you. Thank you.

Finally, to all the readers who have accompanied me this far: I give you my deepest and heartfelt gratitude for following this series for so long. Your fan letters and gifts provide me with daily encouragement. *My Happy Marriage* will still continue from here, so I hope you'll continue to watch over Miyo and Kiyoka's tale together with me for a little while longer.

Well then, until next time.

Akumi Agitogi

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