Kana Akatsuki
Illustration by Suoh



Agents of the Four Seasons

THE ARCHER OF DAWN



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Character Introductions



CUSTODIAN OF THE ARCHER OF DAWN

Yuzuru Fugeki

He took over his father's role attending Kaya. Proud of his work and fond of his young charge, he finds Kaya's attempts to push him away aggravating.

ARCHER OF DAWN

Kaya Fugeki

The god incarnate who oversees morning in Yamato. A high schooler with a boyish manner of speech. She cares about Yuzuru and wants him to have the freedom she lacks, but he refuses.

ARCHER OF TWILIGHT

Kaguya Fugeki

The god incarnate who oversees night in Yamato. After the events of the summer, he recovered his Custodian and surrogate son, although his wife remains away. For now, he lives with Eken in the Ryugu Shrine. Kaya looks up to him as her senior.

CUSTODIAN OF THE ARCHER OF TWILIGHT

Eken Fugeki

His lord's affection allowed him to regain his humanity after the Dark Wolf incident. Since being reinstated as his Custodian, he has found meaning in supporting Kaguya. He's growing up fast; at this rate, he'll be taller than his Archer in no time.

AGENT OF AUTUMN

Nadeshiko Iwaizuki

Holder of the power of Life Putrefaction. Her trust and love for her dear retainer grows every day. While it might seem like she depends on him, she's the one holding the reins in their relationship.

GUARD OF AUTUMN

Rindo Azami

Nadeshiko's retainer. He cares the most for his lady, as she does him. He has become a reliable Guard. The hardships endlessly thrown at him have forced him to become adaptable.

GUARD OF WINTER

Itecho Kangetsu

Rosei's retainer. He likes to be relied upon and is capable of dealing with most things, partially thanks to the great troubles he encountered when he first got the job. The oldest of the Guards, he is very kind to the others.

AGENT OF WINTER

Rosei Kantsubaki

Holder of the power of Life Coagulation. Ever since his reunion with Hinagiku, he hasn't been able to get her out of his head. He cares for her the most, and then Itecho and Sakura. No one else really matters to him... Well, he's become fond of his other colleagues, too.

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SHUNKASHUTO DAIKOSHA AKATSUKI NO SHASYU
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Edited by Dengeki Bunko
First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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Yen On
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First Yen On Edition: August 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Anna Powers Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Akatsuki, Kana, author. | Suoh, 1989– illustrator. | Avila, Sergio, translator.
Title: Agents of the four seasons : dance of spring part 1 / Kana Akatsuki; illustration by Suoh ; translation by Sergio Avila.
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2023– | Contents: v. 1. Spring dance: part one — Identifiers: LCCN 2023038212 | ISBN 9781975373177 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975373191 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975373214 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975373238 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Seasons—Fiction. | Goddesses—Fiction. | Gods—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy comics. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.A377 Ag 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023038212

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9390-8 (paperback)
978-1-9753-9391-5 (ebook)

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Back when the world was born, Day and Night watched the sea.

When they transformed the Canopy, the sea burned, and they loved the dye of sunrise and sunset.

They longed for a day when this empty world would change like the tides in the sea.

The time passed in ennui, turning body and soul into stone.

Eventually, creatures began arising in the sea and land.

Day and Night turned their gaze from the sea to the colorful mountains and trees. The insects. The birds. The horses. The humans.

The world evolved at a dizzying speed.

The hustle and bustle of the humans, in particular, amused the two gods, and so enraptured were they that they forgot to shoot the Canopy.

Days without morning and days without night troubled the humans, the animals, and the plants. Without a clear boundary, they did not know when to sleep.

Yet Day and Night would not stop watching.

Finally, they no longer had to watch the lifeless sea all by themselves.

One suggested to the other that they make disciples. Rumor had it that the Four Seasons had done so.

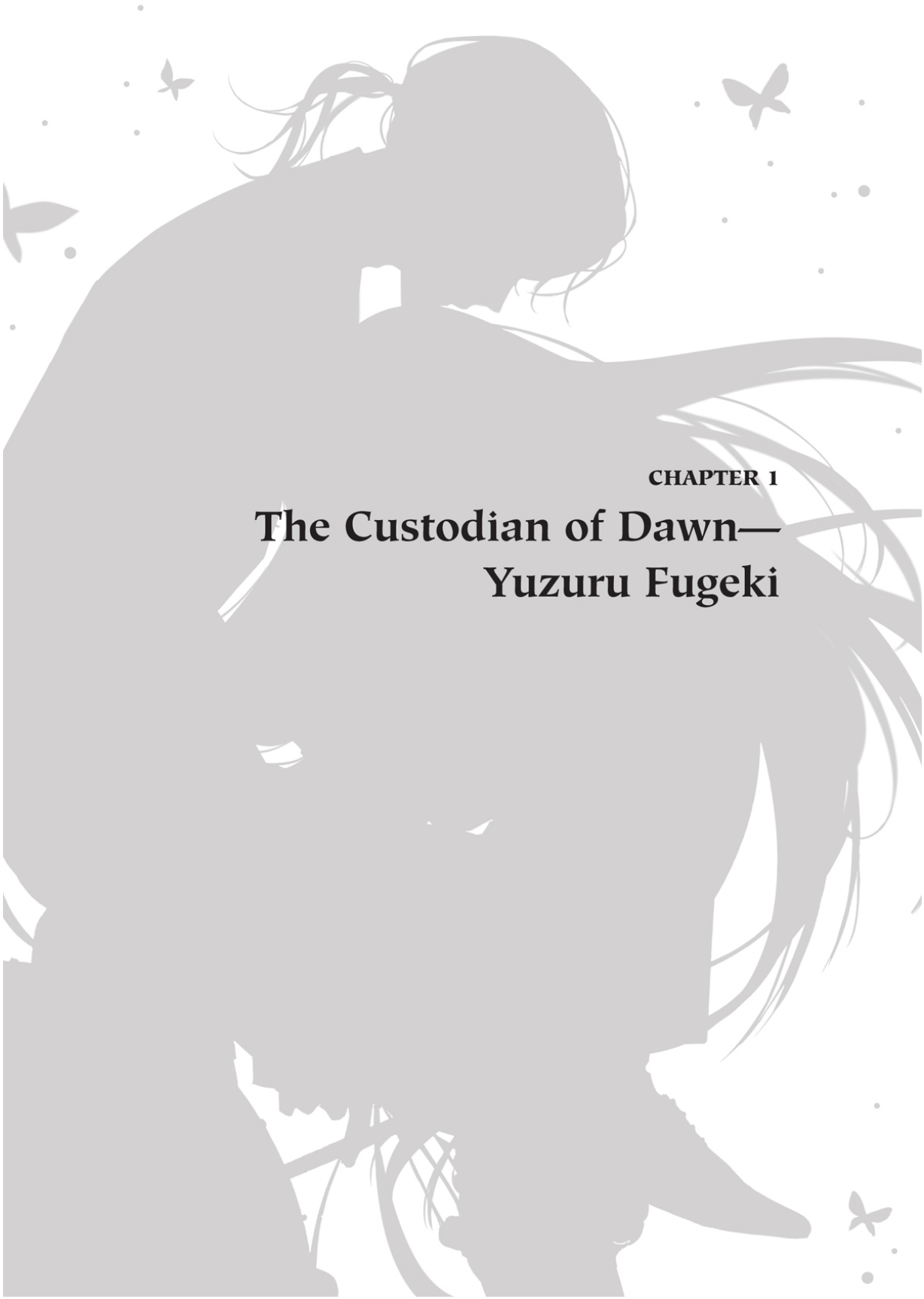
Thus, Day and Night followed and entrusted humans with a bow of light and a bow of darkness, sure that these would be the easiest to use.

The two gods took on multiple disciples and made them compete with one another. Those who could endure and shoot their arrows every day without fail became the successors.

Their disciples were dispersed across the world, bearing the work of the gods on their shoulders.

And so a structured sleep returned to the land and the creatures.

Even now, the two gods watch the descendants of their disciples shoot the sky.



CHAPTER 1

The Custodian of Dawn—Yuzuru Fugeki

My father, the previous Custodian, asked me to meet someone.

I think I was seventeen or eighteen at the time. My father's work was away from home, and it had been a while since I last saw him.

"My age is catching up to me. I want someone young to take over, but we haven't found a successor. She wants to meet you before any other candidates. Would you do this for me?"

After mentioning that she was happy to see me, he got right to the point. I knew what his job entailed. I was also aware that I could succeed him one day.

I'd had a hunch over the years, so I said yes right away.

But he was surprised. Did he not expect it?

"You're so obedient, it actually worries me."

Despite his comment, he took me to meet the goddess one week later.

The goddess incarnate of the morning lived in the pastoral countryside.

We walked down mazelike footpaths across ponds filled with koi fish and swaying trees until we reached a mansion at the end of the stone paving. I'm used to it by now, but I was taken aback at first by the way my father just walked into that luxurious manor as if he owned the place.

As he went inside, he told me to go to the garden.

"You're his son, huh?"

The goddess was waiting for me by the beautiful wisterias.

Her name was Kaya. She was thirteen at the time, if I recall correctly. The way she spoke was fairly boyish.

We were together for only a short time, but she asked me a lot. Whether I smoked, whether I could drive, what my pastimes were. I felt like I was taking a test.

When it was time for me to go, she broke one branch off the wisteria and said: "If you take this, that's it, you know."

Receiving a flower tree branch from the goddess was the ritual to become her Custodian.

"So you're choosing me?"

"Yes. But these days, it's not cool to take away someone's freedom when they're so young. I'm giving you a choice."

"I don't mind it. In fact, I want to ask you if you're okay with me?"

"…If you're the one with me, I do think it'll be okay. But I don't want to force you…"

She was one eccentric goddess, and full of herself. Not many were invited into her world.

She must have felt anxious at the thought of losing her trusted Custodian. Now she had chosen me and was nervously waiting for my response. I felt bad for the goddess.

It was a heavy burden for someone so young.

"If you accept me, Lady Kaya, I shall protect you."

Yes: It was pity at first.



As time passed and I knew her deeper, I got to witness the green mountains light up in daybreak.

The night ends, and all is well.

The light illuminates the sea, the mountains, the settlements, the world.

The air that once prickled my skin turns warm and embraces my body.

The sky casts off the veil of darkness little by little.

The night dies every day, then revives once again. Tonight, the split Canopy of dark will come back to life and fill the sky with stars.

Nobody knew what sacrifices and miracles served as the foundation for this everyday cycle.

Every time I saw this scene, I was frustrated.

"Is morning here?"

The Archer of Dawn's voice was hoarse as she awoke.

"Yes, it is."

"I see," she murmured in relief.

I knew she wasn't actually relieved.

Day and night only tortured her.

She was not the kind to feel pride in her duty to bring morning for the sake of others.

And yet she asked the same thing every time.

As though praying for it to be the case.

For morning to have come.

"Thank goodness."

How I wished for her to be more selfish.

Early summer had arrived, although traces of spring still remained.

The young man was on his way to receive the young Goddess of Day.

The blue car ran down the center of a provincial city.

The news was playing, and the young driver was switching through the stations.

"Summer comes after spring… This is the right way of the four seasons"

"Members of a reformist organization in the city"

"Cherry blossom patterns have been selling out this year in traditional craft shops all over"

The driver stopped on a more soothing news story.

He turned the wheel while admiring the view outside.

Far more people were walking down these streets than in winter. The snow thawed for the world, spring came, and now the green summer was here. Everyone was enjoying the outside world.

The view here consisted mostly of concrete buildings, but one could see faint purple flowers from time to time.

Syringa vulgaris was their scientific name. The lilac was no rare flower, but it was widely liked in colder regions due to its hardiness against lower temperatures. The young man's car was in one such region.

The woman on the radio happened to be talking about the topic right then.

"It is already warm in Ryugu, Tsukushi, and Iyo, but here in the north edge of Enishi, we still get strong, cold winds. The lilac frost is

here, folks. Don't be fooled by the brief moments of warm, and stay protected. Don't put away your shawls and thick coats just yet."

Far up in the north of the eastern archipelago of Yamato was the large island of Enishi.

While summer had technically arrived here, it was still cold.

They called this time of year the *lilac frost* due to the combination of blooming flowers and sudden cold fronts—a phenomenon not unlike what they called the *blooming cold* during cherry blossom season.

The sky was a clear blue, but the town still felt a chilly embrace. Despite the sting against the skin, the sweet purple scent was stronger.

Perhaps that was another reason for their popularity. Enishi needed something fun the middle of the cold, and the beautiful flowers were a beloved source of enjoyment.

The young man in the car headed toward the blooming lilacs, too. He was on his way to a prestigious girls' school, a garden shielded by the trees.

The man in the suit parallel parked the car by the roadside trees and checked he had his gun with him before going out.

The wind was cold, but his expression remained unchanged.

He stood on standby, his head and back straight, as though pulled up by a string.

His hair brushed elegantly against his face, thanks to the wind, although most of it was tied in a ponytail. The style highlighted his fine cheeks, chin, and physique.

He was a solemn man, upright and attentive, no scrolling on his phone.

Waiting soberly was important to him. He wanted her to meet him like this—a handsome man standing among the lilacs. A sight worthy of immortalizing in a painting.

He glanced anxiously at his watch.

She hadn't come through the gates yet. He was sure he was perfectly ready to receive her, but he still checked nothing was amiss

again and again.

He was not allowed to upset her.

He had to be in sight and easy to find, so as to not worry her.

Anyone else would have been baffled if they could hear his thoughts. How bad could a little lateness be? Yet he simply could not allow that.

As weird as it sounded, he served a very important person.

She had the peace of everyone in this country on her shoulders. Protecting her meant protecting everyone else.

This was the heavy responsibility of the young man on the northern island.

And nobody knew about it.

That said, it was not a life full of drama.

The role of a VIP's retainer would generally be assumed to be a bodyguard, but as his true purpose was kept a secret, there were no battles to be fought. He supported her everyday life and accompanied her everywhere—that was his main duty.

The school staff—outside of the higher-ups who knew the truth—only thought of him as the young man who always picked her up. Their life was tranquil.

Too tranquil, in fact—one could easily overlook the pain hiding underneath.

"…"

It had been a few minutes since he arrived, but she still wasn't here. He was starting to worry, although it did not show on his face. Classes were already over, and other students were coming one after the other.

The girls' school before him was famous within Enishi. Some students would travel a good ways to attend here, so there was often a line of cars waiting for them.

One girl after the other waved and ran toward their guardian.

Meanwhile, the young man searched the crowds for his own charge. Plenty of other students stared at him in return, but he pretended not to notice.

No boys were allowed in school, and this man showed up before the gates every day. It wasn't hard for the girls to fall in love with a guy they had never spoken to. They were at the height of puberty, after all.

One wouldn't be hard-pressed to find someone who would take a liking to the attention, but this was not the case for him. He was outward in his rejection. He would not even glance back at them.

Some of the braver girls had turned up to talk to him before, but no romance ever developed.

He would shoot them down with a cold and curt response.

Some liked his stoicism.

Some found him twisted—and they were the sharp ones.

Everyone who served the gods was softly twisted for their loved one.

They had to be; otherwise, they wouldn't be able to take it.

"…Lady…"

I have no interest in the rest; only you—the servant had no qualms saying that out loud.

Finally, his lady arrived.

A girl who caught the eye like a night-light in the dark.

In spring, she would come down in a shower of cherry blossoms.

In summer, she would come through the melodic rustling of the trees.

In autumn, she would come across the wind carrying maple and ginkgo leaves.

In winter, she would come shivering and cringing with the cold.

The young man loved to see his lady walk in every season.

She wore a black sailor uniform accentuated with a wine-colored ribbon scarf.

Her hair was like moonlight, her skin like fresh snow, her lips like a peony. Everything about her from birth was vivid and colorful.

The crimson ribbon adorning her hair swayed with graceful beauty.

The more he looked at her, the more enraptured he was—like a mountain summit waiting for the day to break.

This was his lady.

Only a moment more until her star-twinkling, big, peach blossom eyes looked his way.

"Lady Kaya."

The young man said her name loud enough for her to hear.

She looked back, then said his name.

"Yuzuru."

After saying good-bye to her friends, she walked straight toward him. The sight brought warmth back into his cold body.

It feels like coming back to life, every time.

Life was monochrome to him while she whiled away her limited youth.

“Kept you waiting?”
“Not at all. Welcome back, Lady Kaya.”

The young man—Yuzuru—received her tenderly.

So began the young retainer’s and goddess’s day.





Kaya got into the back seat of the car and sighed. Ignoring the behavioral standards for someone her status, she lay down.

"…I'm so tired." Her voice was hoarse, as if to make her point for her.

She curled up into a ball, wrinkling her school uniform. The car was about to leave, but she apparently didn't intend to sit properly.

Yuzuru got into the driver's seat and replied without a shred of surprise at the girl's unbecoming behavior.

"I understand you are terribly tired, Lady Kaya, but would you mind wearing your seat belt?"

The response he got to that was feral moaning. Yuzuru tapped the tablet embedded in the car to put on music, but the local news started playing.

"I want some music instead, Yuzuru." Kaya wasted no time complaining.

Yuzuru immediately switched off the radio, and the usual Western pop played from the car's speakers. Kaya said nothing, meaning it was the right choice.

She closed her eyes to let the music wash her fatigue away.

His lady liked listening to the lovely songs created on the other side of the planet.

She romanticized faraway countries, as was common among girls her age. Listening to her favorite songs should give a high school girl some energy back, her young retainer thought, but it seemed her fatigue was particularly great today.

She just wrapped herself up like a bagworm.

Poor thing.

Yuzuru sincerely felt for his tired lady. There was good reason behind her fatigue, so he did not fault her for her indolent behavior.

She didn't have a single day off from her duties, nor any way to run from them.

"Lady Kaya, we're going back to the manor now."

"Okay."

"Could you please put on your seat belt?"

"Okay."

"…Lady Kaya?"

Kaya's eyes suddenly shifted to the driver's seat, glinting with both the boldness of a boy and the delicacy of a girl.

"You reach over here and put it on."

Yuzuru was taken aback by her request. "Why should I?"

He was a reverent retainer, but not a blindly obedient one. He knew to ask *why* when her requests were unexpected.

"Can't I ask you to?"

He had to be firm; after all, his lady was still young. Yet no matter how hard he tried not to spoil her, he had never succeeded.

"I believe you should do what you're able to for yourself," he said.

"Don't you get it? I'm an exhausted high school girl, dude."

"…"

"I'm dead right now. I can barely move."

"…"

"Cut me some slack. Aren't you my Custodian?"

"Lady Kaya."

"What? Don't get so mad… You're so mean…"

"I'm not mad. But I am surprised you refuse to pull yourself together."

"C'mon."

"I'll be right there."

In the end, the retainer couldn't say no. Not when she called him *mean* in such an adorable tone. Yuzuru sighed and got out of the car without a shred of annoyance, then got into the rear seat and reached out to Kaya.

"Whoa, you're actually doing it?"

"Were you just joking?"

"Half and half. I was gonna move if you gave me three more seconds."

“Please don’t play those games… Anyhow, I’m here now. I’ll do it.”

“All right.”

His capricious lady nodded. Yuzuru pulled her into a sitting position, wrinkling his impeccable suit in the process.

“Are you taking these off?” Yuzuru asked, once he’d sat her up. The sock garters on her calves had caught his eye.

“Yes, please.”

“Very well.” Yuzuru grabbed her calves without a moment’s hesitation and took off the bands. “What about that?”

He pointed at the choker on her white neck.

“Leave it.”

“Very well.”

Yuzuru stared at Kaya, looking for anything else that could be constraining her.

“Looks like you’re all right now. I’ll put on your seat belt, Lady Kaya.”

“Okay.”

In the end, he fastened her seat belt personally.

Kaya and Yuzuru had no qualms touching each other, but there was an odd tension in the air.

“Do you mind it when I order you around?” she asked.

Yuzuru lowered his voice. “If you feel bad about giving orders, why not do these things yourself from the beginning?”

“Right.” Kaya chuckled, then stared at Yuzuru.

She was studying him, trying to discover what he was feeling right then.

“…”

Yuzuru worked hard not to let anything show.

She thinks this would make me hate her?

They had built a relationship of trust, but they did not expose their feelings to each other. It wasn’t a matter of closeness or distance, exactly, but rather a hesitancy to step further. So Yuzuru chose to remain quiet.

Once he was done sitting her up and fastening her seat belt, Yuzuru posed a soft complaint.

"Lady Kaya, if I may speak not as your servant but as your elder, this childish behavior is not good for your growth into a young woman."

It was the most obvious and expected of scoldings.

"…"

Kaya stayed in a pensive silence for a few seconds.

"Yes, that was wrong of me. But I am still young and need looking after. It shouldn't be shameful to be pampered like a child still, should it?"

She stood her ground.

"You're already in your second year of high school. You should be able to act independently already."

"I'm just saying, I wouldn't want to rob my retainer of his job."

"Your remarks become wittier every year… Do you enjoy troubling me like this?"

"No. It's just that I can't complain to the world—no choice but to complain to you."

Kaya looked away. "You really are mean. Okay, if you won't let me grumble at you, I won't do it anymore."

"…Then who will you grumble at?"

"No one. I'll bottle it all up. I am independent now, right?"

Yuzuru sighed again.

"Tired of your master already? It's okay. You can quit whenever."

Yuzuru sighed internally once more at her reaction.

Does she not think saying that could hurt me?

It was as though she was testing him. She played tricks and rebelled to see whether he'd let her get away with it. That way, she could be sure whether others recognized and affirmed her existence. It looked that way.

But that's not it.

"…Tell me whenever you wanna quit, 'kay?" she said. "Don't mind me, Yuzuru."

Yuzuru knew that she actually meant it.

That one wasn't a test. She would really allow him to quit if he asked.

She would do it out of the sheer goodness of her heart. She did not want to tie her retainer down.

If he were an employee, this flexibility would be a sign that she was a good boss. But he was meant to share one life with her as her retainer, so the offer took away the meaning in serving her.

"…"

Yuzuru stayed quiet and analyzed Kaya's expression. Her face was strained.

A retainer should never wish to see his charge in pain, but he had to admit he was glad.

Her expression showed that she didn't really want to let him go.

She simply wanted to give him the choice.

She's giving me the choice that she doesn't have. Instead of responding, Yuzuru brushed away the black hair that had stuck to her lips and tucked it behind her ear.

Kaya shivered. A touch like that only happened in a very close relationship.

Yuzuru spoke with a softer voice than usual. "…Feel free to grumble at me. Were your lessons today that tiring?"

He chose to ignore the subject of quitting.

He hoped that was enough to for her to understand: *I won't go away even when you're tired of me; I won't go even if you try to get rid of me.*

"…"

Kaya let out a breath, and Yuzuru could hear her relief.

"How was your day, Lady Kaya?" he asked again. "I want to hear about it."

"…Yeah, we had PE today… And we had a middle-distance race…," she replied timidly. She looked at Yuzuru's face again, then grumbled, "One girl slacked off, and they made us all run a lot…

They punished us all because one person messed up… It's not fair, is it?"

Yuzuru chuckled. What an adorable complaint. "Sounds terrible."

"It was."

"No wonder you're tired."

"Yeah! And I gotta hike after this… Damn commoners."

Yuzuru smiled affectionately at her grumbling. "…Lady Kaya, if you ever think going to school is too much…you are free to quit at any time."

He kept his face straight so as to not let her realize that was exactly what he wanted.

I don't want you to go.

"There really is no need for you to mingle with the common folk."

The truth was that he simply did not want her to go to school.

"You bring morning to this country…"

"I don't need to go, because I'm the great Archer of Dawn?" His lady cut him off. "Bullshit."

"No, it's not…"

The title she mentioned revealed her truly noble position.

Only a limited few were normally allowed to see or talk to her.

"To hell with that."

Yet she attended school with normal people. She acted like a typical high school girl.

"Lady Kaya…"

The common people were not aware of how special she was.

"Talking down your position is fine if it's only with me, but please do not say it in front of anyone else."

Yuzuru was not meant to show himself before the common folk, either. His job was to accompany, protect, and serve his lady at all times. He could dedicate himself to her because of her position.

"I say this because I want to protect you. Please be careful."

He wanted her to be aware of her position, but she seemed to doubt her authority.

"You are this country's Day, Lady Kaya."

The goddess incarnate snickered. *To hell with that*, she was saying again.

When asked how the seasons come to be, the people would answer:

"The Agents of the Four Seasons manifest each of them across the country to create the environments of spring, summer, autumn, and winter."

The Agent of Spring, the Agent of Summer, the Agent of Autumn, and the Agent of Winter.

The gods incarnate in charge of each season used the powers entrusted to them by the gods through song and dance to paint the land in their colors.

The arrangement came into action when the people and the Seasons made a vow in the age of the gods.

Then what about morning and night? The people would answer:

"The Archers of Oracle shoot their arrows across the world to slash open the Canopy of Day and the Canopy of Night."

The Archer of Dawn brought morning. The Archer of Twilight brought night.

Together, they were called the Archers of Oracle.

Day and night arrived when the Guardian Canopy in the sky was cut open.

There were Archers all around the world, shooting their arrows at a specific time and place.

The Canopy of Night was slashed apart with the help of many Archers to reveal the Canopy of Day; hours later, the Canopy of Day was shot down to reveal the Canopy of Night. Physically touching the Canopy was impossible; a hand would just go through it. The Archers themselves had to cut through it to make morning and night come.

The Archers of Oracle had support in their work as well—the Custodians who loyally served them.

Both the jobs of Archer and Custodian were difficult.

They had to climb the mountain in the gloomy spring haze.

They had to shoot their arrows in the scorching summer heat.

They had to keep walking among the eye-catching autumn foliage.

They could not wish for a normal life in the lonely winter freeze.

They had to work 365 days a year to bring peaceful morning and night to the world.

That was the task of the Archers of Oracle.

In the archipelago called Yamato, the Archers were split between north and south.

The Archer of Dawn dyed the world in the red aurora from the north.

The Archer of Twilight dyed the world in starry dark from the south.

Both Archers of Oracle were managed by their descendants, the Fugeki clan.

The name of Fugeki was given to those who served the gods and performed prayer and séance. Everyone in the clan bore the name of Fugeki—although one would be more accurate to think of it as a title instead.

Fugeki was composed of the two characters meaning *they who serve the gods* in Yamato's language—*kannagi* for women (pronounced *fu* in the compound word), and *geki* for men. Together, they formed the general term for men and women in priesthood.

The Archers of Oracle chosen from the Fugeki clan were bound to one specific locality, fated to perform their work there without travel for their entire life.

While the Archers of Oracle used their divine powers to perform the miracles granted by the gods, they needed the aid of the

bountiful leylines in the sacred mountain. They were tied to one place for that reason.

As long as an Archer was an archer, they could not live far away from the sacred mountain.

The gods with nowhere else to go had been protected and concealed by all powers since the beginning of time.

"The whole 'god' thing doesn't really resonate—I'm just a poor little girl being forced to work."

Kaya kept grumbling after Yuzuru returned to the driver's seat.

"And I gotta work late at night! Isn't that supposed to be illegal at my age?"

"You make a very good point there."

"Right?"

"However, Lady Kaya… Nothing can be done about the Archer of Dawn having a different schedule from everyone else. You are the goddess of morning, after all. You couldn't bring morning if you weren't working at night."

"…"

Kaya shut her lips in the face of the immovable reality.

"Your position is harsh, but the gods incarnate are treated much better now than in the past. You are able to live with your family and attend school because past generations kept demanding better treatment. Let's do the same and tell the higher-ups about unreasonable requests being made of you. I will help you."

He did not want to brush off her grievances and claim nothing could be done, but the sad reality was that it was part of his job as

her Custodian. Fortunately, Kaya herself understood it, though she still wanted to complain. She did not yell at him about this.

"And it's harsh for you, too. You could complain a little yourself…"

"I don't feel the need."

"No way."

"It's true. Lady Kaya, I get a normal amount of sleep and have spare time. In the end, the main reason for your exhaustion is school. It is hard to keep up with it and the Archer of Dawn's schedule at the same time… You could be using that time to sleep and have the rest for leisure."

"…"

"So, for the nth time, if you wish to continue your studies, I again recommend you switch over to online classes and get enough sleep."

That was Yuzuru's honest wish. She didn't need to fixate on attending a physical school if she wanted to study. She could even access overseas academies if she so wanted. Modern technology allowed for it.

"Are you stupid, Yuzuru? The point is to go to school with girls my age…like everyone else."

The suggestion did not resonate with Kaya.

"I want to wear the uniform, eat sweet bread, spend time with friends who don't know anything about my identity…even if we can't hang out outside. That's the point."

"…"

"I am rebelling. I resist my fate as a goddess incarnate. I can't surrender to my duty and lose my life."

"…"

Yuzuru shut his mouth this time. Kaya never would have had to make such a wish if she were not a goddess.

She only wanted the normal things for a girl her age. School was more than a place for learning—it was a place for socialization; a

place where one could experience youth in ways that were impossible elsewhere.

"We got the bigwigs to let me come to school while hiding my identity. I am not gonna let go of the last bastion of my humanity."

The hapless girl-turned-goddess couldn't obtain even that without hard work.

Still, Yuzuru asked himself:

Is it worth losing sleep and building up so much fatigue?

He wanted her to go to school and hang out with friends and do what she liked and smile.

But more than that, Yuzuru wished for his lady's good health. He only insisted for her sake.

Yet she would rather indulge in life than worry about her health.

Yuzuru knew it was useless to argue any further and turned on the car.

"Aren't you angry, Yuzuru? You're tied down here as my Custodian."

Yuzuru glanced both ways down the street and answered plainly. "As I said, I have no complaints about my current job."

It was true. He felt no distress in serving Kaya.

"Liar."

"I'm telling the truth."

"You get no freedom. You can't go anywhere."

"I like Enishi."

"You won't even get to see your loved ones when they pass away."

"My parents were well aware when they asked me to be your Custodian."

"You gotta put up with this annoying girl twenty-four seven."

"Not twenty-four seven—you attend school."

"…Does it not feel pointless hiking up and down the mountain every day?"

"I feel very fulfilled, even if it's not obvious to you."

"…You're a fool. You shouldn't be doing this job."

There wasn’t so much a rift between them as there was a shallow river.

They weren’t opposed to each other. They wanted to understand each other. They wanted to cross the river. A little bit of courage was the only thing they needed to step over the water. They simply had to say they liked each other.

But they couldn’t take that last step and instead kept walking in parallel lines. As the retainer, Yuzuru should have been the one to yield, but he was obstinate about this matter.

“Aren’t you the fool, Lady Kaya?”

It hurts me, hearing you say I shouldn’t enjoy my time with you.

He could choose to be honest, but the words coming from his mouth weren’t exactly what he wanted to say.

“I’ve said many times before that I don’t think myself unfortunate. Why do you insist I must be? Besides, even if you got rid of me, a new Custodian would come. Would you say the same to them, too?”

“…It’s not that I want to get rid of you…”

“Then stop saying such things and keep me by your side.”

“…”

“You chose me yourself, then say you made the wrong decision. How am I supposed to feel? If there’s any way I’m lacking, please tell me. I’ll fix it.”

“Yuzuru… No, I’m not… You don’t get it…”

The car carried the clumsy goddess and her clumsy retainer through the beautiful environment.

Kaya and Yuzuru were headed far from the town and the school.

The Archer of Dawn lived in a place called Shiranui, a small town in the large island of Enishi.

The town was hidden in the middle of the famous mountain of Shiranui.

Thick snow piled up in winter, and it trapped heat in summer, but the plants and trees here were abundant.

One could enjoy all the flowers of each season in this land. For someone who wanted to live in the pastoral countryside, you could call this place ideal.

It had its necessary set of medical and educational facilities, and it had locally produced food for local consumption.

The only sight beyond the window were fields and paddies, but plenty of people found joy in it.

Young people tended to find it a bit boring, but if they left home and then became disillusioned, they would always be welcomed back.

It was a perfect place to choose as one's last home.

Such was the town of Shiranui.

Its main tourist attraction was the lavender flower fields at the foot of Mount Shiranui in summer.

The place made various appearances in movies and novels. Thanks to the large number of references, fans of at least one of them would visit every summer.

A famous winter spot was the ski resort in Mount Shiranui. It had courses all the way from beginners to experienced skiers, and the high quality of the snow attracted enthusiasts from all over the world.

All these descriptors made it sound as though the mountains were a bustling place, but that was not the case. Unlike cylinder-shaped mountains, the sharp-summited, twin-peaked mountain had

gentle highs and lows. The mountains here were not high, but they were long.

Only part of the mountain range was open for tourism; the rest was a quiet kingdom of flora and fauna.

Kaya's house was at the foot of the mountain, but away and hidden from the tourists. Not even locals usually passed by here.

It was surrounded by a mazelike forest of white birch. At the end of the narrow path crossing through the trees was an imposing security gate, beyond which one could finally find the Yamatoan-style mansion.

Everyone who visited for the first time was overcome with awe. The big manor oddly blended in with the enigmatic woods, in a way that was removed from the modern era.

The residence seemed detached from this world, as though it existed in a different dimension.

This was the mystical home of the Archer of Dawn.

Kaya's day as the Archer began after returning home.

First, she had to take an ablution bath.

She washed away the dirt brought in from the outside world.

In the meantime, Yuzuru took care of her homework.

She had little free time—he decided she didn't need to do it herself. While other students would consider that cheating, Kaya had to take time out of her sleep schedule to study for tests. Yuzuru thought she ought to be allowed that much, at least.

Fortunately, Kaya wanted to stay in school and kept up with her studies, and so her exams had never ended in tragedy.

Once Kaya emerged in her loungewear, he would attend her in her room until she fell asleep.

Usually, he would help dry and brush her hair, but since they had argued on the way home, Kaya had asked him to let her be until she was ready to sleep. Yuzuru was anxious at the sight of her not-fully-dried hair.

They had to say good night while discomfort remained between them.

We couldn't make up today.

Yuzuru wanted to sigh.

But he had no intention of apologizing. He could deal with anything, except for talk of him quitting. Kaya showed no desire to apologize, either. Neither of them yielded, ultimately leaving them in an awkward state.

"Lady Kaya," Yuzuri said impassively, "I've set your alarm. On multiple devices."

"…Okay. And if I don't wake up?"

"I'll tickle your feet."

"Okay. We're all set, then."

"Yes. Good night, Lady Kaya."

"…"

Kaya kept quiet. She didn't even want to say good night, and Yuzuru got even sadder. But then she opened her mouth.

"Good night, Yuzuru," she said. "…You wake me up, okay? Not Mom or Dad."

She pulled up the blanket.

Oh, milady.

Yuzuru was annoyed by the surprise strike.

You're implying you'll feel anxious if I'm not there when you wake up? Even though you just tried to push me away? he wanted to say. *Now who's clinging to whom?*

"…"

But despite her machinations, happiness surged in his heart.

The young goddess of morning could easily stir the heart of her retainer yearning for her love.

"…Yuzuru…?"

Her slightly fearful voice echoed in the quiet bedroom.

Yuzuru wanted to be impassive at all times, but he was unable to maintain the facade near her.

He found delight in her fear. Again, a smile escaped him, as serious as he usually was.

Why won't you just tell me you want me to be with you, then?

Reality was harsh on his wish.

Kaya always told him how hard and oppressive his job was, that it was a waste to devote his only life to this.

She encouraged him—*you have the potential to fly high elsewhere*. She had a gift for saddening her retainer.

Yuzuru understood that she was saying these things for his sake. She had dragged him into a hard job, and she felt guilty.

If they disliked each other, these thoughts would never cross her mind.

She would not suggest he quit. They would simply and quietly do their jobs.

Yuzuru respected her as a goddess incarnate and worked to be a good retainer—Kaya found solace in him. She couldn't dislike him, and so she lamented what her life meant for his.

Ahh, poor Yuzuru, she thought.

This created a contradiction within her.

She wanted to cling to Yuzuru, and yet she pushed him away to give him a choice to leave. He didn't need to feel bad if he ever wanted to run away.

The problem could be easily solved if they only expressed their feelings for each other, yet they couldn't.

Their relationship was a game of tag between two cowards.

"Do you really want me to? Weren't you trying to make me quit?" Yuzuru said, testing her.

"No…," Kaya responded awkwardly from beneath the blanket.

"I didn't say that. It's not that I want you to quit. I'm just saying that I wouldn't hold it against you if you ever wanted to."

Kaya piled excuse on top of excuse.

"And…even if you did want to quit, you wouldn't right now, would you? You're a responsible man. You wouldn't do that. You'd make sure to get your successor up to speed first. So you'll still be with me. Which is why I'm telling you it's fine if you wake me up."

She felt bad and corrected herself quickly.

"That makes it sound like it's fine if I don't wake you up…"

"I want *you* to wake me up!" she yelled, and Yuzuru smiled.

That was exactly what he wanted to hear.

But his smile quickly vanished, and the sadness in his heart remained.

Everything would be solved if Kaya only accepted Yuzuru's duty.

But is it cruel to force that on a girl still trying to find her place in life?

Yuzuru touched the blanket so Kaya would not notice. He couldn't close this blanket-thick distance even today. He was a young man himself; he still often didn't know what to do. He immaturely wanted to blame her. *If you would just accept this, we wouldn't have to worry.*

But she's even younger.

As a high schooler, his lady was at one of the most unsteady phases in her life.

He may have served a goddess, but she was still a teenager. Even though her emotional outburst hurt him, he was the adult here. He had to swallow those feelings and guide her.

"…I want you, Yuzuru…," Kaya repeated from under the blanket, to break the silence.

This should be enough for today.

Yuzuru immediately felt bliss again, to an embarrassing degree. He was hit with a desire to peel the blanket off and see Kaya's face, but he resisted.

She said she wants me.

Kaya yielded today.

He needed to say something to her in return.

"…Thank you, Lady Kaya. I shall come wake you up, I promise."

They managed to have a slice of reconciliation before going to bed.

Kaya had two lives—a high schooler and the Archer of Dawn.

Everything was set up so that she could live both of them, and she had nearly no free time as a result.

She couldn't join any clubs or take extra classes, much less hang out with friends. Her schedule was only sleep, eat, work. No peace.

And this schedule was repeated 365 days a year. For morning always had to come.

Being the goddess of morning was harsh for a modern youth, and equally harsh for her supporter. Yuzuru's only chance to rest was while Kaya slept.

He got his sleep when he was back at the mansion after seeing Kaya to school, not when she slept. He woke when it was time to

pick her up. Her sleep was his time for himself, but he could not leave Kaya for no reason—he never left the mansion.

Yuzuru's time of rest was as quiet as his nature. He would polish the car or exercise in his room. Either that, or do something for Kaya. Today, it was car maintenance day.

"Yuzuru."

Whenever he took care of his car, the residents of the mansion assumed he had nothing else to do and would come up to speak to him.

"Lady Shuri, is something the matter?" he said to a woman in a kimono, in her late thirties or early forties. She was holding something. "I thought you were at the Fugeki clan meeting."

"Yes, I just came back. There's something I want to talk about…"

"Is it about Lady Kaya?"

She was Kaya's mother. Unlike her standoffish daughter, she had an amicable aura about her.

"Allow me to hear you out."

His lady's mother lived with them. As a Custodian, he had to show respect.

Although he wanted to keep scrubbing his car, he could not ignore her.

Shuri seemed glad that he was willing to listen.

"About today's lunch—I'm making meatballs, but what vegetables could I add to the dish?"

Yuzuru was disappointed at the scale of her question, but she was asking about today's ritual.

The job of the Archers of Oracle began by climbing up the mountain. They had to hike up to the sacred zone near the summit and shoot their arrows from there. Without the arrows, neither morning nor evening would arrive.

And if they didn't go to the sacred zone, they wouldn't get any assistance from divinity, and their powers would run dry.

Hiking to the sacred zone was essential to their daily task.

Mount Shiranui was relatively easy to climb, but it was still tiring, and food was vital for regaining energy. Shuri prepared a box lunch for both Kaya and Yuzuru.

Normally, Yuzuru or a domestic helper assigned to the mansion would do it, but Shuri herself had asked to cook for her daughter.

"Vegetables…?"

Yuzuru knew a bit about cooking, but with Shuri and the servants in the mansion, he rarely got the chance to and could only come up with a recipe for boiled spinach.

Shuri didn't wait for Yuzuru's answer before saying somewhat aggressively, "My husband looks at what I cook and says it's too brown. That there's too much meat."

"…Is that so?"

Yuzuru thought back on what he usually had for lunch. There really were a lot of browns—many Hamburg steaks, fried chicken, and wieners. It felt like she was making dishes that the young'uns would like. It had been a while since he last saw fish.

That said, he had no problem with it.

"I like meat," he said, implicitly asking *What's wrong with that?*

Shuri clenched her fist, vindicated.

"Right?! Both you and Kaya are still young. Of course you'd be happy with a lot of meat! I'm making things that you'll like… But then he comes up. Gives my cooking one glance and says that it's unbalanced, I should let the cooks take care of it, grumble, grumble, grumble… But he's not the one in the kitchen!"

Shuri's voice was full of anger.

Yuzuru smiled softly, keeping all emotions beneath the surface.

"And you're angry about it…"

The couple was bickering again. Sigh.

"If he's got a bone to pick, then he should try and make lunch himself! He gets to say whatever he wants because he can't do it!

And it's not like I'm forced to make it! I do it because I want to! It's the only thing I can do for my daughter… And he wants me to give that job to the helpers? No, no, no… He doesn't get it."

"…"

"Don't you agree?"

"…Yes, of course."

Kaya's parents were one step from getting divorced.

The quarrels happened every day, and both of them always looked for Yuzuru to complain about the other. They never met eye to eye, and the winner switched every day. Yuzuru felt like a trash can they would throw all their dirty emotions into every time, but he could not push them away.

"But maybe he just said it to make conversation…?"

Kaya would be sad if her parents divorced.

It was their decision in the end, but as far as Yuzuru could tell, there was still a way to prevent that ending. If they felt nothing for each other besides disgust, then the relationship would be beyond saving.

So Yuzuru had to manage the family's problems.

He could not allow anything that would hurt Kaya to happen.

"I know. That's how he is. He probably didn't think anything about it. But hearing it just gets my dander up… Now I'm wondering if I'm forcing my own preferences onto you…"

"Lady Shuri…"

He felt bad for Shuri this time around. After all her efforts, her husband's comments had to sting.

Shuri was a bit fussy herself, but she was not a bad person. It wasn't uncommon for parents to have conflicted feelings about their children's divine status, but she never lost her love for Kaya as she raised her daughter.

Shuri made her lunch every day—Yuzuru considered her to be a good mother.

The problem is facing her husband.

Kaya's father's face came to mind.

He was not a bad person, either.

However, he was a bit of a cynic. He was the type to tease in order to advance conversation.

That side of him was endearing from time to time, but he could be unbearable to the wrong people.

He was a particularly bad match for Shuri, who took everything seriously. His thoughtless comments frequently hurt her.

The mismatched couple managed to get by when they were young, but as their daughter grew to need less and less attention, the cracks in their relationship had widened.

As for why they hadn't divorced already—was it that they still had feelings for each other? Or did they worry for their daughter as Yuzuru did?

"Lady Shuri, if I may be frank… As Lady Kaya has said herself before, she will do anything if she's hungry… Perhaps you don't need to worry yourself so much about what goes into the lunch. Of course, I understand that you're her mother, and you want her to eat good food…"

Shuri nodded after a moment of silence. "Yes. She doesn't exactly have a sensitive palate…"

She seemed disappointed, but she agreed.

"I have no problem with what you cook, either."

"I knew you would say that. Thank you…"

"Please, no need."

"Mm… Maybe I was overthinking it. I took it too seriously, when he doesn't even know your tastes."

The conversation had cleared her mind, and her face was gradually returning to its usual softness.

"Do you feel better now?"

"I do. But it got me so riled up. Now if I don't make any changes, I'll feel like I lost… I'll try something new, starting today."

"Sounds great."

"Look, I even bought a book. I haven't been to a bookstore in ages."

It looked like showing off her purchase was her true aim all along.

She showed him what she had been holding by her side—the cover showed an extremely cute lunch box.

It explained in detail how to make the faces of kids' cartoon characters with food.

"…"

Kaya was already in high school—she probably wouldn't like childish dishes like these. But he couldn't kick her down now that she had cheered up. It wasn't nice.

"I look forward to it. You're a great cook, after all."

Yuzuru handed the book back. Shuri smiled, glad to hear that.

"I'll do my best. I'm going to shut him up. He thinks I'm a coddled princess who can't do anything, but he'll see! Thanks for hearing me out, Yuzuru."

Yuzuru was relieved to see Shuri cheer up.

It was not the Custodian's job to solve marital problems.

But he had a reason to do so.

She's bearing too much already. I won't let her burden grow any heavier.

So, as always, Yuzuru spoke to protect Kaya's smile.

"Please, it's nothing. You are irreplaceable to my lady. Please never hesitate to come to me."

Mitigating the mental stressors on his lady was part of his job as Custodian.

And so passed the day of the Archer and Custodian.

Eventually, the Archer of Twilight shot at the sky, and shortly before midnight, it was time for Kaya to wake up.

And so Yuzuru was back on the clock. He headed to her bedroom to wake her.

Normally, a young man shouldn't enter the bedroom of a sleeping, unwed woman, but he had no qualms—after all, part of his job involved drying her hair after a bath.

He knocked first, just in case, but he knew there would be no answer and opened the door right away.

He flicked on the lights and walked up to the bed where his vulnerable lady slept.

Her face scrunched up in displeasure. If only the lights were enough to rouse her—but she was a sleepyhead. This process was an ordeal every time.

Yuzuru began by gently calling her name. "Lady Kaya, it's time to wake up."

She did not.

"Lady Kaya. Lady Kaya."

She ignored all his calls. After a few moments of silence, Yuzuru moved on to shaking her shoulder. Then came a grumpy reply.

"…Five more minutes."

"All right."

He followed the request and stood in place for five minutes before the alarm started blaring.

Kaya slapped the clock quiet with a frown and buried her face in the pillow. Yuzuru scolded her for her violence.

"You're going to break the clock, Lady Kaya."

"Shut up…"

"Please wake up, Lady Kaya."

"People shouldn't be waking up at these hours…"

"It is night, yes. Most people would be in bed."

The curtains hid the night sky outside.

"The Archer of Twilight, Lord Kaguya, fulfilled his job. It is time for us to do ours."

"…"

"Don't forget who you are—the Archer of Dawn. You bring light to the world, Lady Kaya."

It was an embarrassing thing to say, but it was fact—Yuzuru said it with the utmost sincerity.

"Now I'm the hero of the kingdom or something…?" Kaya grumbled apathetically, her voice hoarse. "…He has it so good. I gotta shoot in the night, but he gets to do it in the day. *His* schedule doesn't get messed up…"

"In our last call, he complained about the coming summer. Sunlight is strong in this season. He said it's a living hell with how hot it gets. Remember his sacred area is south in Ryugu…"

"And we're north in Enishi… The cold's actually deadly over here in winter. I guess we have it better in summer, but it's worse overall."

"I suppose. Now then, will you wake up?"

"No. Screw mornings." Kaya covered herself in the blanket again.

"…" Yuzuru peeled it away from her without a word.

"Hey!"

Kaya groaned, curling into a fetal position. She covered her eyes from the fluorescent light.

"Turn it off, Yuzuru…"

She reminded him of an otter.

"No."

"Meanie. Bully."

"I don't think anyone is kinder to you than me…"

"But you're being mean now."

"Sure. Now then, come bring light to the world," Yuzuru insisted to his shameless lady.

"No."

"Lady Kaya."

"…I don't wanna."

"Lady Kaya, if you don't get up in thirty seconds, I will tickle your feet."

Kaya shivered. "That might actually kill me," she replied quietly.

"I don't want to do it, either. But when you were fully awake, you told me to tickle you if you refused to get up. I am only following your orders."

"I do have a vague memory of that…"

"Okay, show me your feet."

Yuzuru reached for her ankle, and Kaya kicked.

"No!"

She squirmed away like a fish refusing to leave the water (which was a bed, in this case).

Yuzuru was actually having fun, but his voice was cold. "You don't want to do anything."

"No."

"You're just a spoiled child."

"…"

Yuzuru kept quiet for a second before giving her a test. "Okay. I give up," he whispered. "I suppose there's no morning today."

Kaya transformed back into a human, flabbergasted.

There we go.

Yuzuru doubled down. "Who cares if there's no morning today?"

"…How could you say that? And you call yourself my Custodian?"

Yuzuru smirked at the shock on Kaya's face.

In the end, you'd rather sacrifice yourself.

He wanted to laugh.

And you never believe what I say.

"I'm just repeating what you said. Is that so wrong?"

"Someone as dedicated to his job as you wouldn't say that… You're playing with me, aren't you?"

Yuzuru was not the man she thought he was—he knew he was colder and crueler than her image of him. He simply hid that side of himself so that she wouldn't be afraid.

After a bit of silence, Kaya began feeling bad about throwing a tantrum and sluggishly sat up.

"…I'm getting changed."

"So you will serve as the Archer of Dawn today, Lady Kaya."

"You really are just teasing me… Yes, I will, darn it. I wish it'd be night forever… But that wouldn't be good for everyone."

"Exactly."

"…I guess, anyway. I'm not really sure."

Yuzuru didn't understand what she meant, and he could give no reply.

The world would come to a halt without morning. That was a simple fact. What was she unsure about?

Kaya noticed Yuzuru's surprise and shook her head.

"Forget it. Bring me my clothes, Yuzuru."

It was finally time for the Archer of Dawn to go to work.

Kaya and Yuzuru began changing into hiking clothes to get ready.

Their departure time shifted depending on the season, so that the sun would rise when it should.

They took the car up to the entrance of Mount Shiranui. It was a vast land in their corner of the countryside; there was little traffic even in the day. It was dark now—they rarely encountered any other cars.

They must've walked this whole way in the past.

Yuzuru sometimes thought about the Archers and Custodians throughout history when he was driving in the middle of the night.

They arrived at their destination in ten, fifteen minutes by car.

Mount Shiranui was divided largely into three zones. The popular ski grounds, the Shiranui Shrine and its forest, which was within

walking distance of the aforementioned ski grounds, and the hiking trail that was open to the public. Yuzuru parked the car by the entrance exclusive to the Archer, which was far removed from the aforementioned three zones. Archers of Dawn throughout history had taken this secret path.

"We're here, Lady Kaya."

"All right."

Once it came time to hike, all of Kaya's childish temper left her—she was now the Archer of Dawn.

"Let's go, Yuzuru."

Her voice had regained its dignity. During the start of summer, Enishi was as cold as early winter in some other places. Particularly so in the mountains. The Archer and Custodian wore jackets, but perhaps they needed scarves, too.

"Lady Kaya, there's a scarf in the car. Would you want it?"

"No. The cold clears my mind."

"You'll get sick."

"You know the Archers of Oracle don't get sick. Can't even stay injured for long."

"…I know, but you can get under the weather."

"Nothing a nap can't fix. That's just how my body works. Couldn't be hiking every day otherwise."

It was a marvelous power, but she seemed to have conflicted feelings about it.

"Let's go, Yuzuru."

Kaya walked ahead of him onto the mountain trail, and Yuzuru quickly followed behind.

It was so dark, they could barely see. Getting lost would be easy—even inevitable—but they did this every day. They could follow the path with the light of the moon, which was especially beautiful tonight.

That said, they still needed a flashlight so they didn't trip over anything. As they hiked up the mountain, they talked.

"I've always thought they should put some lights with motion detection here."

There was nothing new to talk about, since they spent every day together. The topics were mostly work-related and mundane.

"That would be convenient, but if any regular people happened to find them, they'd end up reaching the sacred area."

"…I mean, yeah, but it's just a cliff, right?"

"You never know. Good views tend to get popular. And the view from there is beautiful."

"You really love nature, huh?"

"Yes. I think life here fits me."

If anyone heard this conversation, they would understand that these two couldn't possibly be on bad terms.

"That reminds me—Lady Shuri bought a cookbook. I think we can expect some cute-looking lunches by next month, once she's had some practice."

"But why?"

"The grown-ups have their own issues. Don't ask her about it now. But when you get one, make sure to thank her for her efforts, okay?"

"I don't really need pretty lunches. And I don't want Mom to have to work harder just for that. But if she's doing it for fun, then fine, I guess…"

"I think she's at least partly doing it for fun now. Her lunches have come a long way since the days of rice balls."

"Yeah, I remember they were huge."

"Huge doesn't begin to cover it. They also had a big variety of fillings… I liked them."

They got along well enough, so they would both draw closer and push each other away to protect themselves. Another silence followed. Yuzuru sometimes glanced at Kaya while lighting the way with the flashlight. Meanwhile, Kaya kept her eyes set ahead.

The bigwigs say the god and their closest person will always become attracted to each other.

But Yuzuru felt like the legends didn't quite fit their relationship.

After all, even though Kaya liked him to an extent, she was ready to let him go.

I wonder how the situation is with the Lord Archer of Twilight.

He thought of the faces of Twilight over at the faraway southern island of Ryugu.

Archer of Twilight Kaguya Fugeki was a dignified man in his midthirties. He could be imposing on first meeting, but after breaking the ice, he turned out to be quite the kind god.

His Custodian was a boy around Kaya's age. Kaya acted mature, while still having a childish side to her, but to Yuzuru, he seemed even younger. He acted his age, but he was still a kid. Not quite in a bad way, but from a grown-up's perspective, he was like an endearing puppy. The relationship between that god and Custodian was a little like a parent and child's.

Although Yuzuru and Kaya also lived together, Twilight seemed more like a family. At least, from Yuzuru's point of view.

I heard he was only supposed to be a provisional Custodian, though.

From what he could tell, it seemed they were likely to spend the rest of their lives together.

The Custodian clearly loved his lord, and Kaguya seemed fond of the boy, too. It was easy to imagine Kaguya refusing to let him go in the end.

Anybody would become attached to someone who loved them that much. You would want them by your side.

Meanwhile, we…are not very family-like.

Ultimately, their relationship was built on the basis of master/servant—there was a line drawn between them. They kept to their roles. There was no sign that one would love the other enough to keep from letting go, as was the case with Twilight.

If anything, Kaya kept offering to let him go and be free of her.

Kaya felt his eyes on her and turned her head. "Are you still mad about what I said?"

Yuzuru wasn't expecting that question. He frowned. "Didn't we already make up?"

"…I…think? Did we?"

"You asked me to wake you up."

"…"

"I assumed that was your olive branch."

Kaya blushed. "…I'm scared by how easily you can say embarrassing stuff like that…"

Yuzuru cocked his head. It was nothing of the sort to him. "I'm not embarrassed at all."

"I am."

"Well, that's your problem, then."

"Hey!"

"You're too shy."

"You're too shameless. And stop staring at me like you want to say something."

"But it's my job to watch over you. I'm simply making sure you don't trip."

"Don't be ridiculous. How many times have I gone up this mountain already? Besides, I can tell that's not it. You've got something to tell me."

You're sharp.

Yuzuru pressed his lips together awkwardly. "Very well. I'll try not to make you feel my gaze."

So he kept his eyes away from her face and focused on her shoulder.

Am I a hard Custodian to deal with?

Perhaps she would rather have a businesslike relationship, with more distance between them.

But you wanted someone who would understand you.

Yuzuru stared at Kaya's small shoulders, reminiscing about their first meeting.

When they first met, they both had carried a painful past.

In order for Yuzuru to become Kaya's Custodian, a couple of events were unavoidable.

Kaya had to become the Archer of Dawn. And Yuzuru's father had to be appointed Custodian, then retire.

In fact, it all began with the previous Custodian's retirement notice.

The reason was quite rational: His legs and back could no longer take him up the mountain.

Aging could wear down even otherwise healthy, fit people.

Normally, a man would be allowed to enjoy his golden years in gratitude for all his hard work.

However, in order for this veteran to leave his service honorably, there was one problem to be solved.

The next Custodian had to be chosen.

A Custodian's retirement was of concern for the whole Fugeki clan. As was the case in the Four Seasons society, the person closest to the god incarnate was chosen from their lineage.

There were multiple criteria to be met for selection, but membership in the clan was imperative. Except for the Archers and Custodians, the clan's people were generally assigned to the observatories around the nation, where they watched and studied the Canopy.

Day and night, they analyzed the structure of this world, and how the invisible, intangible veils of morning and night would remain without the Archers' arrows.

Besides that, they also had the Honzan—the head temple that oversaw the clan's operations. Both those who worked in observation and the Honzan had personnel to assist the Archer during the selection period.

Yuzuru's father belonged to the Honzan, and he was chosen as support.

"The Custodian can't go on much longer. This might become a long-term job. Please take care of the house and your mother. You and your brothers be good, okay?"

And so Yuzuru's father left home.

While the Custodian was unable to give his support, he had to take care of and accompany the Archer into the mountain, as well as guide the next Custodian to the mansion in case of their selection. That said, the job was not just for Yuzuru's father. There were plenty of other personnel as well.

Yuzuru's father was the former Custodian's cousin, which was why he was assigned there, but he was only one member of a team. He was nothing special.

Yuzuru's family was proud of the father's assignment and wished him good luck in Enishi.

He'll be gone for half a year at most. Probably back in three months, thought young Yuzuru, but it was not to be.

The Archer was also nearing retirement.

Unlike the Agents of the Four Seasons, the Archers of Oracle retired in life.

There was no clear requirement for this—the Archers' power would degrade all of a sudden, and their time of day would become unstable. The Archers themselves would fall unconscious and dream of their successors.

This point brought to mind a clan of mediums: seeing the future regardless of the person's will.

The dreams, called Oracles, would announce that the current Archer's retirement was close and reveal the successor. That was the system for the Archers.

Once the person in the dreams was found and brought to the sacred area, the god would descend upon them.

As soon as the Oracle came, the clan would search frantically for the person in question.

As the chosen one would be within the Fugeki clan, it was not that difficult to find them once their features were clearly understood. The dream this time was especially vivid and easy to look for.

"A preteen girl with beautiful, long black hair."

They only had to look among children, and all males were out of the question.

In the past, other Archers had seen only blurry silhouettes.

In times when the dreams were fuzzy and the clan couldn't find the successor, the Archer could lose their powers, and the proper cycle of day and night could be lost. Getting a clear dream was a major responsibility. The fate of the world rested on this.

Once the Oracle was revealed to the clan, they would take the person in question to the sacred mountain. Potential candidates who matched the description had been hidden in the past, so precautions were taken against that. This time, the Fugeki clan made all young girls climb the mountain. The clan served the gods, but few of them wanted the responsibility. They all wanted to run away. Each girl stepped into the sacred area while praying to be passed over, to go back home with her family.

Kaya was one of them. She hoped to prove she was not the goddess quickly and go back to her parents.

But fate was not so kind.

The girl with the beautiful black hair stepped across the threshold and immediately became the Archer of Oracle. She drew her bow and released the arrow into the sky.

The offering for the world had been found.

Though some had pity for the new Archer, all was as intended—this was the normal succession.

The Archer of Dawn was succeeded just as the Custodian retired, throwing management into chaos. The personnel sent by the Honzan were rushing every which way for days.

Naturally, this lengthened Yuzuru's father's stay in Enishi.

Yuzuru's father had always been a model member of the Honzan, and his reputation grew further in Enishi. The previous Archer trusted him as a relative to the former Custodian, and he ended up as the leader of the support staff.

He was also the best at managing Kaya, likely from his experience as a father. He was proactive and concerned about her. She became attached to him quickly.

Few people managed to be such a good influence on their surroundings.

Everyone recognized him as a capable man.

In the end, his good qualities were a curse for him. He was unaware of the plot developing behind the scenes.

It was a bolt from the blue.

One day, Yuzuru's father was asked if he would be the next Custodian.

Why Dad?

By the time the rumors reached all the way to Yuzuru, it was too late.

No one could refuse once the higher-ups decided they were fit for the job.

This was an anomaly in the history of the Custodians.

Normally, a married man with children would not take this job. Custom dictated that it should be a young, single person. The Custodian had to be separated from their family until the god had their own family, to avoid jealousy. The tacit understanding was that one would spend their last days on the mountain.

Yuzuru's father was supposed to be out of consideration, but it was ignored. Someone who was bitter about his renown had pushed the higher-ups to kick him down—or that was the rumor at the time. The truth was unknown.

In any case, Yuzuru's father was sacrificed for the world.

Why?

Everyone who cared for him, including Yuzuru, asked the same question with pain in their chest.

Kaya was similarly unfortunate, being chosen as the Archer at the age of ten.

The new Archer was taken away from their family and intentionally isolated as soon as they were chosen. They had to give up their life for the world and its people.

In order for the Archer to function as a tool, they had to be instilled with a sense of duty, kept away from information of the outside, and isolated.

Archers were chosen relatively young, so if they were properly disciplined during childhood, they would resign themselves to their fate. After they reached a certain age, they would be allowed to see their parents, and the Honzan would support them in finding a spouse, so they were not entirely forsaken.

One could compare this traditional treatment of the Archers to a live-in apprenticeship; they were separated from their parents one day and made to work. This system had not been seen as

problematic in the past, but few people accepted it in contemporary times.

Those who escaped the hands of the gods were fortunate. As such, Yuzuru held no negative feelings for Kaya. Had the Oracle told of a young boy instead, he could have been a candidate himself. It just so happened to be her this time.

In fact, he had to be grateful it was her and not him.

So he held no grudges. But when he saw his mother crying at the news of her husband's appointment, Yuzuru decided himself: *I'll take over his job when I grow up.*

He always was a self-sacrificial boy.

For a few years after that, Yuzuru's father left the Honzan to serve as Kaya's Custodian.

The environment surrounding the Archer changed greatly during this time.

The present Archer of Twilight, Kaguya Fugeki, proposed a revision of the Archer system.

It involved two demands: to allow the young Archer's family to live with them, and to allow them to attend school.

Kaguya was taken away from his parents when he was young and had been confined to Ryugu ever since.

He didn't wish for the new Archers to experience the same loneliness and sadness he had.

As soon as he knew the new Custodian used to work in the Honzan and was a reasonable man, he asked him for help in convincing the higher-ups. Having come this far, Yuzuru's father decided to do what he could. He accepted Kaguya's request and worked hard to better the conditions of the gods incarnate.

Yuzuru's father relayed Kaguya's wish to the Honzan and asked the previous Archer of Dawn to help him speak to the Fugeki clan

bigwigs.

The former Archer accepted and personally visited the Honzan.

Eventually, Kaya was allowed to live the way she was now.

Yuzuru's father must have seemed like a bright, reliable star to her.

The bond between the young goddess and her Custodian grew stronger every year. Everyone was sure they would be together until he aged. Finally, the society of the Archers calmed down. All the pieces fell into place. But just as they breathed a sigh of relief, further chaos erupted.

Three years into his appointment, Yuzuru's father grew weak, and the doctor recommended he quit.

Yuzuru's father never had a physique fit for being a Custodian. He was not sickly, but he lacked muscle.

He was a thin man. His job at the Honzan was originally in the office. He was not experienced with physical labor, and now he had to hike every day, while taking care of a small child and being the bridge between multiple groups. He ended up useless in just three years.

It was good news for Yuzuru's family; he was finally coming back home.

But for Kaya, the news was a major blow. It was difficult to fathom how deep her sorrow must've been. The only reason she had been able to endure the treatment of the adults was thanks to her Custodian.

Despite the Honzan accepting the reforms, some members still argued they had to go back.

Who knew if the next Custodian would fight for her sake, too?

The anxiety and fear took over her body. She clung and pleaded to her Custodian.

"I want your son."

Kaya had heard about Yuzuru before.

His father had only meant to share some stories with her, but hearing them had brought her great relief.

His youngest son resembled him.

Yuzuru's father had smiled sadly at her request, but he followed her wishes and brought his son. And so Yuzuru was appointed Custodian.

Our meeting wasn't the best, Yuzuru thought while reminiscing. Kaya had fearfully looked for a new Custodian without understanding the weight of her decision, only wishing to cover the hole of losing the one she knew.

"I turned into a goddess when I was ten. I couldn't go up the mountain at first, and he carried me. Maybe that's what hurt him."

"No matter what, don't you dare carry me. Call for help instead."

"Your father loved fruits. Do you?"

"Let's stop by that shop on the way back. That's where he bought the snacks he sent you."

"Like father, like son, huh? He said you looked like your mother, but you sneeze just like him."

To put it cruelly, she wanted a clone.

Few enjoy being used as a vicarious connection to someone else. Young Kaya began to understand her mistake when she saw a certain expression on Yuzuru's face—his sad smile was like his father's.

Many children recognize their own past cruelty as they come of age, and Kaya's realization was no different.

She shouldn’t pit father and son against each other in her mind, nor seek out similarities.

Kaya regretted her actions and tried to change.

“You like cars, Yuzuru?”

“You lived in the city, right? Do you know if pajamas like this are actually popular?”

“I’m having a video call with Big Bro Kaguya. Join me, and I’ll introduce you as my Custodian.”

The one before her eyes was this young man only; she had to learn more about him.

“Let’s go to the gate, Yuzuru. The snacks I ordered just arrived.”

They should be able to get along.

“Yuzuru, Yuzuru! Mom and Dad are going out. What should we do in the meantime?”

His father had entrusted him to her—she had to take care of him.

"Are you sure, Yuzuru? You always think of others first… You're missing out."

That was her responsibility as his master.

It was a mature thing to think at thirteen.

Yuzuru was exceedingly formal at first, but as time went on, he started getting along with her as a boy close to her age. And all was well.

Kaya's peace returned. She could endure shooting the sky every day again.

Calm had returned again—and thank goodness.

Now, what would they do together tomorrow? What about the day after?

Let's live in quiet throughout the seasons, in search of our own little happiness.

Thank goodness. Thank goodness. But as she got her happiness, Kaya wondered.

She was pleased with her substitute now—but how did he feel?

Chills went down her spine.

Regret hit her so deep, she felt dizzy.

Young Kaya did not understand.

Of course, it had crossed her mind. She'd given Yuzuru a choice. She'd said he could refuse. But it would be a sin for him to do so.

Forcing him was her sin, and she did not truly understand it.

She had received a relative of her former Custodian and got a tranquil daily life.

He had dedicated himself to her, too.

She got someone to trust, and now she could go on working even without her previous Custodian.

And once she achieved that level of happiness in her peaceful life, she realized the sin of her wish.

From Kaya's point of view, Yuzuru had everything to lose.

He was young and capable. He was kind to her. He was perfect. But if she hadn't asked for him, he could have been assigned elsewhere within the clan and led a very different life.

Kaya's heart ached more and more.

Making him a Custodian could even be a loss for the Fugeki at large.

He would be more beneficial inside the organization instead of wasting his time going up and down the mountain every day.

He could have lived near the city. Here, there was nothing fun to do. It was suffocating for a young man.

He could have met so many people where he was. He could have stayed with his family.

Why did he never go anywhere else, even when she told him to take days off?

His father was the same. He was always here alone, even around the New Year.

Ahh, it's my fault.

Her Custodian didn't go anywhere, because neither did she.

She hadn't understood.

She'd prioritized her own sadness. She didn't understand the situation of the one who protected her.

No—she hadn't even tried.

And as she thought about it more and more—

—the more mistakes she found. She'd crushed his future.

All the mistakes pierced her chest like arrows.

All her sins exposed before her, she could no longer look Yuzuru in the eye.

One look at him and her determination to stay strong, to do her job as a goddess, came crumbling down.

She was on the brink.

She began thinking it would be easier for her to let him go, no matter how hard it would be for her.

Maybe Yuzuru wanted to run away, but he wouldn't say so out of concern for her and his parents.

That had to be it. Then she had to make him admit it.

She only had him, but he had other choices.

He *had* to leave her, really.

No matter how hard, how painful, how sad the choice was for her, she had to do it.

"You get no freedom. You can't go anywhere."

"You won't even get to see your loved ones when they pass away."

"You gotta put up with this annoying girl twenty-four seven."

"…Does it not feel pointless hiking up and down the mountain every day?"

"…You're a fool. You shouldn't be doing this job."

"I didn't say that. It's not that I want you to quit. I'm just saying that I wouldn't hold it against you if you ever wanted to quit."

"And…even if you did want to quit, you wouldn't right now, would you? You're a responsible man. You wouldn't do that. You'd make sure to get your successor up to speed first. So you'll still be with me. Which is why I'm telling you it's fine if you wake me up."

It hurts. It breaks my heart.

But I'll let you go, no matter what it costs me.

"I want you *to wake me up!"*

I have to.

"…I want you, Yuzuru…"

Because that's what's best for you.

What a fool she is.

Yuzuru thought this as his consciousness returned to the present, and he watched his lady hike up the mountain.

He knew what Kaya was thinking. She was easy to read; it all showed in her actions. Put one way, she was simpleminded. Put another, she was pure and sincere. She was well-suited to her sacrificial role.

Kaya doesn't truly try to understand me.

Their meeting was sheer coincidence, but Yuzuru always felt fate at work.

He was proud to succeed his father's work, too. He didn't like the way she tried to find similarities between them, but it was a good, quick way to get his goddess to open up.

Yuzuru was more adamant than Kaya realized.

Besides, life with her was far more peaceful and blissful than expected, despite the difficulties.

He was raised in the city, but the countryside fit his nature better.

He preferred caring for others to being cared for, and so he dedicated himself to his lady. It gave his life meaning.

He was aware that he was supporting the world. And he conveyed all this to Kaya.

Yet his words didn't fully reach her.

She thought he was only saying that to ease her mind.

No.

Everyone had pushed a huge role, responsibility, and inescapable environment onto her.

You've got it wrong, Lady Kaya.

Who was the one truly in need of sympathy?

Who was gently killing the girl with the weight of responsibility?

She did not realize that it was all the recipients of her morning.

Everyone's peace was built on the sacrifice of another.

Most people didn't even think about the gods incarnate. Yuzuru used to be no exception.

The goddess blamed herself for the new sacrifice dedicated to her.

Only the sacrificial goddess would be so kind. And so the sacrificial young man thought: *Ahh, you're such a fool.*

And that is why I want to serve you.

"We'll get to rest soon, Lady Kaya."

"Yeah. Let's do this."

Yuzuru loved this kind, tragic goddess.

Yuzuru and Kaya hiked for two hours.

Finally, they reached the sacred area of Mount Shiranui.

The place couldn't be reached without paying full attention to the tracks left by the Archers throughout history.

At first glance, it was a simple cliff, although the view was fantastic. It was clear of trees, so they could see down to the foot of the mountain.

During the day, this vista was gorgeous, or so they assumed. Unfortunately, it was the middle of the night.

Out here in the country, there were no city lights. The tillers and farmers, the people who led quiet lives here, were already asleep.

"Do you want water, Lady Kaya?"

"Yes."

Two hours of walking was exhausting even when you were young.

Yuzuru was set on serving Kaya until she left her position, but that all depended on his health. It could become impossible if his body weakened like his father's.

If I'm so worn out even now, how's it going to be when I'm older?

He did not want to think about old age, but it frequently crossed his mind.

He often wondered how long he would be able to protect her.

"I'm exhausted…"

"Me too."

A person's life was impossible to measure.

Both Kaya and Yuzuru were kept in a cage until their deaths, and who knew what tomorrow could bring?

"Everything hurts!"

Life was unpredictable.

Which was why Yuzuru believed people had to live without regrets.

Our lot is already decided.

The only course of action now was to throw themselves into it.

He would have to look for a successor eventually, as his father had.

When the time came, he wanted to be able to say he did everything he could.

"Hey, mind if I ask you something?" Kaya's expression was serious.

"Go ahead."

Yuzuru wiped the water off his mouth while turning toward her.

"…"

But Kaya wouldn't ask the question.

Yuzuru waited, puzzled. Ten seconds went by, then twenty, then thirty.

Right as he started wondering if this was her version of teasing him, Kaya finally opened her mouth.

"…Yuzuru, do you really think I bring morning?"

That wasn't what he expected.

"Wha…?"

Yuzuru blinked. He was sincerely flummoxed.

He had imagined a different topic.

"…I'm asking if you think there's any chance I'm not a goddess."

His lady's comments today were especially perplexing.

"What are you talking about?"

He had no idea what she was getting at.

The clear moonlight lit up Kaya's expression, and it let him know she was not joking around.

"…Am I really a goddess? What if I do nothing and morning comes anyway?"

He could hear in her voice that she was serious.

"Lady Kaya, you…"

"…can't say that, eh?"

"…"

"I'm not saying it to anyone else. Just to you." Kaya finally returned Yuzuru's gaze.

Instead of her usual strength, her eyes were full of the fear of a lost child.

"What if I'm just being tricked by all the adults and forced to do this stupid ritual?"

Yuzuru was wounded by the remark, as he was one of "all the adults."

"Lady Kaya…"

"…"

"That can't be."

"You don't know."

"Yes, I do. It can't."

She had the right to resent the adults. Her position certainly warranted it.

"Why would we do that?"

Kaya had become a goddess when she was young.

Yuzuru did not serve her at the time, but the adults, including his father, must have told her:

"You're a god now. You must bear with it and dedicate yourself to this."

Yuzuru said something similar every day, too.

"It would be ridiculous to trick you like that."

At the same time, he didn't want her to think she was being deceived.

Kaya had been forced bear this divine role.

No matter how painful, she was the only one who could do it. There was only one Day in this country.

Yuzuru had compassion for her and chose to share her pain. Now she had a companion to ease her sadness.

"The Fugeki clan has been doing this since the age of the gods. There is no way that you would be the very first to be deceived."

Yuzuru's words were cut-and-dried. And Kaya didn't seem to mind his reply. Still, that childish confusion remained in her eyes.

"…Yuzuru."

Yuzuru did not know what this girl was afraid of.

"You bring morning, Lady Kaya."

That much was undeniable.

"I've seen it. I've seen you shoot your arrows into the sky."

"…"

"Your arrow melts the night away and brings the morning."

"…"

"The sight of it is more beautiful than anything I've ever seen."

"But maybe morning will come even if I don't shoot the sky."

"Then what is the arrow for? What is that bow of light formed in your hands?"

"Do the light bow and arrow really come out?"

"What are you saying? You see it every day."

Kaya tried to say something, but then she shut her mouth.

She bit her lip.

"…Lady Kaya."

It was then that he realized.

"Lady Kaya, you mean…?"

He leaned in close, and she turned her face away.

It had been a long time since he had seen her appear so weak.

"You're not conscious when you do the ritual?"

A few seconds of silence passed before she shook her head.

"…No."

She glanced at him to see his reaction, then immediately looked down at the ground. Like a criminal waiting for judgment, she kept her head low.

Ahh.

A sigh escaped Yuzuru's lips.

He did not find her immature as an Archer. However, he had always had the sense she felt distant from her nature as a goddess.

"I'm sorry, Yuzuru…"

She only did her duty because she was told to.

Like a scolded child ordered by the adults.

That wasn't it.

She simply, truly, was not aware of her status.

"…I have no memory of what I do in the sacred area."

She had kept that to herself all this time, for the years they'd spent together. The reason why was clear from her behavior.

The young goddess was still insecure and feared that her retainer would respond negatively.

"…I couldn't say it…because I didn't want you to get mad…"

So she kept it to herself.

"…!"

She had no other choice.

Yuzuru nearly yelled his response.

Why did you think I would blame you? Do you think I would attack you at your most vulnerable?

But he swallowed the words. After all, she had just said she didn't want him to get mad. There was something she'd wanted to say, but she had struggled to.

The conclusion was simple.

Kaya didn't feel comfortable talking about everything with Yuzuru.

"…Lady Kaya."

It was that simple.

Yuzuru, as the retainer, had no right to blame his lady for not talking with him.

When he remembered that, his anger evaporated, leaving only regret behind. This whole time, he had been the one closest to her, believing he was paying attention. But he could not notice her fear or save her from it.

"Lady Kaya," he said again, and this time his sadness was audible.

Yuzuru reached a hand toward her, and Kaya took a step back.

"Lady Kaya. Lady Kaya."

In reaction, Yuzuru grabbed her shoulders.

He did not want her to run away.

Please don't run from me.

He couldn't stand the thought of becoming something she had to hide from.

"…Are you mad at me?" Kaya whispered in resignation. Yuzuru felt powerless.

"How could I be…? Do I look that easy to anger…?"

"No… If anything, you bottle things up. You're good at keeping up with me."

"…"

"I just thought that if anything would get on your nerves, it was that. It's not your fault. I was just being a wimp."

"…It *is* my fault. If you didn't feel safe to tell me, I've failed as your Custodian."

Kaya shook her head.

"No, you… You've been excellent. I'm just saying that I might not be worthy of you. Don't get it backward."

"I'm not… Lady Kaya, please look up."

Kaya shook her head again.

Yuzuru spoke as gently and encouragingly as he could. "It's okay, Lady Kaya. That isn't something you need to worry about."

"…It's not okay. I'm defective."

"No, you are the Archer of Dawn, Lady Kaya Fugeki. Even if you are not conscious when you're firing your arrows, that is no reason to believe you're anything less than a fully-fledged Archer."

Kaya shivered.

"…That's a lie."

"I'm being honest. I've heard it can vary from person to person. Some have stayed that way their whole lives."

"…Don't lie."

"It's true. You remember everything up until you enter the trance, right?"

Kaya kept her head down as she nodded.

"You don't remember after that. You black out all of a sudden. Am I getting that right?"

"…"

"Please answer me, Lady Kaya."

"…Yes."

"That's proof that you are a goddess."

Finally, Kaya looked at Yuzuru.

Her big, peach blossom eyes were finally looking his way—she was trying to listen to the words of the one she trusted the most.

Yuzuru's fingers tightened on her shoulders.

"We in the Fugeki clan were gifted with powers from the gods of Day and Night. They say the gods temporarily inhabit the Archers of Oracle when they use their powers. Or rather, part of their power takes over you, not so much the gods themselves. The Fugeki are a clan of mediums. You invoke a great power to use. It is a weight too heavy for humans, which is why it affects your memory."

"But…"

"But?"

"Big Bro Kaguya says he remembers it…"

Yuzuru blinked.

So that's it.

It made sense why she was so obstinate now. The strength almost left him.

He's the only one she can share her problems with.

Of course she was confused by the differences between herself and her "Big Bro" Kaguya.

All this time, she'd been holding it in.

Talk to me, too.

Yuzuru wanted to tear his hair out. He hated to think he wasn't doing a proper job as her Custodian.

But it was Kaya who was hurting the most. Despite her fears, she'd gathered her courage and opened up. Just as she had when she asked him to be her Custodian.

These were the times he had to protect his lady's heart the most.

Yuzuru set aside his own pain and talked to her. "Lady Kaya, you really don't have to worry about that. Trust…trust me, please."

"…No, it's not that I don't trust you."

"I know, just…believe me now. Not everyone remembers. The Archer of Twilight is also a veteran who's been at this for nearly twenty years. Of course he would improve with those powers over time. Excuse me for the rudeness, but you cannot compare yourself to him when you're still so young. Don't worry yourself comparing."

"…"

Kaya stopped biting her lip, but she still looked beaten down. It wasn't that she didn't believe Yuzuru, but she was unable to quickly process the answer to a question she'd held for so long.

"I'm sorry, but… Lady Kaya, if I may ask…"

"…What is it?"

"Did my father know about it?"

"Yes. I told him about it near the beginning…"

"What did he say?"

"Basically the same thing you did. I was convinced back then, but it's been years since, and nothing's changed…"

"…I see."

Yuzuru was fuming internally at his father. He should have explained this.

"…Yuzuru, are you sure it's fine that I'm like this…?" Kaya asked after a bit of silence.

Yuzuru drove the thoughts of his father from his mind and focused on her. "Yes, Lady Kaya. I'll get information from the Honzan right away. Let's get them to send us documents related to the Archer's invocation."

"Like historical records…?"

"Yes. Custodians make periodic reports, and they are stored in the Honzan. The data has proper record keepers nowadays, so we should get a reply by tomorrow if we send a message today. You haven't checked any of that, have you?"

"No… I just didn't doubt your father…"

"Don't idolize him. He can be an idiot in his own way."

"Hey, don't say that about him. He was my Custodian."

"And he's my father. I have the right to."

She seemed to be quite affected by comments from the people she admired.

Yuzuru's father was the first to serve her, so he took an important place in her heart—a place so important that she had sought out someone who resembled him to be his successor.

"Lady Kaya, I understand that my words alone aren't enough… But I can say with full confidence that there is nothing for you to worry about. Other Archers have experienced the same."

"Really…?"

"Really."

"But…if I wasn't the Archer…we could both run away." It almost sounded like a wish.

"Where?" Yuzuru replied dryly.

"Wherever… Just you and me."

Kaya made it clear—they would run away together. This broke Yuzuru's heart again.

"Maybe then I could go to school normally, and go on trips out of Enishi, and invite friends over to my house…"

He could hardly bear to see her in this much pain.

"We could do everything everyone else does normally. Right?"

This was not his venerable goddess.

"Even after all this time, I still can't believe I'm a goddess."

She was a regular, normal girl.

"…Lady Kaya."

Yuzuru wanted to hug her there and then.

But he couldn't. A Custodian shouldn't do such things.

He badly wished he could, but it was not his place.

What do I really know about her pain?

The day was formed atop her sacrifice.

And not just hers—Archers around the world were deprived of their lives.

That was why the Archers depended on their Custodians. Why they clung to their support and hated to let them go.

In return, the Custodians had to protect the Archers, help them stand back up, tell them:

"You are a goddess. I've seen it. You bring morning."

People are asleep when you shoot the sky.

The Archers of Dawn throughout history must have feared the same.

What if there's no point to what I'm doing?

What would be the point of tradition?

What if the sacrifices of my ancestors meant nothing?

"There's no point…in what I do…"

"There is. We Custodians can guarantee it."

It was the Custodians' duty to reassure the Archers and help them see the meaning in their work.

To remind them that the day would not come without the Archer.

"Morning only comes because you tear apart the night," he said firmly, hoping that it would encourage her.

"…Do people need me?"

"They do."

"The world needs me, huh? It's a nice thought," she whispered, trying to convince herself. "Yuzuru?"

"Yes?"

"Say it again."

"They need you."

"…Do you need me, too?"

"Of course, Lady Kaya."

A small sea was born in her black pearl eyes.

"I would stake my life on it," he said, and the sea rippled.

"Then I'll believe you… I'm not just being tricked by everyone."

"Of course not. You are this country's Day."

"…Yeah."

"And my lady."

"…"

"You are my only lady."

"……Yeah."

Yuzuru let go of her, and the soft touch of her shoulders left his fingertips.

"I'm sorry, Yuzuru," she said, and a single tear ran down her cheek.

"Lady Kaya…"

Yuzuru took a handkerchief out of his bag and wiped it away. But the one tear soon became two, and then a stream.

She must've been holding them back.

If only I had noticed sooner.

Kaya did her job according to the orders of adults.

She was still young to be the Archer of Oracle.

Of course she would be anxious if she didn't really understand what she was doing. Plus, she had lost the opportunity to tell her second Custodian about it for a long while. Yuzuru was frustrated with himself for his own failure.

He was still not fully trusted.

"…Thanks. I'm okay now."

Kaya calmed down, either at ease by hearing Yuzuru's explanation or relieved after crying it out. She wiped her face with her sleeves.

An awkward mood surrounded them.

"Really, thank you."

Kaya glanced at him bashfully, and Yuzuru felt a prick in his chest.

I should be more direct with her as a general rule, too, he admonished himself.

Sometimes, she was so cute that he had to tease her, but it was better to be honest and straightforward.

I do the same thing her father does.

He was reminded of the way he would tease his wife because he wanted her attention.

Yuzuru had to learn from his bad example.

"The system is cruel."

Kaya pouted in the darkness, mostly recovered now.

"The venerated Agents of the Four Seasons train for a whole year so that they can control their powers, but we gotta get to work the moment we get assigned. What were the gods of day and night thinking? Didn't they think at all about what it would be like, getting turned into a god all of a sudden and forced to go up the mountain?"

After relief came indignation.

"I know… But the seasons only change every few months, while day and night switch every day. The world would crumble if they had to wait for an orientation."

"…It's not fair."

"On the other hand, the next Archer will be chosen while you're still alive, and you aren't in as much danger as the venerated Agents. It's not all bad."

"Hmm… Well… Yeah. Still, we're treated more as tools than they are."

"You think so? I feel closer to the gods here."

"How?"

"Maybe because I see you shoot the sky every day. I can't think of a sight that's more divine…"

"…How about you take a video, then? I wanna see it, too."

"Any form of recording is forbidden. Besides, I heard that they tried it once before, and nothing showed up. Must be the will of the God of Dawn."

Kaya frowned and clicked her tongue. "What a stingy god."

"Be careful of your words, Lady Kaya."

"…"

Kaya said nothing in return; this time she agreed that she had gone too far. Then she let out a big sigh and took a deep breath.

She looked away from Yuzuru and up to the night sky. Then down at Shiranui below the sacred area.

Day would not break for them without her.

"…Let's do it." Kaya whispered with determination.

"If you would."

Yuzuru nodded. It was time for the Archer of Dawn to show her powers.

"…"

Kaya stood at her usual position and took another deep breath, then a few more.

Her hands were empty at the moment. The Archers of Oracle didn't need to bring a bow and arrow. Their presence was enough.

The birds and bugs and even the air went silent as Kaya inhaled.

Silence enveloped the whole mountain. It turned into a stage made especially for her.

Her hair began to light up in the darkness, shifting from a black that blended with the night into a bright pearl.

This ritual needed no spell or dance. The only requirements were the mountains, herself, and clear air.

That, and someone she could trust.

"It's here, Yuzuru."

Someone else had taken over.

Yuzuru could tell from the change in her voice. The Fugeki were a clan of mediums, after all.

A different being had entered her body—Day itself.

She glowed brighter and brighter as the deity properly took over.

The light coming off her hair spread across her whole body and took on the form of a bow. A bow of light, then a string of light, then an arrow of light materialized from nothing.

Yuzuru always felt anxious in its presence, despite seeing it every day.

Lady Kaya.

And he worried about her safety after the ritual ended.

Lady Kaya.

He was struck by a wave of distress. The great presence did not heed the feelings of the human watching.

The girl aimed her golden bow at the dark sky.

"I'm counting on you," someone else whispered in Kaya's voice.

There was only one thing for Yuzuru to do in response.

"Release!"

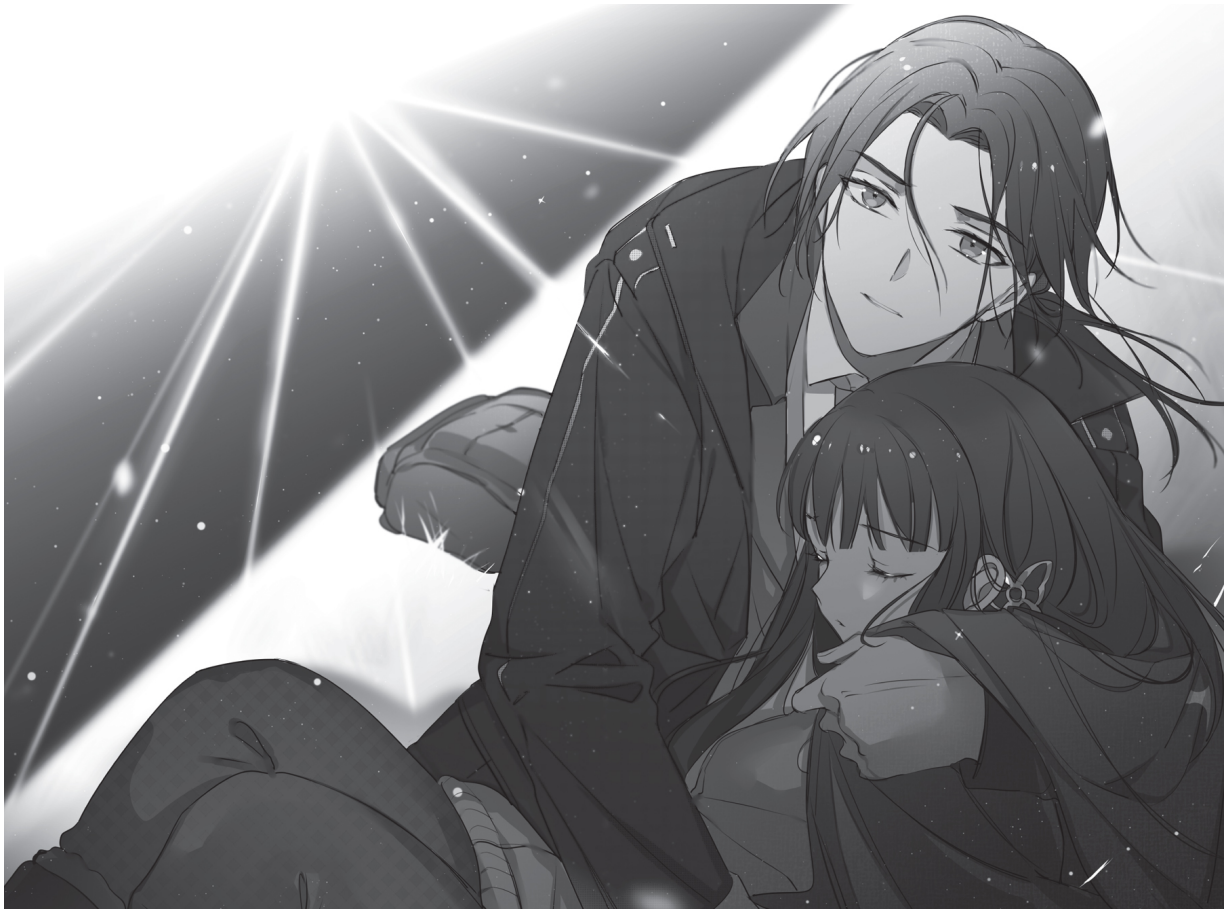
On his command, the Archer of Dawn let go of the string.

The arrow slashed through the night, and the light drew a beautiful spiral into the sky.

At the same time, Kaya slowly tipped backward.

Yuzuru ran up to her and caught her.

He looked up.



The arrow cut through the sky and disappeared into the beyond.

"…"

Yuzuru laid his lady down on the picnic sheet he had prepared and covered her with a blanket. She needed to stay warm until she awoke.

The Archers of Oracle invoked their divine powers for only a moment—and it was so powerful that it would knock them out. She would be asleep for a while.

This was where the Custodian came in.

They had to protect the body of the Archer from the elements and any enemies.

Nobody would think that a girl collapsed like this every morning.

Yuzuru hated this part. Or, more precisely, it frightened him. He could be cold, but not cold enough to remain unaffected seeing a girl lose consciousness from an unexplainable divine force. Especially when he watched over her every day.

What if she never woke up again? It was a moment of solitude for the Custodians, too.

Would I lose my mind if you drew your last breath here?

Such fears would torment them while they waited, and it was only exacerbated by the attachment they had to their Archer.

So Yuzuru held her hand without asking her if he could. Feeling her pulse brought him peace of mind.

You couldn't know how I wait for you here.

Yuzuru sneered at himself.

Kaya thought of him as a promising, capable, basically perfect young man—but that was not the man here in this moment. He was only a boy fearing for the life of the girl he cared for the most.

Although there was an age gap between them, it wasn't large. Once they were a little older, it would become meaningless. So in these moments, Yuzuru turned back into a boy.

He was frightened by the sight of her corpse-like, motionless body, but he forced himself to keep it together.

It's time to wake up.

For both the day and you.

Please open your eyes.

He hoped anxiously for either to wake up.

I want morning to come because it reflects well on you.

Because you work so hard. But to tell the truth, that doesn't matter.

But I don't care if morning doesn't come, so long as you're in good health.

His feelings had grown considerably.

Soon, the prayers of the young man of north Enishi were granted.

Daylight shone upon the green mountain, and night came to an end.

The ritual ended without incident.

The sea, the mountain, the towns, and the world were lit up.

A soft, embracing warmth brushed away the pricking sensation of the air on his skin.

The sky undressed the veil of darkness before his eyes.

The night died and revived every day.

The dark Canopy would come back within the day, once again shrouding the skies in stars.

Nobody knew the cycle of day and night was built atop great miracles and sacrifices.

The young goddess's servant thought that was a shame.

"Is morning here?"

Kaya had woken up; her voice was hoarse.

Yuzuru let go of her hand, which had turned white in his grip.

But then she limply grabbed his again.

Yuzuru understood she wanted to keep holding hands.

He gently took it back.

"Yes, it's here."

Kaya sighed in relief. "Good."

He knew she couldn't think that sincerely.

Day and night only suffocated her.

She wasn't the kind to find a sense of meaning in bringing morning to others.

Yet she would ask him every day, almost pleading.

Is morning here?

"I'm so glad," she said with a thin smile.

Yuzuru's respect for her grew at the sight of her divine bearing, but at the same time, it made him feel powerless.

The people of the world don't know what you do.

None of the common folk recognized or praised the work of the Archers of Oracle.

Yet day would come, and then night, in an ordinary, seemingly natural cycle.

By the miracle built atop their sacrifice.

"…I hope it's a clear day today. I hope they enjoy it."

Kaya whispered with childlike innocence. Her expression was softer than that of her usual gallant self.

She brought stability to the people, yet had none for herself.

Kaya was consumed in order to bring a good day to somebody else.

Lady Kaya, you are being sacrificed to the world.

Yuzuru wanted to say the exact opposite of what he told her today. If only he could.

"Lady Kaya, you are a slave to the people."

"They call you a goddess incarnate, but you're nothing but an offering to maintain the cycle of the world."

"You must be aware of this yourself."

"It's a waste to do this. You should quit."

"Let's run away. I wouldn't fault you."

"If that's what you want, I…"

…I'm ready to hold your hand and take you away.

"Yuzuru…?"

Yet Kaya would not run.

She kept going with the support of her caring Custodian.

Don't go.

You can run away.
No, don't go.

Yuzuru was exhausted by the endless cycle, but at the same time, he found it almost unbearably adorable.

He had no idea why or what made him love her. He only noticed the feeling after he'd fallen.

Why couldn't the world be a little kinder to them?

Kaya waited for his response, but nothing would come out.

It had been a while since the last time he felt like crying.

Lady Kaya, I love you.

What if he died and another Custodian came to serve the Archer of Dawn?

He loved her so that the mere thought made his throat tight.

"…Yuzuru."

She said his name again, and Yuzuru yielded.

"Yes."

While his voice was a bit raspy, it was less affected by his emotions than he expected.

"Indeed, hopefully it is a good day today…"

Kaya watched him quietly. She was sharp—perhaps she noticed something was afflicting him.

Yuzuru summoned some cheer into his voice to push away the gloom.

"Anything you want to do now, Lady Kaya?"

"Today?"

"Yes. Hopefully something I can help you with."

"Hmm… Kaya thought for a moment before smiling bashfully. "I know. I want to have some coffee after school."

"That's it?"

It was such a tiny wish.

"…Yes. Morning came, and you stayed by my side. That's all I need to start my day off well. I don't really need the coffee, even."

"…"

"Take that…as us making up for real now."

"Thank you, Lady Kaya." Yuzuru brushed her perfectly tidy hair. She said nothing.

Lady Kaya. Why won't you be mad?

In the end, she was a terribly kindhearted and lonely goddess.

"Lady Kaya."

"Hmm…?"

"Let's go get that coffee."

She would never have the freedom of any regular girl.

"Really?"

"Of course."

The day he could tell her he loved her would never come.

"But what if I can't sleep? That's going to be annoying to you, too."

"You never have any problem falling asleep."

The relationship began with pity, and that had kept it stagnant.

"You don't know. You may have to carry me up here."

"I shall."

Even if he said he loved her, she would only think of it as pity.

Still, Yuzuru wished for her to understand one day.

He looked into her eyes with a serious expression on his face.

He wanted her to believe him, if just a little, today.

"Lady Kaya. Going back to what you said…I only need you with me, too."

Yuzuru was willing to take the day away from the world if she so wished.

“You don’t have to be a goddess. You’re all I need… Really.”

Kaya’s eyes widened at the sudden words of love.

He was kind at some times, strict at others—and a replacement. The symbol of Kaya’s guilt.

His sudden warm words took her by surprise.

Perhaps she shouldn’t accept it at face value.

But she couldn’t suppress the joy dawning over her face.

How could she not be happy? Every god wanted the love of their closest human.

There was a barrier between the awkward goddess and human that did not allow them to get closer to each other.

But for now, Yuzuru would wave at her from across the wall.

Kaya saw.

A small sign—a shining pardon. To love him.

So Kaya smiled like any regular girl would.

The Goddess of Day lived in north Enishi.

The Archer of Dawn.

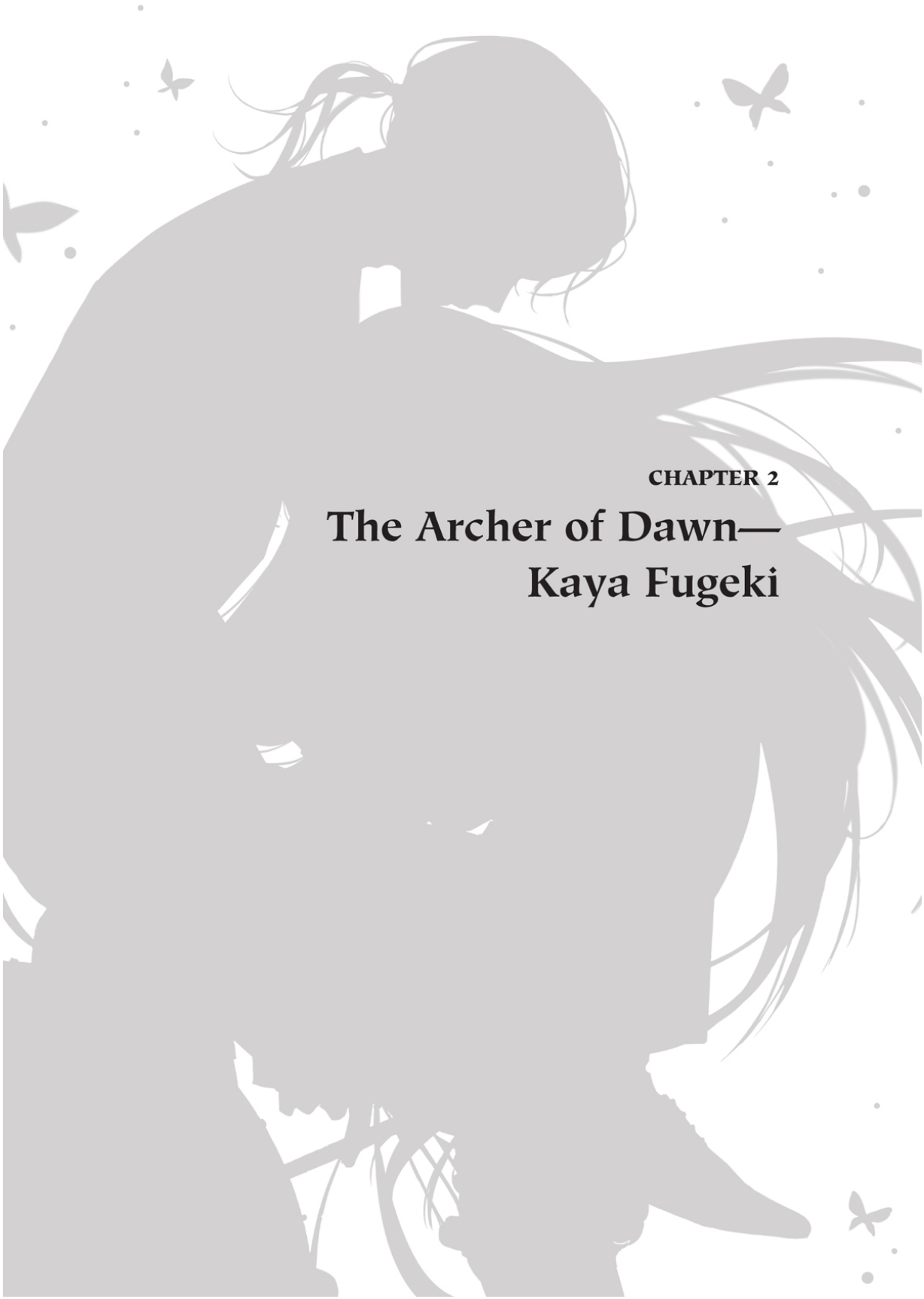
The medium who formed a bow and arrow of light to shoot down the sky’s Canopy.

She had no prospects for the future.

She was not allowed to leave the sacred mountain.

She would most likely spend most of her life ascending and descending this path.

Her name was Kaya.



CHAPTER 2

The Archer of Dawn—Kaya Fugeki

Spring came, summer passed, and autumn arrived.

The autumn rain was in full force in Yamato.

The long rains persisted in both the south and the north around Enishi. Dew adorned the ginkgo and maple leaves brought by the Agent of Autumn.

The autumn of Reimei 20 was a rainy one, but once they were past the Soukou solar term at the end of October, the skies began to clear.

And so we reach the present day—November 7 of the same year, in the Rittou term.

The people had already forgotten about the autumn rain.

So had the Goddess of Day in Yamato, Kaya Fugeki.

"…"

She woke from her idle nap and got out of the bed to open the curtains and look out the window. In Enishi, maple leaf season was over by November; the trees were already stripped. It was a dreary sight as the world prepared for winter, but there was elegance in it. Today, they even had a light frost.

The Agent of Winter must have begun manifesting the season somewhere, and the shock waves had reached Shiranui. Kaya took a deep breath, savoring the chilly air, and let it out.

It was a day off. Nobody came to wake her up in the morning—there were no classes.

The Archer's work was a little different when she had no school. Typically, she would get a second round of sleep once they were

home in the early morning after shooting the sky. It was a luxury she was only allowed when there was no school. Not even Yuzuru came to wake her up from her nap. Which also meant she could stay in her bedroom and relax as long as she wanted to.

"…"

However, it was boring being by herself, and her stomach was growling.

Her bedroom had a fully equipped bathroom. She got all ready before leaving.

Changed from her pajamas, she went downstairs. She could hear the news coming from the living room. She also felt someone was there.

Is that coffee?

It was already near noon. Perhaps someone was having some during or after lunch.

"Lady Kaya."

The living room door opened before she reached for it, and a voice met her ears.

Kaya started, and the owner of the voice quickly grabbed her wrist before she could fall.

The touch made her directly aware of his hand's size.

"Sorry, I was just trying to open the door for you."

Kaya looked up at him.

Her Custodian always wore a suit, but he wasn't wearing a jacket or tie now.

"…Oh, don't worry. Good morning."

The shock brought her mind away from sleep and into clarity.

Yuzuru smiled slightly, seeing how drowsy she still was.

"Good morning. You're up early."

"Mm-hmm…"

So ended the morning greetings. Kaya gave him an expectant look, but he gave no reaction.

He could have stepped aside from the door already.

And let go of her arm, too.

"You have some bed hair."

Yuzuru touched her hair with his other hand. A strand of hair drew a smooth semicircle on her head.

Embarrassment welled up within her, followed by anger. She pouted.

"I tried fixing it with water…but it didn't help…"

"Don't you have a flat iron?"

"It's not like I'm going to school. I'm just gonna be hanging here until it's time to work…"

"Is that so? I'll leave your little antenna be, then. It's funny." Yuzuru smirked at her.

Kaya had nothing to say back; he was always impeccably tidy.

She took great care of her appearance when she was going to school, but she was lousy at home.

"…I'll go fix it," Kaya said reluctantly.

She felt awkward about leaving her hair messy in the presence of a boy around her age. And she also hated the idea of Yuzuru going the entire day seeing her with her stupid little stray hair.

"I'll do it. I'll go get the flat iron. Please take a seat."

Yuzuru walked to her bedroom upstairs. He was quick.

Kaya resigned herself to do as he said and sat down on the living room couch. The news coming from the smart speaker reached her ears.

They were talking about the Rittou. The Agents of the Four Seasons began their manifestation in the respective terms of Risshun, Rikka, Risshuu, and Rittou.

They've been talking about this more than usual now that Lady Spring is back.

In Yamato, spring and summer began from Ryugu, while autumn and winter began from Enishi. The Agent of Winter had to be doing his divine work not far from her right now.

She waited for a while before Yuzuru came back. He plugged in the flat iron before going into the kitchen and returning with a cup of coffee.

"For you."

"Didn't you just pour this? Sure it's not yours?"

"No, it's for you."

"…"

He was leaving his for later. She wanted to object, but she realized there was no point. She just thanked him instead. Yuzuru was greatly devoted, but he was also stubborn. She took a sip of coffee before asking: "Where's Mom and Dad?"

"They went to Shiranui Shrine today."

"Oh, because of Rittou?"

"Yes. Lord Winter stops by that shrine. And it's an important one for the Archers of Oracle. They said we should help each other when one of us is in need, so they went over to clean up."

The Shiranui Shrine had been here a very long time, and the Fugeki clan could not ignore shrines near the sacred mountains.

The clan worked to climb the mountains and bring day and night to the world, while the heads of the shrine revered the land on and around the mountain, and they had a strong voice in local politics. As Yuzuru said, the two sides had a mutually beneficial relationship.

The Shiranui Shrine was in the tourist zone. It wasn't very close to any of the lodges where skiers would stay, but it was still within walking distance of the hotels. It was always in the travel magazines.

It was no easy work keeping the shrine clean for the four times a year the gods incarnate visited, even if only temporarily. It was something to take care of throughout the year on top of their regular operations.

Not to mention, the Agents' visit schedule had to be kept secret, to protect them from the insurgents. They could not accept local volunteers.

The only help could come from inside, and that was where the couple who moved here for their daughter came in.

The Honzan gave the order, so as to keep a good relationship with the shrine.

Although the couple was given preferential treatment in some ways as the parents of the goddess incarnate, fundamentally, they were like any other members of the Fugeki clan, and they had to take care of any jobs that arose from managing day and night.

"Ah, I should've gone with them."

"You need to rest. I would not have let you."

"I feel bad staying home, though. When are they coming back?"

"They said they would have dinner with the shrine staff, so quite late, I think."

As he replied, Yuzuru stood next to Kaya and began fixing her hair.

"So we're all alone for the day."

"Yes."

"Even the cook has the day off."

"Which is why we'll be ordering delivery."

Kaya was getting excited. "Let's make something. We've got the kitchen for ourselves."

Yuzuru couldn't contain his laughter. "Okay, then. What should we make?"

"Let's make some pancakes."

"For lunch?"

"Yes."

Yuzuru was bewildered, but then Kaya repeated, "Yes," and he gave up.

"…Okay, just this once. But please have real food for dinner."

"Sure! I'm still growing, you know? You don't have to beg me to have a full meal."

Yuzuru smiled. "Look over here, Lady Kaya. Yes, like that. Thank you."

Simply fixing her bedhead should have been quick, but Yuzuru began grooming the ends of her hair, too.

"It's fine already, Yuzuru."

"No. Let me continue until I say it's ready."

He wanted perfection, and she knew he wouldn't listen when he got like this.

Kaya let him do as he pleased while she kept talking.

"Hey, did you know Lord Winter has a villa in Shiranui?"

"…How did you find that out?"

Yuzuru frowned while diligently fixing her hair.

"Big Bro Kaguya. Remember the mess in summer? It sounds like he got chummy with the Four Seasons after that."

"Oh, yes."

The Dark Wolf case in Ryugu this past summer had shaken the living gods and their society. The Fugeki clan was also aware of the plan to replace the Agents of Summer, which had at least been thwarted.

After all, Kaya's "big bro" Kaguya was at the center of the incident.

"He found out, then. He didn't say who told him, but in any case. The Four Seasons apparently have these luxurious villas in sacred mountains. They also choose a good place to rest when they use too much of their divine powers."

"…"

"I'm surprised Lord Winter also has a residence in Shiranui. I guess this place is just that amazing. A 'power spot,' as people put it?"

"…"

"Yuzuru?"

"Be careful saying that."

"*Power spot*?"

"No, the fact that Lord Winter has a villa in Shiranui. He's the one most in danger of insurgent attacks."

Kaya pursed her lips. "I won't tell anyone. Who would I even tell? I'm just making small talk."

"You told me."

"Which is fine. You're my Custodian. In fact, I should be asking *you* not to tell anyone."

"Do you think I would?"

"No, and that's why I told you."

"…I see."

"I wouldn't tell Mom or Dad. Just you. Big Bro Kaguya did the same thing. He only told me. He said we can't be absolutely sure that I'll never get to meet him, so he asked me to be nice in case I did. Gods should help each other. And if I need help with anything, I'm trusting you first. Like, when we heard Winter's call through the shrine, you did all the work, right? Even if I ultimately made the decision to help."

"That's true… Sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"You get it?"

"Yes. Please let me off the hook."

"…I'm not angry. But I'll be even more forgiving if you put some whipped cream and honey and banana and strawberry on my pancakes."

Yuzuru laughed. "No need to push so hard for that," he said gently.

The mood softened quickly after the little argument. Kaya glanced at Yuzuru.

Their eyes met, and he smiled slightly.

"…"

Kaya pursed her lips bashfully.

Their relationship had improved recently.

I feel like we're getting closer.

She realized that they were closer than any boy and girl without feelings for each other would be, but she didn't mean it like that. Up until now, they had been somewhat opposed to each other, but now their minds were more in sync.

The opposition came from Kaya's insistence on making him quit, and Yuzuru's refusal to. Their care for each other had resulted in conflict.

It must be because of that conversation back then.

Kaya reminisced on their exchange on the mountain a few months back.

"…Yes. Morning came, and you stayed by my side. That's all I need to start my day off well. I don't really need the coffee, even."

"Lady Kaya. Going back to what you said… I also only need you with me."

That was what had they told each other in the sacred area of Mount Shiranui in early summer.

After encouraging him to quit for so long, Kaya had needed a lot of courage to say that.

But that day, she wanted to tell him her true feelings.

She was scared up until she told him her secret.

Whatever the reply, he could end up disliking her. He could decide she wasn't worth the trouble.

Simply asking was excruciating. Suffocating.

Meanwhile, Yuzuru was obviously desperate to ease her mind and said everything he could for that end. He reassured her that she was his goddess.

After his pure, open sincerity, she felt the need to respond in kind.

She wanted to show the affection she usually wouldn't.

She wanted to thank him for what he had given her.

She imagined his reaction would be either "Oh, don't be so dramatic" or "You should be that sincere every day, then."

"You don't have to be a goddess. You're all I need… Really."

But to her surprise, Yuzuru also laid out his feelings.

He'd looked her in the eye and spoken frankly and seriously.

She could sense the love in his words.

I'm such an idiot.

Kaya didn't know what kind of love it was, but she felt the unmistakable fondness he had for her.

Naturally, she assumed his kindness came from his duty to encourage the Archer of Dawn, but even so, she could tell there was a genuine sentiment in his words. It was so strong that it pushed away all that troubled her.

Perhaps the Custodian loved his master more than she imagined.

And she loved her Custodian, too. The lady-retainer relationship was authentic.

It was not a one-sided exploitation. Then…

Maybe I shouldn't try to push him away anymore, she thought.

After that, Kaya read the documentation from the Honzan. As Yuzuru had said, some Archers had no memory of what transpired during their trance.

Her issues were taken care of quickly, and now it was up to her and Yuzuru to deal with the awkwardness.

That said, Kaya's sense of guilt toward Yuzuru and his family did not disappear.

She simply reconsidered and decided it was wrong to keep trying to make him quit after what he'd said.

She had kept insisting even when he refused. And he had refused so many times.

He was not a child. He was more mature than she was, both outwardly and inwardly.

If he truly wanted to quit, he would do so without Kaya's urging.

She figured she had already created an opportunity for farewell in case anything happened; there was no need to argue about it anymore.

Yuzuru's actions created a major shift within Kaya. In the end, she stopped bringing up his resignation.

He would be better off away one day.

But at the very least, in this moment, he wished to be with her.

So as his lady, she had to respond in kind. She resolved not to suggest it again.

"Stop moving, Lady Kaya. Can't you stay put for a moment?"

"…You don't have to be so thorough. No one's gonna look at me but you…"

"That's why I'm doing it. It bothers me."

"…"

"Besides, it's your duty to allow me the chance to practice using one of these."

"No, it's not. You should be practicing your powers instead, if anything."

"I do practice, just not where you see."

"…If you say so."

"Indeed. I do plenty outside of your knowledge."

After that, Yuzuru worked even harder as her retainer.

He seemed to be aware of the change in Kaya's mind.

Now that he knew she wouldn't bother him with such suggestions, he became more proactive in his duties.

He had always been proud of his work.

He must've had an ideal image of a Custodian he wanted to live up to.

Yet he could never fully immerse himself in it because Kaya was always talking about his resignation. Now that he was free of that, although he remained a mostly straight-faced retainer, he acted more assertively.

"Why do you wanna practice with the flat iron? You gonna style your hair, too?"

"What sort of retainer uses his lady as a practice mannequin for his own hairstyles? I'm doing it for you."

"Me…?"

"You'll have a coming-of-age ceremony, so I have to know how to style your hair perfectly. I don't know what style I'll have to do, either. But we still have time."

"I'm not gonna request anything that complicated. You think I'm…a tyrant or something…?"

"Not at all. But it's always been the retainer's job to tidy and groom their mistress. Plus, I want to do it."

"You want to…?"

"Yes."

"Seriously?"

"My reputation is on the line, after all. I want to immortalize you in your finest and send a picture to my father. Show him what I can do."

"…"

"Lady Shuri will take care of your dress, and I'll do your hair. I can send my father a picture, can't I?"

"Fine… Do what you want."

His sense of rivalry against her previous Custodian had intensified, too.

Now that he was so fired up about his work, one could only imagine what he would do if she told him he should quit again.

He'd tear me a new one.

It would cause turmoil between them for certain.

I gotta accept it at this point, Kaya told herself.

Yuzuru had changed her, and Kaya had changed him.

The adolescent goddess had to find her resolve soon.

To truly confine young Yuzuru Fugeki to this tiny town in Enishi for the rest of his life.

It had been decided the moment Yuzuru became her Custodian, but it remained a source of deep guilt for her. She was taking Yuzuru's life, and there was little she could offer in return.

At the moment, the only thing she could give him was morning.

Kaya didn't pay him. His wages came from the Fugeki clan.

Kaya and Yuzuru's relationship of one-sided servitude was hard to change. There was nothing she could do now—but maybe that could change.

Kaya would become an important person within the clan as the years went by.

Experience, status, and accomplishments would become influence.

Kaguya Fugeki and Yuzuru's father were good examples. They were able to argue with the whole clan, including the bigwigs, without much power or authority. They had earned their influence.

Naturally, that influence was not achievable alone.

Making allies was important. She couldn't leave Enishi, so a collaborator who could act in her stead was essential.

She needed the power to stand proud even in the face of a storm. If she could secure such a foothold, she could help Yuzuru or his family in times of need.

She could eventually offer her voice for a final say when push came to shove.

She could serve him.

That was one of the few things she could do to repay him.

I gotta be a good master.

If he wanted to be her Custodian, so be it.

If there was anything he wanted to do, so be it.

That was how Kaya felt about the situation currently.

"…Yuzuru, it's raining."

Kaya couldn't move her head, so she commented on the thing she could see.

"It sure is. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"It rained nonstop in autumn, but these days it's been really clear."

"It was a long spell of rain. I was getting worried, even."

"…" Kaya began to worry about her parents outside. "You think Mom and Dad are working outdoors?"

Yuzuru could only guess. "I wonder. I imagine they would ask others to rake the leaves… But they would probably have to check the secret path Lord Winter would take."

"Did they go by car?"

"I got them one from the security gate."

"Then they'll be fine on their way back…"

Kaya thought in silence. Yuzuru finished taming her hair and moved on to brushing it. Once he finished, Kaya spoke again: "Should I join them so that they finish early…? We can be back before night."

Yuzuru sighed. "I told you, I can't let you do any work other than the Archer's."

"But…"

"They'll be fine. They wouldn't send volunteers out in the rain. Let's wait for them here. You really worry a lot about your parents…"

She was honest when it came to this.

"Obviously… I made them move to Shiranui for me… Neither of them are from around here. I'm glad to have them, but now they can't see their own parents."

This young goddess always felt bad for others.

"…Yes."

Yuzuru put the iron on the table and sat down on the couch next to Kaya.

He took a conversational posture, and Kaya glanced at him.

"Yuzuru… You can go see yours whenever you want…," Kaya said, and with that, the peace was broken.

Yuzuru scowled. "…Lady Kaya."

His low voice was intimidating—*Do you want to go over this again?*

Kaya immediately objected.

"Wait, don't get the wrong idea. I'm not saying you should quit… You just have to say you're going away for a bit, and the Honzan will send someone for the meanwhile. Your father did the same, right?"

His scowl softened, but he was still frowning.

"…You forget you lose consciousness when you shoot the sky?"

"I don't."

"So you'll let a stranger watch over you when that happens?"

"…"

He was entirely right. It was an exemplary reply for a retainer.

Kaya was as happy as she was frustrated to hear it.

"…We could ask your dad or mom," she insisted, but Yuzuru wouldn't allow it.

"They can't climb up Mount Shiranui. They've only followed the path to the sacred area a couple times, and they've gone up it for picking vegetables a couple others. They don't have the stamina."

"A guard?"

"No. They're not strangers, but I can't trust them entirely."

"But you trust them with all the delivery."

"That's not the same."

"Then how could we make it work?"

Yuzuru decided to indulge her insistence. After all, this could also serve as a plan in case something ever happened to him.

Yuzuru stared at Kaya and answered, "If we did ever do this, we would need multiple people that could monitor each other. And they would have to stay in contact with me throughout the entire ritual."

They were harsh conditions, but he gave them readily.

"That sounds like a lot… Usually the only security I have is you."

"Because I'm your Custodian."

"So it's just because of your status?"

"No, it's a matter of resolve," Yuzuru explained. "You gave me your flower branch. I'd already thought of protecting you before… but that made me certain. Nobody else feels the same sense of duty and responsibility that I do."

As Yuzuru looked at her, expecting her to agree, she flinched. "They say gods and humans are cursed to be codependent. Is that what this is?"

"I don't think so… Besides…I believe that to be an old wives' tale."

"Really? I do depend on you."

Yuzuru blinked. "Huh…?" This time, he was the one who flinched. "…You do?"

His voice cracked; he was truly surprised.

"Yes? You do literally everything for me, and you find that surprising? It's obvious to me." Kaya held up a lock of her beautifully styled hair to make her point.

"But… Well, that's only on the surface… And the rumors you mention say…that the god incarnate and their closest human have these intense feelings for one another…"

"I do. I wish I could protect you, in my own way. I'm not experienced enough, though. I feel bad that I can't do anything for you yet."

"…"

"If that's not the case for you… Then sure, it's probably an old wives' tale."

"Ah, no, I…" Yuzuru was still shaken up. "…I wouldn't say I don't have any feelings. No, let's be honest… I very much do."

Yuzuru was so sure Kaya didn't feel strongly about their bond that it took him time to process it and react.

"It's fine; you don't have to force yourself. It's my own deal how I feel."

Kaya assumed he was simply playing along and indulging her.

She felt a bit bad about it, but she didn't think that Yuzuru didn't care for or love her at all.

She simply shrugged it off as a gap in the intensity between their feelings.

"Going back on topic—you're saying that you prioritize my safety above all, and your pride as my Custodian doesn't allow you to entrust me to anyone else when they don't have the same sense of duty. Did I get that right?"

Yuzuru showed frustration on his face for once. They needed to talk these things through properly, but she was switching gears again.

"…"

I want to talk about this more with you. Why do you jump to a conclusion so quickly? Their underlying feelings were surfacing. Yet Kaya only urged him to answer the question she'd asked, and he reluctantly replied.

"…Yes. I'm the only one who would never betray you," he said gloomily.

"Yeah, I get what you mean. That's just how the Custodian is. I mean, what happened between Big Bro Kaguya and Eken during the Dark Wolf case…? That wasn't really betrayal."

Kaya ignored Yuzuru's inner turmoil as she nodded to herself, remembering what had happened down south.

She hadn't been told all the details, but she knew the outline.

Kaguya's Custodian, Eken Fugeki, had used his powers to hide his master's ex-wife's injury from him. He'd also attacked Kaguya

using the same powers of illusion. The actions were reproachable, but his actions were born out of concern for his Archer.

Kaya knew Eken, naturally. The boy loved and respected Kaguya, and he had nowhere to belong other than by Kaguya's side. She couldn't find it in herself to blame him. She was just glad everyone was alive, and that was her honest opinion of the incident.

"During the Dark Wolf case, National Security's Special Agents protected the Archer. As you see, a full team is needed to secure you without a Custodian."

Now that he had given an example, Kaya had to accept Yuzuru's perspective.

"I heard that a team guarded you when my father came back to talk to me about being your Custodian, too. We can't have peace of mind without doing that much at least."

"I'd say that's taking it too far… But if that's how it's been done… then okay."

"…Lady Kaya. If I may ask, then, wouldn't *you* feel anxious leaving your unconscious body to someone else?"

"Well…I would. But I'd feel worse not letting you see your family…"

"…"

Yuzuru was trying to argue the stubborn girl into submission, but instead she was talking him out of his own arguments. It was easy to forget that Kaya did not create these circumstances on her own.

She was a bird in a cage.

She only wished for the other bird in the cage to fly in the outside world.

When Yuzuru asked, "*Are you okay with somebody else?*" she said, "*I'm not, which is why I want at least you to get that much.*" She had no ill will toward him. She had seen so many others draw the short straw because of circumstances that originated with her.

She wanted no more. She refused to repeat the same mistakes she made when she was young and naive.

She was not the kind to drag others down into her own suffering, and in that way, it was fair to say she was fit as an offering to the world. Her good nature was why she had become the goddess incarnate tearing open the morning for everyone else.

"…"

Seeing Kaya's complicated expression, Yuzuru tried not to blame her quite so much.

"I understand that you say it for my sake," he said softly, and Kaya timidly looked back at him.

"…"

"But I get in touch frequently with my parents even if I don't see them… And my father was your Custodian—he understands I can't go home. You don't have to worry about it."

"…That's what I don't like. Forcing your family to put up with it. I'm sure your mother hates me for not letting her son go home…"

"…"

Now Yuzuru pursed his lips. The mention of his mother and the sad and regretful tone in his lady's voice struck him. They both remained quiet for a while before Yuzuru spoke again.

"…I understand."

Kaya shuddered a little.

"I won't go home, but I'll look for a good time to invite them over here. What do you say?"

Kaya's face lit up. "That's great!" she cheered. "They can stay over here!"

"No, no need for that. My father would be fine with it, but my mother is more timid. She wouldn't enjoy the trip much… I could get them a reservation at a hotel near the ski resort, and that way, they can do some sightseeing after visiting me."

"…Oh. Okay, if you say so. I'll pay for it, so get them a nice place."

"No, thank you."

"Yuzuru, let your lady do right by you."

"…Lady Kaya."

"Besides, I brought it up. It's my responsibility; I have to do something."

"I don't mind it. I can do this much for my parents."

"It's not a money issue. I'm talking about moral responsibility."

"…"

"I want to do something for your parents… I mean, this isn't just my problem. When it comes down to it, it's a matter of what my family can do for yours."

Yuzuru pursed his lips and considered what she meant.

Yuzuru lived with Kaya's parents, and he was close enough with them that he sometimes even mediated their arguments. They certainly were on good terms. He was a good young man, and a lot in their current lives was founded on that. Yuzuru's father had ensured Kaya was allowed to live with her parents, and the current Custodian assured them that it would remain that way. Kaya's family was in debt to Yuzuru's family. They were thankful to Yuzuru personally, too.

It would be shameful for the family not to do anything for their benefactors. If Kaya told them he refused, they would most likely try giving his parents something else personally. Her mother, Shuri, in particular, would never allow that. Her sense of responsibility was too strong.

"But Lady Kaya…"

Yuzuru's hesitation was natural, too, though.

Kaya's wealth was earned through her sacrifice. The Fugeki clan paid her as compensation for her imprisonment. Yuzuru felt it was reprehensible, as her Custodian, to let that money flow into his family's hands.

Anyone would gladly accept a little gift such as a box of cakes, but this was too different in many ways. And there was one more thing that tormented Yuzuru.

"Even then, I can't…"

Yuzuru Fugeki was not a man who would gladly make the girl he loved pay for anything.

Perhaps he would have tolerated it if he were a bit older and more mature, knowing it would make Kaya happy anyway.

"I can't, Yuzuru…?"

"…"

It took the young man time to accept it.

"Are you that against it…?"

"…"

"There's nothing I can do for you…?" she timidly asked, taking his arm and shaking it a little.

That was what it took for him to swallow his feelings.

"…Very well. I shall receive your kindness with gratitude," he finally said grudgingly.

"R-really?!"

"…Y-yeah."

He nodded with evident regret.

"Great! I'm glad… There's really so little I can do…"

"…"

"I'll let you have lots of time alone with them, but I would like to say hello. Especially to your mother. I need to apologize."

"You don't need to do that… And please don't think of making this a tradition…"

Kaya was rarely in such high spirits, so Yuzuru pushed aside his complicated feelings to accept what he was doing for her.

That day, they went to town to shop and got the ingredients for making pancakes. The time flew by as they chatted and cooked and wolfed the pancakes down.

Kaya's internal clock told her it was time to sleep.

Yuzuru grabbed her hand and took his drowsy lady to her room and into bed. She fell asleep the moment he pulled her blanket up.

She didn't sleep that deeply, even though it was her usual bedtime, thanks to all the sleep she had gotten that morning. She woke up by herself a few hours later.

"…"

She rubbed her eyes in the darkness before looking out the window. Night had taken over the outside. Now it was time for the Archer of Dawn to work.

Big Bro Kaguya brought night.

She paid her respects to the sky. She was lucky to have woken up before Yuzuru came. Kaya gave herself a pat on the back as she went downstairs to the living room.

Yuzuru was talking with Kaya's parents.

When she opened the door, she could hear their conversation.

"The hunters' association couldn't make it during the day. What should we do…?"

"There's nothing we can do…"

"Why are you saying that?! Aren't you worried about Kaya?"

"I'm just saying worrying ourselves to death over it won't solve anything."

They're arguing again?

Kaya sighed. Then her Custodian stood between them as mediator.

"Lady Shuri, Lord Eisen means that we would need a concrete plan."

Kaya's mother looked at Eisen. He wasn't quite middle-aged, and he was wearing a kimono and *haori*. He was the only one sitting down on the couch.

"I'll wait by the entrance," Eisen said. "Yuzuru will take a beacon. Kaya, too. And a transceiver. They'll report to me every half an hour. That should be enough, don't you think?"

Eisen had a sharp mind; he gave instructions swiftly despite the way his voice tended to drawl. His intelligence was visible in his face,

too. At this point, Yuzuru had noticed Kaya was there, but he hesitated to acknowledge her while the tension remained so thick.

"Yuzuru… What's a beacon?" Shuri asked anxiously.

"Why are you asking him?" Eisen reproached his wife.

"B-because you'd make fun of me!"

"Don't assume. Besides, I'm right here. I mentioned it. Asking me is the normal approach, don't you think?"

"But Yuzuru's nicer about answering…"

"Then ask me to be nice."

"Why do I have to ask? You can't be nice unless someone tells you to?"

"Erm… Lady Shuri, Lord Eisen… Lady Kaya has woken up."

It was not until that point that they turned to look at their daughter.

"Morning, Kaya."

"Kaya, good morning. Why are you standing there? Come sit."

"Good…morning."

Kaya couldn't ignore the argument just now. She decided to join in on the talk.

"What were you talking about? Was there an accident on the mountain? The beacon's for searches, isn't it?"

Oh! Shuri's face said. "There's a bear in Shiranui. We were talking about how to keep you safe."

It all made sense to Kaya now.

Enishi was bountiful in forests and natural resources.

Naturally, all sorts of animals lived on the mountain, some of which were bears. To many, bears were the big adorable zoo animals rolling around on the ground, but those were domesticated.

Wild bears attacked people and sometimes killed them. A bear showing up near a town was huge news for such a small settlement.

Ever the worrywart, Kaya's mother was anxious about her daughter going up the mountain in the middle of the night.

"Where? When?" Kaya asked, and Shuri thought back on what she'd heard.

"…I think it was while you were asleep. They saw it in the garden of a café by the ski resort—the one with hiking trails in the offseason. It's pretty close to the hotels… I heard there were a lot of people in the café because of the rain. The staff and the tourists panicked. Bears don't usually go all the way down there. It's been years since the last sighting."

Yuzuru nodded; she could take that information as accurate.

"Kaya. I'll drive you today, okay?" her father said.

"Huh? Don't worry. The ski resort's way away from the Archer's entrance."

"It went to the town, and now we've lost track of it. Who knows where it is now? Better be careful."

"But you go to sleep at twelve, don't you?"

"You don't think your dad can stay up a bit late?"

"That's just when we leave. The ritual's not over until morning."

"I'll just sleep in the car."

"Hey, the whole plan is pointless if you fall asleep," Shuri cut in.

Eisen frowned. "It'll be just a nap. My phone's alarm can wake me up. I'll set one every thirty minutes. That way, I can check they're okay. And if they don't call, I'll get someone and check the beacon."

"I'll go," said Shuri. "You stay at home."

"You have trouble getting up."

"I just have to not fall asleep. I can stay up all night."

"I'm not so sure. Can you even use the beacon?"

"Why are you being such a jerk about this?"

"You started it. I just said I'd take a nap."

"But was I wrong? There's no point if the contact is napping."

"That's why I said I'd set alarms."

"What if they try to call you when you don't have an alarm set?"

"Then my phone would wake me up."

"No way. You never pick up when I call you."

The girl grimaced while her parents argued.

I'm not sure I can trust either of you, to be honest.

She couldn’t easily interject when they were arguing about her, both worried for her. As she looked for a good moment to stop this futile conflict, Kaya felt a hand on her back. *Yuzuru*.

She looked at him and saw the pity on his face.

He gave her a nod, letting her know he would step in. “Excuse me, but I think that’s enough. I understand how much you care about Lady Kaya.”

Shuri and Eisen’s argument halted when Yuzuru intervened.

“The truth is, as her Custodian, I should refuse the request to carry a beacon and report back every thirty minutes throughout our hike, but I understand that you two are worried about your daughter. The bear only showed up today, after all. You may come with us up to the entrance. Let’s have Lord Eisen come today, and Lady Shuri tomorrow. As for the day after, we will consider going alone again depending on the hunters’ association’s reports. What do you think?”

It was an appropriate compromise.

Kaya couldn’t shun her worried parents, nor allow them to overstep too much into her Custodian’s job. This way, the idea was passable.

“Plus, I have my powers in case anything happens. Divine Cloak exists for this sort of situation, and my father trained me in its use. I am prepared to protect Lady Kaya.”

Kaya felt his strong affection for her in the way his hand rested on her back.

Yuzuru vowed to protect her body and mind.

“He showed me when he was still Custodian,” said Shuri. “He did mention that it was for chasing off wild animals.”

“Using it won’t be a burden to you?” said Eisen.

His composed argument quelled the flames. Yuzuru reassured them further:

“The Divine Cloak is granted to the Custodian, since the Archer, unlike other gods incarnate, has no offensive skills. I train with it every day. I might be affected if I use it too much, but it’s fine for

short intervals. And driving away a bear that pops out of nowhere should be easy."

The Divine Cloak Yuzuru mentioned was a special power given to the Custodians of the Archers of Oracle.

The *other gods incarnate* he mentioned were the Agents of the Four Seasons.

The Agent of Spring had Life Stimulation; the Agent of Summer had Life Operation; the Agent of Autumn had Life Putrefaction; and the Agent of Winter had Life Coagulation. Their powers, reminiscent of each of their seasons, were mostly used to fend off their enemies. They focused on offense.

On the other hand, the Custodians' Divine Cloak was focused on defense.

It created an illusion close to reality to transform their enemies and drive them away.

Depending on how it was used, it could cause harm, but thankfully, the Archers of Oracle and their Custodians were rarely in a situation that needed its use. In cases like this, he could warp the environment around a bear to show it a wild rabbit and draw it away.

Normally, this power was kept under wraps even with members of the clan, but Shuri and Eisen were Kaya's parents. Yuzuru's father had already explained it to give them peace of mind.

As soon as Yuzuru reassured them the power would not be a burden on him, Eisen chose to let him take care of defense and went back to his room to get ready to go outside.

Meanwhile, Shuri stayed with her daughter and her Custodian, watching them with concern.

"If something really scary happens, just forget about the morning and run, okay?" she said. It was an irresponsible suggestion, but well meant.

"Should the Archer's mother be saying that…?" Kaya said.

Shuri crossed her arms. "I don't give a damn about that," she retorted somewhat aggressively. "I didn't give birth to the Archer. I

gave birth to Kaya."

Her anger was directed at the God of Day, or perhaps at fate itself.

"And if anyone wants to complain about that, they can say it to my face. I'll get my family to defend you, too."

"But the common people…"

"I'm not gonna listen to anyone upset about the day being a few hours late. I care more about my daughter. You just make sure you're safe before doing the ritual, even if it's late. That goes for you, too, Yuzuru. Don't push yourself too hard. I couldn't face your parents if something happened to you. Eisen might be watching over you today, but I'm telling you, if you even hear the bear coming, run back, even if you haven't done the ritual yet. Your lives come first. I'm already getting in touch with the Fugeki bigwigs, asking what they can do, and what we should do if something dangerous happens. I'll get a reply from them by tomorrow. Just remember to keep yourselves safe first of all."

Kaya and Yuzuru couldn't believe a member of the Fugeki clan would say that, but the warning encouraged them.

Morning naturally came every day. Yet that "naturally" was built on their sacrifices. Kaya and Yuzuru needed someone nearby who would get mad for them and protect them, even if it was a bit selfish.

Even if nothing fundamental changed, their feelings were different.

Shuri watched as Kaya and Yuzuru got in the car with Eisen and headed over to today's ritual.

"It's cold…"

The clouds enveloped Shiranui, blessing it with rain.

Eisen grumbled about the unfortunate weather as they arrived at the entrance and got out of the car to send off the kids.

The chill of the mountain hit him hard, and he shivered. He had taken off his usual kimono and put on winter hiking clothes, but nothing was enough in this season.

"Dad, just stay inside the car," Kaya said with worry. "It's cold, and you'll get wet."

"Yeah."

"And get some sleep if you need it."

"Your mom made me coffee. She insisted I shouldn't fall sleep."

"Lord Eisen, we need to go."

"Take care, Yuzuru. I'm trusting you with Kaya."

Finally, he got back in the car.

Kaya and Yuzuru took the secret entrance up the mountain as always. There was little moonlight tonight, and the ground was muddy from the rain. Every step of the hike was heavy.

"I'm sorry, Yuzuru," Kaya apologized as they walked.

"For what?"

"My parents. It's not that they don't trust you, really…"

Yuzuru shook his head; he hadn't taken it that way. "I know. They're only worried about their precious daughter."

"…Which is so embarrassing. I was worried it might've rubbed you the wrong way…"

"Don't worry about that."

"You're always mediating their arguments, too…"

"You're too timid to be up front with them, after all. Either way, they come to their senses when a third party steps in. I don't really mind it."

"…"

"You don't need to apologize. If you should say something, I'd be happier if you said I did well."

"Really?"

"Yes, indeed."

"You'd just laugh at me if I did that…"

"You think I'm that kind of jerk…?"

"No, not at all." Kaya lit her path with a flashlight as she stole a glance to her side. "You do a really good job."

"So you will praise me?"

"You're so caring and helpful."

"I'm honored."

"And the girls love you."

"…Excuse me?"

"A girl from another class I'd never talked to asked me to introduce you to her."

Yuzuru grimaced. This was even worse than the money talk. "… Please don't. Don't tell me you said yes."

"I didn't. I thought you wouldn't like to…"

"If she ever tries to make contact with me, I'll shoot her right down."

"Don't say you'll shoot her."

"I will *kindly turn* her down."

"Please. Poor girl."

"You feel sorry for her? You said she'd never even talked to you before, and then she wants you to introduce us."

"…"

"It's such a shame we can't say that you are this country's Day."

"I'd rather be a normal high schooler."

Kaya and Yuzuru chatted like usual while going up the mountain.

The rain had been falling all day and, unfortunately, it had only gotten worse for the ritual; the weather had turned truly terrible.

These rain clouds weren't going anywhere. Kaya and Yuzuru both wore waterproof pants and raincoats, but being out in the rain was still unpleasant. The cold wasn't healthy.

"Yuzuru, let's put up a tent today."

"Yes. Wait by the trees. I'll get it."

They immediately took measures to deal with it. There was nothing novel about bad weather for the Archer and Custodian who made this hike every single day. They only had to endure it. Yuzuru

opened a toolbox hidden in the bushes near the sacred area and took out a pop-up tent and a small kerosene heater and put them in place. The Archer had to adjust the exact time to shoot the sky, and they used such equipment when the weather called for it.

The two of them took refuge in the tent as soon as it was up. It was so small that it could only fit the two of them lying down, but its size also meant it was quick to deploy. The heater hadn't seen use for a season, but it was now back in service.

"Here, wipe your face."

"Thanks. You too."

"I should call Lord Eisen first, before he gets worried."

"Thanks."

Kaya and Yuzuru took quick action and waited inside the tent lit by the small lantern until it was time for dawn.

"The wind is getting stronger."

"Will you be all right, Lady Kaya?"

"Yeah. I'll get it done quick."

The time finally came, and Kaya shot the arrow of light into the sky.

The moment she released the bow, her thin body collapsed under the rain.

Yuzuru caught her and carried her into the tent. Why did she have to be exposed to the elements like this? He was indignant, but that wouldn't change anything. So long as she was the Archer, she would never get sick, and her injuries would heal right away.

But even with that knowledge in mind, he hated seeing her lose consciousness in the rain and strong, cold wind. As always, Yuzuru felt a knot in his stomach the whole time she remained unconscious while the sky slowly regained color. The change was subdued, however, as the heavy rain and wind persisted. After a while, Kaya woke back up.

"Is morning here?"

"Yes, Lady Kaya."

Now they had to get ready to go back down.

They put the equipment back in the toolbox, locked it so no animal would get into it, and went back the way they came.

Kaya remained anxious, feeling criticized under the weeping sky.

It's been a bad day already, what with the bear and the storm. Not that there's anything I can do about it.

She had to stop worrying about it. That was life within nature.

One had to accept their environment and find a compromise to keep on living.

"Lady Kaya, the ground is soft. Be careful."

"I know…"

"Shall we hold hands?"

Her body was weak after the ritual depleted her divine powers, and her steps were wobbly.

"…"

She would normally refuse, saying she was okay, but the weather was too powerful. She grabbed Yuzuru's hand meekly.

"Yes…"

Yuzuru smiled. "Watch out for the slopes. Let's take it slow and easy."

"Yeah."

The touch of his hand, even through the hiking gloves, gave her peace of mind.

"Your father's waiting for you at the bottom."

"Yeah…"

She wanted him to rest up, too. She took step after heavy step, hoping to get into the car with him as soon as possible.

"…"

Something was off.

Fssh, fssh.

There was a strange noise on the mountain.

The rain hid it, but she could tell—this noise was one she never heard up here.

"…?"

It sounded like underground tremors, but that wasn't it. Kaya came to a stop with suspicion.

"Lady Kaya?"

Yuzuru frowned. Did he not notice?

"Something's up, Yuzuru. An earthquake, maybe?"

Her gut was sharper than his in times like this. She had lived in the wilderness for longer.

The perception of danger abruptly sharpened her languid senses.

Something's wrong.

Her heart was beating abnormally fast, and her hand tightened around Yuzuru's.

"You can't hear it?"

"I only hear the rain. I don't feel any shaking, either. Do you?"

"No. I think it's not happening yet."

"It's just coming?"

"Yeah."

Kaya looked around carefully, just as the birds sheltering in the trees all took flight at once.

Kaya took a step back, surprised by it. Yuzuru flinched, too.

"Yuzuru… Look."

Kaya noticed water flowing from the slope they would take down. It was no puddle, although it looked like it. Every small detail told her something unusual was happening.

"Let's move under a big tree, Lady Kaya."

They needed something to grab on to if an earthquake was coming. Kaya agreed, and they took a step toward the closest tree.

"…Lady Kaya!!" he yelled, just as the ground beneath her feet crumbled. She began to slide.

It happened in the blink of an eye. The constant autumn rain had slowly affected Mount Shiranui, ultimately culminating in a

landslide.

"Yuzuru!"

It was hard to perceive in the middle of the storm. One could easily realize how dangerous a place it was, and how to prevent a disaster after the fact, but not in the moment.

"…Lady Kaya…!"

Kaya's pause and warning had helped Yuzuru. They were holding hands, too. They remained together even as their footing fell apart, and he pulled her toward him and held her in his arms.

So he got to protect what was precious to him as they fell.

"…!"

Kaya's scream stuck in her throat.

They rolled down the ground like a pair of discarded dolls, hitting the ground over and over on the slope. They fell and fell without slowing for what seemed like an eternity.

They finally stopped when they slammed into a big tree, already battered like dirty rags. Yuzuru had cleverly twisted his body to change their trajectory.

Fssh, fssh.

The landslide continued for a while before the unpleasant noise stopped.

"…"

Their senses were halted for a while, too.

Fortunately, the sudden disaster wasn't big enough to transform the shape of the mountain. The damage was isolated. The path would need repair, but the slide didn't reach all the way to the foot of the mountain.

The issue was the young man and girl unlucky enough to get caught in it.

Kaya had quickly blacked out. Even with Yuzuru's protection, she had rolled down the mountain with him. And the ritual had already worn her down earlier.

"…Lady Kaya… Lady Kaya…"

She heard Yuzuru's voice from afar.

"…Lady Kaya!…"

Kaya slowly regained consciousness as she heard her name.

She needed to stand up—that was the one thing on her mind.

Even though her body was screaming, she could not let her Custodian be alone.

Archer and Custodian were one and the same. She had to respond to the call.

My body's limp.

She yearned to put Yuzuru at ease, but her body yearned to remain down.

Her bones and muscles were shouting at her not to move. But if she didn't, her body temperature would drop. She might even die.

"…Lady Kaya! Please wake up!"

A clap of thunder accompanied Yuzuru's desperate cry.

Kaya felt like the lightning had torn her apart.

This was not distant thunder, either; the bolt had hit nearby. The boom was so powerful that Kaya jumped up into a sitting position. Her body cried in pain, but this was good.

"Yuzuru!"

She searched for her Custodian for salvation, and he was right next to her.

He was on his knees, watching over her unconscious body.

He forced himself to smile, and it reminded her so much of her previous Custodian.

"Ah, thank goodness… You're up. Does anything hurt?"

He spoke in his usual calm tone, trying to keep her at ease. The sight and sound disturbed her.

"…Forget…me… What about…you…?"

Kaya's mouth was smeared with dirt and blood; her voice came out hoarse and quickly dissolved into a coughing fit. Even with

Yuzuru right in front of her, all she could do was cough and spit.

"Lady Kaya…"

Yuzuru rubbed her back. She was embarrassed, but the gesture did soothe her.

"…I'm…okay… What about…you?"

"I'm fine," Yuzuru replied, without room for doubt.

He did seem all right. No big injury in sight. He had woken up before her and assessed the situation. He was as calm as could be.

"Let's check your injuries, Lady Kaya. Can you walk? Try moving your hands and feet, carefully."

Kaya moved and checked her limbs.

No problems with her joints. She was probably bruised and bleeding internally, but thanks to her accursed healing power, she didn't have to worry about any wounds.

"Looks fine. Try standing up, please."

She stood up shakily due to the pain, like a newborn deer, but as she stepped and stomped repeatedly, she regained her normal senses. This was the blessing of the Archer. Although she had nearly no stamina, she could walk.

Her raincoat and pants were ripped, and she was completely drenched now. If she stayed this cold while she was still weak, she could black out again. Her teeth were nearly chattering, but she tried not to let Yuzuru notice.

"Looks like I'm okay. Thanks to you…"

"Thank goodness…"

"Are you *really* okay, though?"

"Yes. Although it hurts a whole lot."

"Did you break anything?!"

"No, it's just bruises."

Yuzuru smiled as he shook his arms. Kaya stopped him in a panic.

"Don't do that. You could be fine now, but then find out you're hurt later…"

"I'm fine. I'm sturdier than you."

"Maybe, but you don't have magic in your body."

"…Lady Kaya." Yuzuru looked hurt.

"Don't try shielding me again. Not that I've tested it, but I don't think I'd die even if a tree fell on me. That's just how it is."

Kaya took off her hiking gloves and showed him. She had felt pain in her hand, and sure enough, there was a cut across the back. The ceaseless rain kept falling and washed away the blood, revealing the wound.

But as they watched, it closed up.

"Creepy, right?" Kaya said, while Yuzuru grabbed her hand and put her glove back on.

"Be careful, or you'll hurt yourself again. And you should be grateful for those powers."

"…"

"If I may be frank, I'd even want you to share some of them with me. It hurts."

"Sorry…"

Kaya sincerely apologized, and his hand tightened around hers.

"Does it not hurt anymore?"

"Nope."

"Then keep holding my hand, and let's go down."

They descended while circumventing their usual path.

It would take them a bit longer, but they had to be careful. The path hadn't been tamped down by foot traffic, and it was an ordeal for their fatigued bodies. Every step left them out of breath.

"Let's get Lord Eisen to make an emergency call to the Fugeki clan once we're down. Someone needs to come do something about the mountain or we can't do the ritual tomorrow. I mean…I doubt we can use this path anymore."

"Yeah. I think they need to send a specialist to show us another path… The one Archers have used throughout history is gone now… A lot of people should be coming from the Honzan. I don't think we'll get to go up with just the two of us. You should take a break tomorrow, okay?"

"…Yeah, maybe it's best if we ask them to do that."

Kaya was shocked to hear him accept a day off for once. "Yuzuru…"

Of course she had suggested it sincerely, but the answer worried her.

"You're doing worse than I thought, aren't you…?" she said. "You want me to carry you down?"

Yuzuru chuckled at her concern. "I'll carry *you* if you ask, but not the other way around. I'm okay."

"But you're hurting, right? I can help you."

"…I'm fine."

Yuzuru insisted, but it didn't ease Kaya's worries. She quickly made another suggestion.

"Hey, Yuzuru, let's call my dad. If you don't think I can help you, maybe he can. We should get you to a hospital soon."

"Thing is, our stuff fell and got lost. I couldn't find any of it… I think we ought to get down instead of looking for it."

"Huh?!"

It was then that Kaya realized she had lost her backpack. The shoulder straps must have gotten torn off during their fall.

"…"

Kaya was baffled, remembering just how much she relied on him.

She hadn't even noticed until he pointed it out. She had someone to hold her hand, but he did not. She could only follow behind him.

"Don't worry, Lady Kaya. Even if Lord Eisen comes looking for us, we should run into him if we just follow the beacon. We're back on the proper path. It's more likely we'll bump into him if we keep going."

"…"

"What's the matter, Lady Kaya?"

"Yuzuru, you hold on to me if you get tired. Okay? Take my hand when you step down. Don't use up all of your strength."

Kaya sped up, walking ahead of him.

"You'll help me?"

"Yes. I'm mostly healed already. I'm stronger than you now."

"That's reassuring. You're such a kind master."

"Obviously. And I'd help you even if you weren't my retainer."

She glanced behind her and saw him smile feebly.

Yuzuru had to be in much worse shape than she imagined.

Ahh, God.

Kaya prayed to the God of Day, who was out there somewhere.

To please not let his wounds have complications.

Please, don't let him get sick from the rain.

Please, don't let him hate me for being so unreliable.

Kaya could only pray.

She felt time was going by more slowly than usual, but the exit was drawing near.

"Kayaaa! Yuzuru!"

Eisen's voice reached them through the rain. He was beginning to go up Mount Shiranui, worried that he hadn't heard from them. Kaya smiled.

"Dad!" she shouted back.

"Kayaaa!"

"Dad!!"

Not even hail could keep the father and daughter apart. They kept calling out until they pinpointed the other's direction. Across the gaps between the trees, Kaya spotted her father. She was still smiling.

"Yuzuru, we're okay now!"

He smiled, too.

"Let's get Dad to help! Good thing we had someone who could drive with us…"

"Yes."

"Sorry. It must've been so hard on you, coming all the way here. I'm sorry…"

"No… I am sorry… I have to apologize to you."

"…Why?"

Yuzuru forced another smile.

Wait.

Kaya found it strange—Yuzuru's voice sounded far away.

He was right there; why did he sound so far away? Was it because of the rain? Was it because he had let go of her hand, which she had only just noticed?

"…I am truly sorry. I lied to you because I care so much about you."

Kaya could not speak. What was going on?

There was so much to ask him, but she was paralyzed from the suddenness of it all.

I just noticed. Why are his clothes not very dirty?

She had been so focused on getting down the mountain in all the chaos that she had overlooked several important things.

"I know you'll be mad."

Wait.

A chill went down her spine.

"But you're so kind… I believe you'd lend me a hand even so."

She couldn't breathe.

No.

"I am really sorry…"

It couldn't be. It shouldn't be.

"Please, Lady Kaya."

But his forced smile warned her of his following request.

"Would you mind coming back for my body later?"

Another clap of thunder shocked Kaya back into action.

"…Yuzu…ru."

The heavens boomed, as if to try and make the foolish Archer open her eyes.

"Yuzuru. Where are you now…?" she asked.

Yuzuru smiled again. Then she felt it. The touch of this Yuzuru before her eyes, caressing her head. The same familiar touch as always.

Ahh.

But it wasn't him. Kaya finally understood what he meant.

"Lord Eisen. Lord Eisen, over here," Yuzuru called as he ran over to them, while Kaya remained stupefied.

"Haah, haah… Yuzuru, what happened?!"

Yuzuru waited for Eisen to get his breathing under control before he spoke. "Lord Eisen, take Lady Kaya to the car and to safety. Then call for help. My body isn't here now."

"…What are you…?"

Eisen was at a loss for words as Yuzuru pointed up at the mountain.

"There was a landslide; I'm around there. But I'll lose consciousness any moment."

He was so calm, one had to question his sanity.

He had to be gravely injured—perhaps even fatally.

Yet he calmly talked about his "body."

"It's dangerous up there. You'll need experts. I hit my head, and blood is running all the way into my nose and mouth. My legs are broken. I think you would need a stretcher. Tell them my height and weight. That way, the rescuers will know what to do."

Kaya held her hand out to Yuzuru. She could touch him. He was warm.

Yet Yuzuru was not here.

"Yuzuru… Why…?" Kaya asked with trembling lips. "…Why did you show me an illusion…?"

The answer was obvious.

"To protect you," Yuzuru replied plainly.

Kaya held her hands up to her mouth.

She wanted to scream at her own mistake.

I can't see.

There were clues; she had just missed them.

The servant spoke to his master, who was white in the face and nearly ready to faint.

"Lady Kaya, I found out in summer. This is the way to use Divine Cloak. What happened with Twilight is regrettable, but it served as a lesson."

Why do I…always…?

"I was shocked by his Custodian's idea. I heard he did it subconsciously, but it was brilliant. I knew I could never be that oddly calm and immediately create a standin. But thanks to him, I did it today, while you were unconscious."

Why…am I always…

"I'm so glad I practiced every day before going to bed."

…the one hurting people?

"Though I never imagined it'd be this painful."

Kaya sobbed.

Kaya always, always failed to see the bigger picture.

"…Lady Kaya, Lady Kaya…"

She had failed to notice how strangely well he was doing.

Yuzuru had protected her from the fall. His clothes, his skin, his hair—he had to be torn apart. She should have lost her mind seeing the state he was in. That was a normal reaction.

"Ah, thank goodness… You're up. Does anything hurt?"

Simply seeing him had left her so relieved that she didn't think of anything else.

He was such a source of peace for her.

Everything would be all right because he was there. As long as he was there, everything would be all right.

So she thought no further.

"I'm fine."

He must have been hiding nearby, worried about letting her see the state he was in.

He hid himself out of kindness.

Yuzuru had created an illusion of himself to save her.

"If I may be frank, I'd even want you to share some of them with me. It hurts."

He couldn't be fine. Being her Custodian did not make him an omnipotent superhuman.

Yuzuru was young, only a few years older than Kaya. How awful must he have felt as he watched his lady go away to safety?

"Does it not hurt anymore?"

And yet, even while in pain himself, he protected Kaya.

"…Yeah, maybe it's best if we ask them to do that."

Because he was her Custodian.

Yuzuru gave Kaya an encouraging smile.

"It's okay. I'm still alive. I wouldn't be able to make this illusion otherwise. And I got you back to safety."

He whispered with relief, but the words were cruel for Kaya.

"…Why?!"

She could only despair at the salvation he had pushed onto her.

"We didn't know if there would be another landslide. I had to get you out of there ASAP."

"But I left you behind!"

"Yes. But as I've been saying, I'm not dead. The adults should be coming to save me now."

"And me…?"

"You go somewhere safe, please."

"I should be rescuing you, too!"

Kaya ran away from Yuzuru's illusion, back the way she had come, until Eisen grabbed her arm.

"Kaya!!" he barked.

She flinched, but she immediately tried running away again. Eisen did not allow her, and he yelled even louder.

"Kaya! Don't be stupid! You can't do anything by yourself!"

His words were like a knife.

"But…!"

"No buts. Yuzuru did this for you; don't throw it away."

The tender parts of Kaya's heart ached. But it was what she needed to hear. The thought of losing someone she loved had nearly caused her to lose her senses.

"We need to use our time to get him rescued. We can't waste it on your objections."

Eisen had to make the correct decisions here, both as Kaya's father and as an adult entrusted with another man's son.

"Yuzuru, I'll get the first aid kit and go to you. Don't worry, I've been taught what to do in these cases. I've never done it in real life before, but I can stop your bleeding and protect you from the elements while rescue comes here."

Illusionary Yuzuru smiled, on the verge of tears.

"Thank you."

That smile made it clear—he wanted someone to save him, too.

"Since you didn't call me, I take it your phone broke?"

"No… I lost it. It must be around here somewhere. And Lady Kaya's backpack, too… I'm sorry. With how terrible things were, I thought it would be best to get her down quickly instead of having her look for it. I also thought the path might crumble again, although I'm no expert. If Lady Kaya had gone looking for it and there was a second collapse, she would have been trapped, too."

"…"

"Plus, if I had asked her to look for it, she might never have left. She wouldn't leave me behind."

Yuzuru turned to Kaya. "Lady Kaya," he said gently, "I know you would help me." His kindness was protective. "That's why I lied to you. I'll apologize directly to you if we get to meet again."

Yuzuru was able to fill the role of Custodian because he was this kind of person.

"Yuzuru… I'm sorry… I'm so sorry…"

And that was why he could easily cast himself aside.

"Please don't apologize, Lady Kaya. Just commend me once I'm back."

Eisen nodded. With some resolve, he said, "Okay. I should be able to find you following the path and checking the beacon. The backpack has to be nearby. Kaya…you stay in the car. We need to

communicate and explain what's going on. Now you'll be the liaison. This is your job. Got it?"

Eisen put his phone and car keys in her hands. He stooped down to Kaya's eyeline. "I'm going to save Yuzuru. You call Mom and get her to call an ambulance and National Security. She knows what to do in times like this. And get her to come here, too. Ask her to bring all the backup beacons and transceivers we have. That way, she can be in touch with me. Also get the security gate guards to come before you call the Honzan, okay?"

Kaya nodded in tears, then repeated the instructions. "Call Mom. Call an ambulance, National Security, and the gate guards."

She made sure she wouldn't forget.

"Yes. And call the Honzan last. They'll go on about keeping the Archer's identity and the mountain path secret and all that crap. They're going to prioritize honor before a person's life. Only call them after we do what we can."

"…Okay." Kaya looked at her Custodian. "I'm going to save you, Yuzuru."

He looked back at her.

"Yes, Lady Kaya."

"Wait for me, Yuzuru."

"Yes. I know you can do it."

Then, perhaps because his real body was growing weak, Yuzuru disappeared into smoke.

"Yuzuru…!"

Kaya and Eisen were bewildered as the man who had been standing there vanished in the blink of an eye.

Only then did they realize that he really was only an illusion. Even knowledge of Divine Cloak couldn't prepare them for the level of detail it could achieve.

Yuzuru's skill at manipulating the illusion from afar, despite his injuries, was equally shocking.

In the end, only anxiety remained. He must've lost consciousness.

"Kaya, let's do this."

She wiped the tears with the back of her hand and nodded.

Even today, morning came.

It was the same for the common folk. One person's life was supported by another's work. Great sadness befell one person, while it was the best day ever for someone else. This was the cycle of human life.

The search for Yuzuru Fugeki began promptly, and by request of National Security and the Fugeki clan, Mount Shiranui was closed off, due to landslides. The rescue team ran to save the Custodian of Yamato's only goddess incarnate of day, and he was taken to the hospital. As Yuzuru had said, his real body had a terrible head injury, and he looked like a bloody corpse when he was found.

It was already late by the time he reached the medical facilities; he was in critical condition.

Yuzuru's family was summoned to Enishi to attend his deathbed.

Kaya Fugeki and her family were forced to make a grave decision.

Cruelly, Eisen took it upon himself to tell his daughter:

"Kaya, can you go into the mountain today?"

No matter what happened, the Canopy had to be shot down.

The gods incarnate had to climb the mountain even in the middle of a storm.

They had to dance even in the middle of roaring thunder.

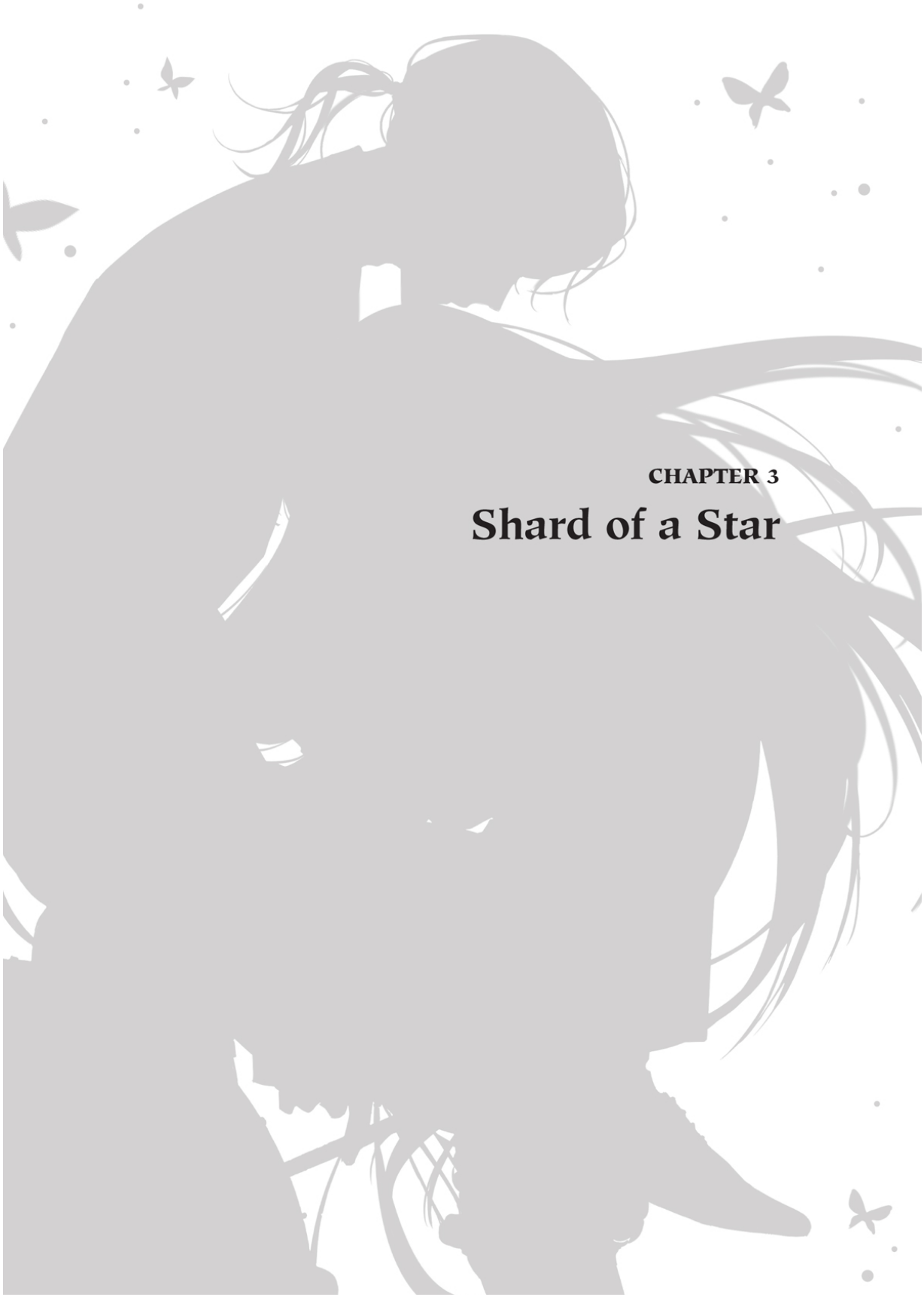
Even if their friends died. Even if their family died. Even if their sweetheart died.

They had to sing and dance and shoot it down.

This was the task of those who represented the gods.







CHAPTER 3

Shard of a Star

She knew it was a daydream.

"Lady Kaya."

Because he came to her in perfect health.

"Are you all right, Yuzuru?"
"Yes. Thank you for saving me, Lady Kaya."

A convenient dream taking place in the middle of nowhere—a pure white world.

"…Thank goodness. I was so worried, I thought my heart was going to explode… Thank goodness."
"I'm sorry to have troubled you so."
"No… No, I troubled you. Don't do that ever again. I told you I'm a monster. You didn't need to protect me."
"You know I could never… I could never forsake you. Lady Kaya… How lucky that we both survived that."
"Yeah…"

It was a nauseating, self-serving delusion.

"Why are you crying?"
"…Mm."
"Out of happiness?"
"…Out of sadness."
"But I'm fine…"
"I hate that you got hurt even a little. I don't want you to bleed at all."

He was kind in her delusion.

"Oh, what an honor… Lady Kaya, were you that afraid of losing me?"

He was so kind.

She replied that she was scared—no, she couldn't manage even that. Only a muffled cry came out of her throat.
He smiled, glad to see his lady cry for him.

"But it's all over now."
"Really…?"

Ahh, I want this to be over.

"Yes, it's all right."
"I can't believe it. More scary things could happen."

"I'll protect you again."

"No, I don't care about myself. I couldn't stand to lose you, Yuzuru."

"…"

"Stay with me. But if push comes to shove, abandon me."

If only.

"That's a tall ask."

"I'm being serious. I don't want to lose you because of me. Heh, isn't it so dumb? This wouldn't have happened if I had let you go."

"Lady Kaya…"

"Yuzuru, why didn't you leave me? Why…?"

"That much is obvious. I'm here to protect you. There's no point to me if I don't protect you. I'd be just a doll."

"…That's fine. I just wanted you to be with me. I'm serious. I wanted you to protect my heart, not my body. Don't do anything dangerous again."

"But I'm okay now. Please don't say that."

"Please, just don't do anything dangerous. Ahh…but I'm so happy you're back…"

"I'm happy to be back, too, Lady Kaya."

If only this was actually happening.

Reality was not so kind.

"Kaya."

The voice woke her back up.

Was it the harm of moving without rest? Or the fault of praying for salvation?

Kaya basked in an impossible dream in the hospital. Reality was too cruel, and her heart tried as hard as it could to keep her alive, even as she wished for death herself.

"His parents are here. Be polite…okay?"

Eisen spoke timidly to his empty shell of a daughter. The slightest shock could break her. Yet even so, she had to suffer through this trial.

"Mom will do all the talking; just look serious. I know you're hurting, but they must be hurting even more. Keep that in mind. You can pull yourself together, can't you?"

"…"

Kaya wanted to respond, but her throat was too dry to speak.

"Kaya…?"

She kept her head low and nodded to show she was listening. She saw her own hands. Clots of blood were stuck in her nails.

The blood was Yuzuru's. It glowed under the sunlight she herself had brought.

This blood was shed because of you.

Pain ran through her heart, and the corners of her eyes burned.

She forced her head up and tried to blink back the tears, but she couldn't keep them from falling.

Yuzuru was gravely injured because he had protected her. His life was hanging by a thread. The fact was too heavy, too sad. The

tears stopped and flowed, stopped and flowed.

She bit her cheek and tongue to create some saliva to swallow down. Finally, her throat could produce sound.

"I'm listening. Sorry I couldn't reply," she said to her concerned father.

"Yeah, it's fine."

"I'll pull myself together."

"…"

"I can do it."

Eisen sighed in pain.

Finally, Kaya met with Yuzuru's parents, and she bowed deeply.

"I'm so sorry. It's my fault."

That was not enough. She got on her knees and tried to press her forehead to the floor, before someone stopped her.

"…I'm sorry. I'm so sorry…"

Instead of replying, his parents began to cry.

"I put your son in danger… It's all my fault."

As Yuzuru's mother wept, his father told Kaya it was not her fault.

"No, it *is* my fault…"

Only family could enter his room.

Kaya was not family, so she could only apologize to them in the middle of the white corridor.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry… I'm sorry."

Not once did she ask for forgiveness.

"I'm sorry… I am truly sorry. It's all my fault. I did everything wrong. I didn't understand the weight of my sinful wish to make your son my Custodian. I am so sorry… I am so sorry… I am so sorry."

She kept her head low before his mother's teary glare—she must hate her.

Ahh, I want to die.

“I am so sorry.”

News of the landslide on Mount Shiranui spread quickly through the town.

The accident had happened after the Archer of Dawn shot down the Night Canopy with the arrow of light. Daybreak had come, the sun had risen, and morning was dawning.

Kaya and Eisen dealt with the accident promptly, but Yuzuru’s condition was worse and graver than expected. Kaya called her previous Custodian, and Yuzuru’s parents took a plane from Teishu to Enishi.

It took two and a half hours by car to reach Shiranui from the Enishi airport.

Shuri stopped helping with the landslide aftermath and took the car to the airport right away to receive them. Now Kaya was meeting Yuzuru’s parents in the hospital.

“Lady Kaya, you should rest… It’s okay,” her former Custodian kindly said.

Kaya finally raised her head to see him. “Soshi…”

Soshi Fugeki barely resembled his son. Yuzuru took after his mother, who was standing a little ways behind him.

The older man had a bit of a hunch, and he was tall and thin. His gentle nature was visible in his bespectacled face.

“You must do your job today, too. I heard you’ve been helping and haven’t eaten anything. You haven’t even changed clothes. You’re covered with mud and blood. Please go back to the mansion.”

The former Custodian, who had improved the Archers’ circumstances with Kaguya’s help, and whom Kaya loved dearly.

Everything about him was average, and yet his voice had an odd magnetism to it.

“Soshi, I can’t go home without knowing how Yuzuru is…”

The sad voice echoing in the quiet hallway caught everyone's attention.

"We…will take care of my son."

It felt like being preached to by a high priest.

He resembled Kaguya Fugeki a little in that way.

Kaguya had an imposing air to him that others often found overwhelming.

Soshi at first appeared to be a quiet man, but his voice made people stand up a little straighter. He was a man with a soft exterior but a firm interior.

"But Soshi, I'm his lady." Kaya couldn't be too aggressive with him, either.

"…It's okay, Lady Kaya."

Soshi was a true senior to her.

He had saved her from loneliness and protected her. She was too indebted to this man.

Kaya showed him deep reverence. They were master and retainer, and on the surface, they acted accordingly. Still, it was obvious that Soshi held the reins in this relationship.

"…In a night or two, my son will leave to the side of the Gods of Day and Night. So don't worry about it anymore." His words were cruel and resigned, spoken with little emotion.

He was saying this for Kaya's sake. She was only a child, except in the moment when she was shooting the sky. So she kept her head low. Her penance would not be over until someone else said it was.

"But there has to be something we can—!" Kaya felt the need to apologize, even if she wouldn't be forgiven.

But how did it look to the bereaved family?

"Lady Kaya, I swear I don't say this because I want to hurt you. Please understand… Please, let us spend his last moments as a family."

She was the root of this tragedy, and now she wouldn't let them share their sadness among themselves. How did they feel about her?

You're a bug in the way. A disgrace. A nuisance. Get lost.

Probably.

While Kaya struggled to find a reply, Soshi spoke little by little. His words met her ears like rainfall.

"His brothers are coming. Our relatives. We called his friends, too. They couldn't see him during the three years he was by your side. So please, let all of us see him off in peace… And I also want you to leave the hospital for a while so you can process what happened."

The man she looked up to was now pushing her away.

What he said was a form of kindness in its own way, but it was still rejection.

Kaya was not Yuzuru's family. She was a victim, too, but at the same time, she was the reason for Yuzuru's critical condition. Soshi was completely right; as long as she cried and apologized, they could not be at peace.

If Yuzuru could speak, he would have gladly accepted her visit, told his parents she was important to him, and to please welcome her. But he couldn't.

Nobody present would accept her here.

Yuzuru loved Kaya. Kaya loved Yuzuru, too.

But not many knew that about their relationship.

"Lady Kaya…"

Soshi's eyes reflected exhaustion, despair, sadness, and pity for Kaya.

As she stayed in place, he reiterated, "I don't resent you. You needed Yuzuru."

He was a rational man. Despite his grief, he knew he shouldn't attack this girl.

"…And I handed you my son."

The past could not be changed.

And the true cause of the tragedy was a natural disaster. Nobody could have done anything.

If one wanted to change the past, they would have to go back to Kaya and Yuzuru's meeting.

So, it was no use resenting it. He had to say it, for Kaya's sake, even if he did not want to.

"Soshi…"

Kaya's eyes were begging him not to kick her out, but he shook his head.

"Yuzuru always talked about you when he called. He seems to have found purpose in serving you."

"…I needed him more…"

"He seemed to see me as a rival because I used to be your Custodian, too… I thought it was cheeky of him, but it still made me happy. My son would work hard in what I was not able to. He would serve you. I was proud of him."

Soshi was already speaking of Yuzuru in the past tense.

He was trying to accept his son's death.

So he asked her:

"Lady Kaya, please. Let us spend his last moments as a family."

—Please go away, Goddess.

It was harsh, but this was right.

Kaya stood still, dumbfounded, and Shuri and Eisen had to pull her away.

Then her own father asked her:

"Kaya, can you go up the mountain today?"

Kaya could not answer.

Kaya, Shuri, and Eisen all remained quiet in the hospital lobby.

"…Eisen." Shuri broke the silence, her expression firm with determination. "I was supposed to go with her today, but…can you do it?"

"…I can, but…"

"Someone has to stay in the hospital. If someone has to talk with Yuzuru's parents, I think it should be me."

"The real hard work is staying here, you know…?"

"I know. But you're not a smooth talker."

"…I…"

"It's better if I speak with them."

"…"

Eisen pursed his lips. He knew he was a poor talker. He was better at giving orders, but Shuri was better at considering the needs of others. She should be the one to spend time with the bereaved family.

"Kaya… I won't force you to go to the mountain." Shuri grabbed her silent, still-crying daughter's hands. "I can't… Knowing what you're going through… I'm your mother. I could never…"

"…"

Kaya tried opening her mouth, but the words wouldn't come out.

"But let's get ready, just in case. Yuzuru got hurt. I know he did it out of the goodness of his heart, because he was always so kind to you." She caressed Kaya's hand. "But he also did it because he's your Custodian."

She prayed that the sin weighing on her daughter's shoulders would become a little bit lighter.

"He's such a hardworking boy. If he was awake right now, I'm sure he would say, *Lady Kaya, please bring morning*…"

Kaya's eyes finally focused on Shuri's face.

Shuri was also crying. She was a mother; she was worried sick for both her daughter and for Yuzuru. How could she not be? The tears choked her voice.

"Rest a little…then think about it. I'll respect whichever decision you make. If anyone tries to force you to go, I'll defend you."

They would never let her. The people of the Fugeki clan were already reuniting.

They were talking about the next Custodian, about how to fill the gaps while there was no one. The Honzan was already forming a party for it. Just as Yuzuru's father did once.

Despite her mother's kindness, Kaya would ultimately be forced to go onto the mountain. She was not allowed to rest.

"Eisen, you two go back to the mansion. You haven't washed the mud off. Get a warm bath and relax a little. You need some sleep."

"…Yeah. Let's go, Kaya."

"…"

Kaya could say nothing. She could only cling to Shuri and sob.

She wept and wept but could not ask for anybody.

She wanted to cry for her mother, but it didn't seem right in this particular moment.

Yuzuru.

Her Custodian hadn't seen his mother since he'd come here. And just as they were about to meet again, this had to happen.

And the reason was her.

He must have wanted to say hello to her, too—to be back home.

It's wrong.

Everything that had happened to Yuzuru was wrong.

The thought surfaced in her mind. Kaya knew she was just unwilling to accept reality, but the idea echoed incessantly in her head.

While her heart and body froze in silence, Eisen took her hand and walked to the car to take her back to the mansion. He was equally dirty with mud and blood.

"…We're home. C'mon, Kaya… Take your shoes off."

An unbearable pain and fatigue hit his whole body.

After finding Yuzuru unconscious and giving him first aid, Eisen had heard it would take a while for the rescue team to arrive, so he carried Yuzuru down. He hadn't trained for such a task, and his efforts to save the young man had taken all his strength. Now he finally had time to recover.

"Kaya, I need some rest first…before I get the bath ready…"

He sat her down on the living room couch, and he dropped to the floor, unable to move anymore. He let out a long sigh.

Eisen wasn't used to being awake during the night, and he hadn't gotten any sleep, thanks to keeping watch for the bear.

The situation had driven off that drowsiness, but now his body grew heavier with every moment.

He could not even think of what to say to his devastated daughter.

He considered leaving her alone, but when he saw her face, he couldn't bring himself to do that. They simply remained together in their grief. Just being her father didn't mean he was able to help her.

"…What is it?"

The moment he relaxed his muscles, his phone rang. He had gotten it back from Kaya and put it in his pocket. He rummaged for it with trembling hands.

The Honzan was calling.

Eisen clicked his tongue.

"Kaya, I'll pick up this call by the hallway. It might take a while. Go take a bath if you can. You could just take a shower, but I think you should take a bath."

He forced his screaming body to stand.

He could not let his daughter listen to an administrative call in the middle of her sadness and confusion.

"Also, I couldn't get all of your stuff, but what I found is in the car. I'll just leave your phone here… Charge it when you can. Your mother's ideas notwithstanding, you can't skip the ritual today."

"…"

"You have to do it, for Yuzuru's sake."

Then Eisen left the living room. Kaya gave no response, but he didn't mind.

He had much to do still; he had no time to rest.

He lacked the mental space to even consider that his daughter was considering suicide.

"…"

Kaya was alone now, unable to move.

One thought popped into her mind among the silence.

I should die, shouldn't I?

She could not fight the death wish building within her.

Maybe that's the only way I could atone.
If Yuzuru dies, I want to die, too.

She had never wished for her own death so strongly.

I wanted to die when I became the Archer, too.

But now she realized that what she'd really wanted was to run away.

She wanted to escape the suffering, but she could survive it when there was someone there to help her.

And someone had.

Kaya had relied on her Custodian. She relied on Soshi.

But this time was different.

If Yuzuru couldn't be saved, it didn't matter who supported her during the remainder of her life. Everything would be pointless. She knew it all too well.

So shouldn't I just die?

It wasn't until that moment that Kaya truly understood what it meant to consider taking her own life.

The phrase rising in her mind was not *I want to die*—it was *I should die, shouldn't I?*

I should die, shouldn't I?

Yuzuru's dying.

He's leaving this world.

I want to leave, too, then.

No. It would be unfair for me not to leave. Yeah. It's wrong. I should disappear.

Even if she didn't really want to die, she ought to.

It was her responsibility.

The wrongness of this thought was difficult to see while she was in the midst of thinking it.

"…"

Now she had more questions. How should she go about it? What way was the best?

After all, she was one of the Archers of Oracle—Yamato's only Day.

Her body was basically immortal so long as she was the Archer. Her veins, muscles, and organs all recovered after injury.

Throwing herself off a tall place would most likely not work. The inexhaustible life force within her would heal her.

She could probably even survive a shotgun shot to the head.

Hanging was out of the question. She would just suffocate endlessly.

No matter what she did, fate would wordlessly whisper to her in the end.

You must go on shooting the sky.

She could not escape the cruel reality of her existence.

"…"

Her eyes burned again, and the tears spilled like a waterfall.

The lament building in her throat finally escaped, but she strove not to let her father in the hallway hear her.

Yuzuru.

She wanted to see him.

Yuzuru.

She wanted to see him, even if Soshi said no.

Would she only get the chance after his death? No—who knew if they would even let her into the funeral? His family certainly wouldn't want her there. Even if they remained amicable on the surface, they wouldn't want the cause of his death to attend. Her parents would tell her she should just give them her condolences and leave, too. And as she laid out her predictions, nausea and vertigo hit her.

I'm already assuming he's dead.

Even though Yuzuru was still trying to live in the hospital.

Kaya clenched her fist and punched her knee. She was too weak to do much damage, but she still had to hurt herself.

Is there really nothing that can be done?

Moving him to a bigger hospital at this point was not realistic. He would die on the way.

Can't I use my body somehow?

Yuzuru himself said he wanted the same powers.

Could her accursed immortality not be put to use? She would rather use it for him, not to bring morning.

She would gladly hand it over to him, even if it killed her.

There is no other way.

Or was there?

"…"

Kaya clenched her fist again and punched her knee.

She had probably broken some blood vessels. But that would heal right away. Who cared?

No need to worry about a body that wouldn't let her follow Yuzuru to the next world.

"Kaya. You're still here?"

Eisen came back to the living room. He was done with the phone call. Seeing his daughter still in tears, he sighed yet again.

"This is grueling, isn't it…?"

That was all Eisen could say.

He looked away from her; he couldn't bear to see her.

His eyes turned to the view beyond the big glass door instead. It was still raining. The storm warning had been withdrawn already, but there was no sign of clear skies in sight. The ceiling of clouds wept as ceaselessly as Kaya. The room was dark, even in the middle of the day. Eisen couldn't stand it and turned on the lights.

"…The call was from the Honzan…," Eisen said, but Kaya didn't react.

Still, he kept on talking to slowly pull her back to her normal life.

"…It was just a notice. Since Lord Winter was already in the middle of manifesting the season, the landslide affected him, too…"

It was past three in the afternoon. She had to get ready to go up the mountain before too long.

"The manifestation doesn't happen right there, but they're delaying just in case. I agree with their decision. The current consensus seems to be that the rain today caused the slide because the earth was already waterlogged from autumn."

Right about now, the Archer of Twilight had to be going up Mount Ryugu.

"Who knows when another landslide might occur…? And it's best to avoid the mountain for a few days. At least until the rain stops. That's what I told them."

The Archers of Oracle had to bring morning and night every day.

"…Kaya."

Eisen looked at her again. He needed her to look at reality, if only a little, but her eyes were still set somewhere else.

"Kaya, tell me if there's anything I can do."

"…"

Kaya did not respond.

"Nothing?"

"…"

No response.

"…Okay. I'll get the bath ready. You can use yours upstairs, all right? I'll use the one here…"

Still no answer.

But she began to show some change, little by little.

"…Winter," she said quietly.

Eisen stopped in the middle of his way upstairs.

"Ah, you don't have to worry about snowfall on top of everything. They're holding off on Shiranui for now."

As he looked back at her, he found an entirely different emotion on her face.

Kaya was anxious. "No, Dad… Winter…! Where's the phone?!"

Kaya began moving all of a sudden. Eisen showed her his phone, but Kaya yelled, "No!" in distress.

"You want yours? It's right there. It's about to run out of battery."

"Th-the charger!"

Kaya leaped up from the couch and tripped. Eisen froze in shock; she'd hit herself so hard, she could've broken her kneecap, but she showed no interest in that. She was just looking around from the floor.

"Where's the charger?!!" Kaya screamed.

Eisen grabbed his bag from the floor and took it out. He plugged one end into the wall and handed Kaya the other one.

"Kaya, your knee's bleeding…"

"It's healing! I'm a monster, remember?!"

Kaya didn't turn to look at him as she unlocked her phone. She made a call.

The screen showed the name *Big Bro Kaguya*.

Kaya's only coworker was far away on the southern island.

She admired him. He worked hard for her sake. He was an adult she could trust, one of the biggest influences in her life.

"Please pick up. Please, please, please, please."

Her hand shook, and so did her voice.

Eisen stared at her, thinking his daughter had finally lost it.

"Please pick up, please, please, please."

Kaya prayed.

"Please, please, Big Bro… Pick up!"

She screamed in pain like a lunatic howling, until her prayers were heard.

"Kaya?"

His kind and quietly lonely voice reached her ears.

"Kaya…? Is something wrong? I'm going up the mountain…"

"Please help me, Big Bro."

Kaguya inhaled sharply at the distress in her voice. Kaya heard it.

"Yuzuru's dying. Please help him, Big Bro…"

"Wait, what?! What happened?!"

"Please help him…!"

"What can I do to help him?"

"I don't know, but I want to do something…*anything* for him!"

Kaya staked it all on this last thread of hope.

Spring was over; Summer had come; Autumn had passed; now Winter.

Kaya was taking action across the cycle of the seasons.

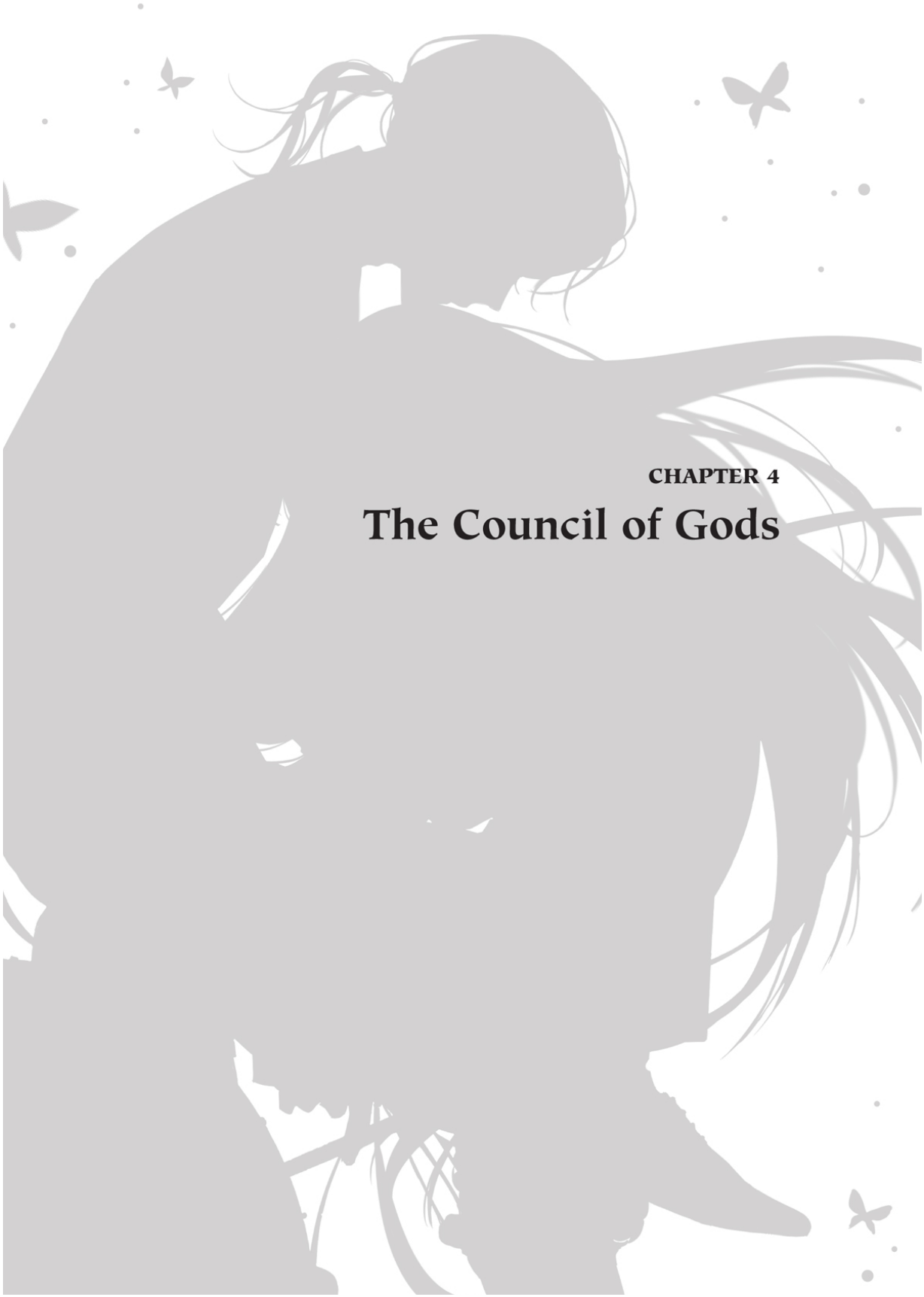
It was now time to use it.

“Could you put me in touch with Lord Winter?”

She did not care what scorn they might have for her.

“I want him to pay me back for the favor in summer.”

Honor and shame meant nothing if she could save him.



CHAPTER 4

The Council of Gods

November 8, Reimei 20. In Mount Ryugu, the sacred territory of the Archers of Oracle in the southernmost region of Yamato.

There, the god incarnate of night, Kaguya Fugeki, hiked up the mountain.

Sunset was in a few hours. The Archer had to reach the sacred area before it.

The hike was a sacred process no one was to interfere with, but soon before reaching the sacred area, Kaguya stopped to receive a phone call.

"Kaya?"

Kaguya's eyes widened as he held his phone to his ear. Beside him stood his young Custodian, Eken Fugeki. The boy was in much better health than he had been during the complications back in summer.

Eken silently asked Kaguya what was the matter, and he shrugged, equally as confused.

"Kaya…? Is something wrong? I'm going up the mountain…"

"Please help me, Big Bro."

Kaguya was once again taken aback by Kaya's voice. He had never heard her plead like this before.

She needs help?

She sounded like she was in some sort of inescapable situation.

Plus, it was unusual for her, a fellow Archer of Oracle, to call him in the middle of his hike. Not that she should never, but it wasn't

good manners. She knew that, and she was not one to break the rule lightly.

There had to be good reason for her to call when she knew how disrespectful it was.

"Yuzuru's dying. Please help him, Big Bro…"

The mystery behind the emergency call was solved in an instant.

Kaguya had met her Custodian through video calls.

"Wait, what?!" he said, thinking of the young man's face. "What happened?!"

Yuzuru Fugeki was a healthy young man. There was no expected reason for his life to be hanging on a thread. The distress in Kaya's voice quickly spread to him.

"Please help him…!"

I hope she's joking.

He couldn't believe this was real—until his mind cooled and pushed away that rude thought.

Kaya wouldn't joke about someone's death. So he asked a straightforward and sincere question: "What can I do to help him?"

Naturally, that was the first question that came to mind. Kaguya was bound to the earth, same as Kaya; as much as he cherished her, he could hardly travel to the other end of the country and directly intervene.

"I don't know, but I want to do something…! I want to do anything for him!"

The pain in her voice hurt him, too.

Kaya took a breath before hoarsely asking, "*Could you put me in touch with Lord Winter?*"

This wasn't the Kaya he knew. She would normally never talk so boldly to her coworker. There was determination in her voice.

"I want him to pay me back for the favor in summer."

If he said no, he wondered if she would survive it.

"K-Kaya… You mean…?"

There was too much to process; he tried putting things in order.

"When they got in touch with me through you to help Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame?"

Kaguya had experienced some major trouble himself back in summer. The events that took place on Mount Ryugu had shaken the whole society of the gods. The Dark Wolf had turned out to be his Custodian Eken, whose mind had broken after an attempt to protect Kaguya.

Meanwhile, after the terrorist incident in spring, the Agents of the Four Seasons had been dealing with attacks from within. This led to Kaguya meeting the Agents of Summer, and then the other seasons had come to save the sisters. In the end, they had shut down an attempt to kill the gods incarnate for their own benefit.

As part of that process, Winter had communicated with Kaya, whom they had never met before, in order to get in touch with Summer and Twilight. Thanks to that, the Four Seasons were able to reunite and fight together.

"Yes. I told you about the danger. I helped him and the other esteemed Agents of the Four Seasons a lot, didn't I?"

Kaguya learned the rest from the Agent and Guard of Winter later.

According to them, they were indeed indebted to her.

But should she be asking for payment now?

They were all gods incarnate. They should do favors out of the goodness of their heart. Kaguya, at the very least, did not like making demands.

"It did, but…what are you going to ask, exactly? I need to know before I choose to ask them."

Kaguya was stern.

Even if she was in a terrible situation, they had to be reasonable.

"Just give me his number. I'll do the talking. Please, it's for Yuzuru…!"

"You'll do the talking…? Wait, hold on. I want to know what's going on first. Why is Yuzuru dying? Is he sick?"

"…After we did the ritual today, there was a landslide while we were going down. Yuzuru protected me and got really hurt."

"…"

"He's in critical condition. His family's here, ready to see him for the last time."

This couldn't be worse.

Kaguya's jaw dropped; it was ten times worse than he had imagined.

Ryugu was still autumn-warm at the start of winter, yet Kaguya felt a sudden chill. His face was pale.

"Okay. This is a race against time…"

Kaguya glanced at Eken. His son-like Custodian looked confused. Kaguya was equally relieved and torn to see him in good health.

If he lost Eken again, he would lose his mind.

"So that's why you called me instead of the shrine or the Honzan?"

"Yes. I thought it would be faster."

What can be done now if his family is already here for his deathbed?

Kaguya put his uncertainty into words, "…I can get you in touch with Lord Winter, but what are you going to do?"

"I want him to reach Lady Autumn for me."

"Autumn…? Lady Nadeshiko?"

Kaguya had a bad feeling about this. He already knew what she was thinking.

"…Kaya…," he said reproachfully.

"…I don't know her name. But you told me what happened in summer. I know about her powers."

He couldn't bring himself to say it was taboo when she was so deep in despair.

"She can control life and death. I…I want to ask her to do it. I'll pay any price."

By then, Eken was leaning in to listen, and he had to slap a hand over his mouth before he yelped. Kaguya wanted to shout, too.

"…I can put you in touch, but it's going to be difficult."

"Why?"

"Lady Nadeshiko's powers are not omnipotent. From what I've heard, there are many restrictions and conditions to their use. And the Four Seasons Code forbids them from using their powers indiscreetly. I understand why… Unlike ours, theirs could turn the whole world on its head. If they break those rules, they'll be punished for it in some way."

"…"

"And most of all, even if you are an Archer, and he's a Custodian, it's not okay to ask her to heal someone she doesn't know at all. Think of the trouble you'd cause her."

Everything he said was absolutely right. Kaya should be aware of how unreasonable her request was.

"I know that."

Yet she could not give up.

"I want to do everything I can. Yuzuru is dying because he protected me."

"…He protected you?"

"He shielded me. Even though I didn't need it…he protected me."

"I don't know him very well… But even just from our phone conversations, I could tell how much he cares about you…"

"…He's a very good Custodian."

"I imagine."

"And I'm a terrible master."

"…That's not true."

*"I don't care if it makes me a horrible person. I don't care if the other gods think I have no shame. I don't care if they hate me… I don't even care if…*you *hate me."*

Kaya had nothing else to lose, did she?

"Please, Big Bro, get me in touch with Lord Winter. I want him to ask Autumn. I'll do anything to keep Yuzuru alive… Please. I'll do anything. Anything…"

"…"

Kaguya sat down on the ground. He wanted time to think, even though he knew they didn't have it. But this was not fine.

Why is there so much hardship this year?

Kaguya's difficulties had begun last year, in fact, but since the big clash took place this summer, this year had felt more tumultuous.

I can't just let him die.

Kaguya knew well how Kaya felt. He had experienced that longing for his ex-wife and Custodian to return in any shape or form.

"Kaya, give me a moment. I'll talk with my Custodian." Kaguya drew the phone away from his ear and called to his Custodian. "Eken. I want to know what you think. Yuzuru's in critical condition. Kaya wants Lady Autumn to see him and extend his life…"

"Mm-hmm."

Kaguya crouched down to meet his eyeline. "…I don't think it's right."

"…" Eken pursed his lips.

"Lady Nadeshiko has been getting pulled around because of her powers already. I heard the insurgents kidnapped her in spring because of them, too."

"…I think people shouldn't use divine powers carelessly."

"Right?"

"But she's not being forced, and it's just for saving people…"

"We're no different from the insurgents if we coerce her with that argument."

"…"

"And even mentioning it would upset her. We risk encouraging more people to ask for her help, and they might get angry if she says no. Having heard all that, what do you think?"

Kaya had to be overhearing this conversation. Even with the whistling of the wind, the rustling of the leaves, and the chirping of the birds on the mountain, but the sounds of nature were not enough to hide it. Indeed, Kaguya was consciously letting her listen.

I'm sorry, Kaya.

He wanted her to be truly aware of everything she was accepting as she made this request.

"Lady Nadeshiko is a very kind person… So she would be hurt if that happened… But…" After a pause, Eken pleaded, "Couldn't we at least ask her…for Lady Kaya's sake?"

"…"

"I know Lady Kaya's strong. She must be really, really upset to be calling you like this. I'm a Custodian. You're the one I care about the most, but she's an Archer, too. I want to protect her. Couldn't we…just make a call…?"

Eken's opinion was firmly formed.

"…I see. So that's how you feel."

Eken seemed to want to say something, but his expression changed again with Kaguya's following words: "Then that does it. To tell the truth… I want to do what I can for Kaya, too. But this could easily cause problems for Autumn, and for you, so I wanted to ask your opinion."

Eken was happy to hear his conclusion, but he seemed confused. "My opinion?"

"Yes."

"But why?" Eken raised his eyebrows innocently.

"What do you mean why?"

His Custodian was too trusting of his god.

"We share a lot in life," Kaguya warned. "My problems are your problems. You'll be an accomplice to this."

"…Accomplice?"

"…Yes. If I do something wrong, then both of us will bear the blame. We are basically one and the same. I'll be honest with you—we'll end up fighting the Fugeki higher-ups if we do this. I don't

mind. I'm already fighting the Honzan all the time. I can go up against them as many times as needed for Kaya's and Yuzuru's sakes. But you…"

"I don't mind."

"You should. It's going to affect your future. You know I'm going to d—"

Die before you, and I don't want to leave a mark on your record, he would have said, if Eken hadn't interrupted.

"I'd be glad to, actually."

He didn't want to hear the rest. Kaguya was quite a bit older than Eken, and they would have to say good-bye eventually. Most likely, Kaguya would leave Eken behind.

"…You shouldn't be, Eken."

The young Custodian did not want to hear about it. "No, I am. I'm glad to be one and the same."

"Listen…"

"My reputation's already shot anyway."

"…You— Well, um…"

He could hardly argue against that, after the Dark Wolf mystery.

"Lord Kaguya…" Eken showed him his characteristic affable smile. "I will follow your wishes. You just have to tell me to keep up with you."

"…Eken."

"Besides, personally, I want to help the Lady Archer of Dawn and Lord Yuzuru. If I was in her situation, I'd be doing the same."

He made a good point.

Although Eken had caused chaos as a wolf, it was always Kaguya at the center of his actions.

He lied because he feared Kaguya would break.

He became a wolf because he thought Kaguya had forsaken him.

He turned back into a human because Kaguya asked him to come back.

He always just does everything for me.

It was vexing at times, but that was why Kaguya knew he could trust his Custodian. Eken was always on his side. Kaguya wanted to rebuke him for it, but in the end, he was glad, too.

He's got me in his web.

Kaguya had to admit that this was why he loved Eken so much.

"You're a little idiot."

He smiled bashfully and tousled his Custodian's hair.

Eken raised his head questioningly and then grinned. "For you, I am."

"Sheesh."

Kaguya withdrew his hand, but Eken seemed to want it to stay. Kaguya obliged as he got back on the phone.

"All right. Kaya, we're done talking. We'll help. Let me call you back."

"…Really? But…we'll be bothering them."

Kaya's voice was hoarse from all the crying. She had lost a bit of her steam; listening to Kaguya and Eken's conversation must have helped her pull herself together. He could tell she was dejected.

"I can't guarantee that this will work. Just keep that in mind, okay?"

"Yeah…"

"But I'll do what I can. I don't want Yuzuru to die, either."

Right now, Kaguya was full of happiness, knowing he had Eken with him, but Kaya was in despair.

He wanted to do something for her, as her senior. He sincerely did.

"…Yeah. I'm sorry… I'm really sorry…"

"Don't worry about it. I'm glad that you asked for my help. For now, you should get some water and try to calm down. Even if we get in touch with Lady Autumn, I can't introduce you to her if you're falling apart."

"…Yeah."

"She's only seven. She acts mature, but think about how she would feel if a girl she didn't know had a breakdown in front of her."

"Yeah. Yeah… You're right."

"You need to pull yourself together before we can make the request. I know it's hard, but stay strong."

"*Yeah… I'm really sorry, Big Bro…*," she sobbed.

He felt a prickle in his chest. "Don't apologize. Just wait, okay, Kaya?" With that, he ended the call.

Kaguya and Eken stood up.

"Eken, do we have time?"

The young retainer checked his watch. "Yeah. We can stay here talking for another thirty minutes."

"Okay. We should have a signal up on the mountain, but we should make the call now."

The decision had been made, so it was time to act. Kaguya opened his contacts list.

"Are you calling Lord Winter?"

"No, I'll call Autumn directly. Lord Kantsubaki and Lord Kangetsu are in the middle of manifesting the season."

Kaguya chose Rindo Azami from his very short list.

Eken agreed. "Oh, of course… And Winter said the insurgents come after them the most… We shouldn't call them when they need to be on high alert."

"Exactly. At least not out of nowhere in the middle of the day. They could be working as we speak. Besides, Winter isn't the only one who owes her. It's everyone who wanted to get in touch with the Agents of Summer. No point beating around the bush."

"Good thing we have everyone's numbers."

"Yeah. Anyway, first we have to call her Guard…"

As they talked, Kaguya listened to the phone ring once, twice on the other end.

Will he pick up?

Then Kaguya heard a greeting.

"Ah, is this Lord Azami? It's Kaguya Fugeki, the Archer of Twilight. It's been a while since we talked."

The handsome retainer Rindo Azami was quite surprised by the call, but he listened. Kaguya heard a cute voice in the background, too—likely Nadeshiko Iwaizuki, the Agent of Autumn.

Rindo was surprised to hear what Kaguya was calling about, but once he'd heard the details, he consulted with his lady and asked to have a call with Kaya present.

About fifteen minutes later, in the sacred area of Mount Ryugu.

Kaguya and Eken sat on a picnic blanket in the middle of the autumnal trees, holding Eken's lightweight tablet.

The Guard of Autumn was quick to respond—he was getting used to dealing with trouble. He'd suggested a group call with Day, Night, and Autumn that same day, since Yuzuru didn't have time.

Thank the advancements of technology for this impromptu council of the gods.

"I bet the gods incarnate of the past would be shocked to learn they could speak to each other instantly across the country."

Kaguya chuckled at Eken's childlike imagination.

In each window of the call, they could see where the others were.

Kaguya and Eken, as stated above, were in the sacred zone. Kaya was still in her mansion. Autumn was in a car, on the move.

The hastily summoned Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki, was a little flustered.

"Um… Lord Kaguya, do you still have time before night?"

"Yes, no need to worry."

"Oh, good… Um, L-Lady Kaya… You have time before bringing day, don't you?"

"Yes, I do that late at night… I am so sorry to bother you out of the blue… My apologies to your Guard, too…"

"Oh, don't worry. We would be happy to help."

They'd made introductions and were finally getting to the point.

Kaguya, Kaya, and Nadeshiko took the lead in the conversation. Their Guard and their Custodian were on standby next to them. As for Kaya, Eisen was behind her, confused by what was going on.

"To cut to the chase…if you are asking whether I can heal your Lord Custodian, yes, I can."

Nadeshiko was speaking more quickly and clearly now.

"But I'm not omnipotent. There are conditions to Life Putrefaction. One of them is that I need to be next to him. I'm currently in Tsukushi, so I wouldn't be able to heal…erm, Lord Yuzuru, was it? I can't heal him from where I am."

She drew closer to her divinity once she began talking about her domain as a goddess.

Kaya and Kaguya both gulped as they listened to her.

"And I cannot cure illness. I could resurrect an ill person, but I wouldn't be able to heal the illness itself. So they would only end up suffering again…"

"Lady Iwaizuki, I believe Yuzuru is suffering from head trauma and blood loss. Would you be able to heal that?"

"In that case, yes. I cannot help with a chronic illness, but bleeding and concussions are the kind of injuries I can work on."

Kaya looked at her father, her face bright with hope. But then Nadeshiko went on apologetically.

"However, I use divinity in order to heal. I was able to resurrect Lady Ruri in spring because it was a very special situation. The mountain where she passed away had the right conditions."

"And by that you mean…?"

Nadeshiko held up one of her little maple-leaf hands and raised a finger with every condition she stated.

"First, the mountain leylines are very useful. I can borrow power from nature like I do for manifesting autumn, so there is no effect on me even if I use a lot of divinity."

"There are leylines in Mount Shiranui! Oh… But he's in the hospital now… What can we do?"

"Is the hospital far from the mountain?"

"No, Shiranui is right in the dale…"

Nadeshiko seemed slightly confused. She had quite a vocabulary for a seven-year-old, but she didn't seem to understand what *dale* meant. Kaya hastily explained.

"I mean it's surrounded by mountains."

"Oh!" Nadeshiko's face lit up in understanding.

"It's completely enclosed. The hospital isn't right next to Mount Shiranui, but you can see it from there."

"…Hmm, in that case…I could be able to reach the leylines even at that distance. I would have to go there to check, though… As for the second condition…even with the leylines, I would need more energy to do something close to resurrection. I absorbed energy from a lot of people when I resurrected Lady Ruri. They were all full of life."

They needed additional information regarding that.

Rindo, next to her, explained the events that had taken place in Ohme to Kaguya and Kaya.

The place was the hideout of the zealous reformist insurgent group New Year, where Rindo had led multiple people to rescue Nadeshiko after her kidnapping. People from the Summer and Autumn Branches' Security Department of the Maintenance Division, National Security, and its special forces "Porcupine" fought there.

Nadeshiko had absorbed energy from them and transformed it into power to resurrect Ruri. She used their life force.

Life Putrefaction embodied the essence of humus soil. Leaves that fell to the ground in autumn eventually became soil and nurtured life. Nadeshiko only had one real power: absorbing people's life force. Whether she used it for herself, for another person, or to transform and move it to another was up to her.

Kaguya frowned at hearing the explanation.

"That's one very special condition… You took the life force of hardy, combat-trained types, right? Would it be possible to gather enough people like that before you reach Enishi, if you were to come?"

"No, Big Bro. She just has to take mine," said Kaya.

Kaguya realized.

Both Archers of Oracle were forced to train by climbing the mountain every day. Nadeshiko had also heard of this back in summer; her eyes grew wide as well.

"Like what you mentioned when I tried healing Lady Ayame's husband, Mr. Renri?"

"Yes, exactly. The Archers' illness and injury heal immediately. Fatigue also gets cleared with a good night's sleep. Absorbing energy from the Archer might just be the most realistic choice. Our life force might as well be infinite."

"Which means we've met conditions one and two… Yes, if I can absorb from Lady Kaya, then that's for the best. You might lose consciousness for a while…but I would want you to stay by Lord Yuzuru's side during that time so he can acclimate. Even if I can heal him, he wouldn't be getting the blood he lost back. It's best for someone with the same wavelength to stay nearby and stabilize him."

Now Kaya asked a question.

"Lady Iwaizuki, what do you mean by wavelength…?"

"Umm… I don't have another perfect way to put it, but… Mmm… Let's say, you get along…? The souls of people who are good friends

resonate with each other, like magnets."

Perhaps the goddess incarnate who dealt with life and death was given to abstract descriptions. Either way, Kaya and Kaguya understood what she meant.

"Th-then I'm a good fit?"

"No one is closer than a god incarnate and their Custodian. His family might be able to do it, but considering how special your body is… I think it would be best for you to stay with him so he can receive your energy. There is a very special energy to you, after all. But I worry it will be hard on your body…"

Kaya covered her mouth. Yuzuru might really be saved.

Hope was within sight. She was overwhelmed with emotion.

"Then please, take it from me…! I don't care if it kills me!"

Eisen's eyes grew wide. "*Kaya!*" he barked. He couldn't bear to hear that.

"…Don't worry, Dad. I won't actually die. I can't. That's just how my body is."

Even so, Eisen grimaced.

Kaguya watched them talk in silence for a moment before he interjected. "…Let's wrap this up, then." His words cut through the darkness and helped everyone come to their senses again. "Okay, so Lady Nadeshiko's power does give us a possible way to save Yuzuru. However, we haven't heard your opinion. You've been talking as though you would go through with it, but are you able to go to Enishi? Wouldn't that be beyond your authority? I believe your Town would complain about it… Lord Azami, as her Guard, do you concur?"

There were still steps to take first.

"*It's no problem at all, Lord Kaguya*," Rindo answered promptly.

He looked at Nadeshiko, and they nodded at each other.

"In fact, we are currently on the way to the airport in Tsukushi."

"…Excuse me?"

Kaguya's jaw dropped. There was a bit of silence before Rindo repeated himself.

"I said we're on the way to the airport."

"The airport?"

"Yes."

"…You're already on the way?"

"Yes. My Autumn commanded it."

Rindo spoke proudly, even though his brow was creased with anxiety.

"I would have preferred to take the Agency's private jet to reach you directly…but it was already returned to Teishu after we finished using it. It's currently scheduled to go to Enishi for Winter, but if we wanted to hitch a ride, we'd have to wait for it to come back to Tsukushi first. So we'll take a regular plane. I asked our security team to book our flight. Please let me put you on hold for a moment. I'll check if they got the tickets."

"Um, yes… Uh, thank you. That's great to hear…"

Kaguya had gone from being the calm one to being the most confused. Kaya's jaw was also on the floor.

They take action too quickly.

Being a god bound to one place, Kaguya was shocked by Nadeshiko's initiative.

Such was the capability of nomad gods. This call had occurred shortly after the first, which meant they must have gotten in the car as soon as Kaguya made contact.

They hadn't been going anywhere when they received the first call—they moved in the interim.

Nadeshiko, who had allegedly commanded her much older retainer to arrange this flight, was left alone on-screen, nervous. She had turned back from goddess to a shy seven-year-old girl.

After a moment, she bashfully said, "*Rindo told me what you asked for… I told him that we should go to Enishi right now.*"

"So right after I called you? And he agreed?"

"Mm-hmm. We've already finished autumn, so we have nothing to do. Rindo… He always respects what I do… He wasn't sure at first, but I asked until he agreed."

Kaguya pictured his reaction easily. He would first worry about Nadeshiko's safety, but given the responsible man he was and the debt he owed them for the events in summer, he found his resolve right away.

After asking Nadeshiko what to do, Rindo would have once again hesitated after she was so quick to say yes. Then he had succumbed to a barrage of *please*s, and that took them to where they were now.

I'm sorry, Lord Azami.

Kaguya felt bad for Nadeshiko, too, but Rindo had the harder job of protecting a child on their way to Enishi. He silently apologized to the man on the screen and hoped Rindo could somehow hear it.

"Lady Iwaizuki, Lord Azami, thank you so much…"

Kaya bowed to the screen again and again. Yuzuru's condition was worsening with every minute. The sooner they arrived, the better chances he had.

"I know I set this up, but…are you sure?" Kaguya asked.

Nadeshiko nodded. *"Of course."* Her cheeks turned rosy. *"Please, let me help."*

She seemed to feel responsibility for this rescue operation.

She clenched her tiny fists and continued.

"Lady Kaya helped us find Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame… I was so worried… I couldn't thank you enough for that… And Rindo thinks the same."

The young goddess's virtue was blinding.

"*But, Lady Iwaizuki…*," Kaya said awkwardly. She clearly felt bad, too. *"I didn't really do anything big… I said I wanted you to return the favor… But it was disrespectful of me to ask this…"*

"How come?"

"…I've never met you, and I'm asking you to come all the way to Enishi to heal my Custodian. It's not an equal exchange… It's rude to ask of Lady Autumn, to begin with… I knew I would be troubling you when I asked…"

Nadeshiko cocked her head. She looked worried, even.

"But you made that call even though you had never met us, right…?"

She did as kids were prone to do; ask why, why, why.

"But…"

"Lord Rosei and Lord Itecho were very happy that you did, too…"

"No, but I mean… It was just a call. And my Big Bro was involved, so…"

"It's the same. I'm just going to Enishi, that's all."

"B-but Enishi's far away from Tsukushi."

"I'm used to flying on planes. And I just went to Enishi to bring autumn recently. I even visited Shiranui."

"…But don't the insurgents come after you…?"

"I have Rindo with me. He'll protect me."

"…"

Kaya still wanted Nadeshiko to come, but she couldn't get rid of the feeling of guilt.

Nadeshiko's little frown deepened into a pout.

"What's there to feel bad about? You bring the morning to me and everyone in Yamato every day…"

"Huh…?"

That caught Kaya by surprise.

"I'm almost eight, but I'm still seven. Which means…I've received morning every day for seven years…right? I don't know how long you've been doing this job, but I know Lord Kaguya has given me all the nights in my life. I owe you that much."

Kaguya felt warmth in his chest as he listened in silence.

"I have no reason to say no to either of you."

They never expected someone to think that way of their work.

"I'm paying you back for the days and nights you've given me."

Nadeshiko didn't take the cycle of day and night for granted like the common folk did.

"I owe the Archers of Oracle for every day of my life. It's a huge debt."

There were people out there who appreciated their ceaseless work 365 days a year.

I'd forgotten. She was always like this.

Kaguya remembered his meeting with Nadeshiko. Back then, she said:

"Lord Archer of Twilight, thank you for bringing night every day."

How could he forget?

"I'm going to Enishi. I want to make it in time."

As Kaya teared up again, Nadeshiko started to panic a little.

Then Rindo returned to the screen.

"Thank you for waiting. We've locked in the shortest route there. There are no more direct flights from Tsukushi to Enishi, so we'll make a connection through Teishu. The arrival time is just past eleven PM. We have to drive to Shiranui from there, which would mean we would get there at around two AM tomorrow."

Kaya was plunged back into despair.

That was right around the time when she had to leave for Mount Shiranui for her divine duties.

Sunrise was coming quite late now compared to early summer.

She had to wait for Autumn to arrive, make them open the hospital, and go into Yuzuru's room for her to use Life Putrefaction, and then Kaya still had to stay with Yuzuru for observation—there was no way she would reach the sacred area to shoot the sky in time.

Kaya wanted to save Yuzuru, but she had to be in the hospital to do so.

"I can't…do my job…"

Kaya turned white. She looked at Eisen for help, but he bit his lip. As she fell silent, he said: *"The clan's people are coming from the Honzan. They should be here today. I don't think they'll let you abandon your duties to heal your Custodian…"*

To that, Nadeshiko replied:

"*We would be in the hospital until Lady Kaya returns…*," said Nadeshiko, "*but would Yuzuru …?*"

"The doctor said…he might be gone today or tomorrow… We might not make it even if we dash there after her duty. She could be there at eight thirty by the earliest."

"…I could still resurrect him if we get there quickly, but…"

There was still a possibility she couldn't make it in time.

Kaya looked at her father and the gods on the screen with distress.

It was meaningless. No one had a solution.

But even a goddess wanted help. She wanted to be saved.

Knowing nothing could be done, Kaya started crying again.

"Dad… Do I really have to…?"

Her responsibility, weighed against the life of her beloved.

"Even though we could save Yuzuru… I have to…?"

There was no way out.

Eisen's tough act crumbled then, and a tear ran down his cheek.

"I want to save him, too, but…"

His voice was full of sadness and affliction. Some fathers could be cold, but not him.

Eisen had gone with them to the mountain last night because he cared about both Kaya and Yuzuru. He'd carried Yuzuru down the mountain and delivered him to the rescue team. He'd stayed by his anguished daughter's side.

But he had a responsibility as the father of a goddess.

Partly because of his rational nature, and because he was not an irresponsible man, he couldn't just say the ritual be damned. He couldn't prioritize love like Shuri did, because he knew what could happen to his family if he did. Eisen was a realist.

No one spoke. No one could bring themselves to tell Kaya the awful truth.

Kaguya's heart was pounding.

This is too harsh on both of them.

As a god incarnate himself with a Custodian he loved like a son, he could not argue against either of them. He would want to save the human he loved most.

But as a mature adult, he knew he ought to fulfill the duty entrusted to him by the God of Night that his clan had maintained across the generations.

Why do we have to suffer like this?

He knew what she was going through. Back when he lost his wife and Custodian, he had kept on shooting the sky even through the tears.

"Lord Kaguya…"

Next to him, Eken tugged on his sleeve.

It was nearing time for night. Perhaps he wanted to remind Kaguya of that.

"Wait, Eken. I'm thinking… I want to do something…"

Kaguya would lose consciousness once he shot. He wanted to find anything he could do before then.

Still, Eken insisted. "But Lord Kaguya—"

"Give me a second," Kaguya said firmly.

Eken flinched slightly, but he persisted in shaking Kaguya's arm.

"Eken…"

"No, I'm not saying we have to go! We still have time. It's just… you want a plan, right? You want to do something about this?"

The young Custodian, who had dutifully held his tongue, asked for permission to talk.

Everyone else blinked. Honestly, no one expected him to have any kind of solution. He was just present and listening due to his job. If you wanted to put it unkindly, he was not concerned with this, nor did he have the wisdom to flip the situation on its head.

"I think you can do something."

They didn't think little of him, but he was very young.

He didn't seem to be particularly special, either. Perhaps the only one who applauded his imagination was Yuzuru, who had taken inspiration from him.

"I've been working it out in my head, and I think we can do it."

When Kaguya's ex-wife had gotten in an accident, Eken had hidden it and created an illusory replacement with Divine Cloak. Yuzuru had admitted that he wouldn't have come up with that, since he would probably keep his calm, but this was a bit different.

Eken wasn't the most coolheaded, but that had nothing to do with his creativity.

One could say that calm and focus were necessary to use Divine Cloak and its psychological abilities.

But what was needed the most was a childlike, innocent mentality.

Eken took things at face value. He was truly simple and naive, perhaps even more so than other kids his age.

His thought process was not fortified with maturity or common sense—his imagination was free like the sky.

If you handed him a blank page, he could cover it with the stories and fantasies growing in his mind, no matter how removed from reality they were.

If he drew a giant wolf that attacked people, if he was told it was impossible, Eken would tilt his head and ask:

"What's so wrong about a giant wolf?"

"Don't bring your common sense to my fantasies."

Breaking the rules came naturally to creatives. Imagination needed no rules.

This would be nice. This would be great.

Others could find fault with these ideas, but a creative mind would not stop, nor could it.

After all, thinking outside the box was effective. Inspiring, at times.

Why would they say it's wrong?

Eken had such a mind, although Yuzuru did not.

An unfettered imagination made the impossible a reality, and Eken's creativity had shocked Yuzuru.

Yuzuru had been forced to recognize his own limitations; he never would have had the ideas Eken had.

"I have an idea…"

And most importantly, Divine Cloak was for the sake of the god. His love for his god was manifest in his skill with the ability.

Eken had become capable of doing anything Kaguya wished for.

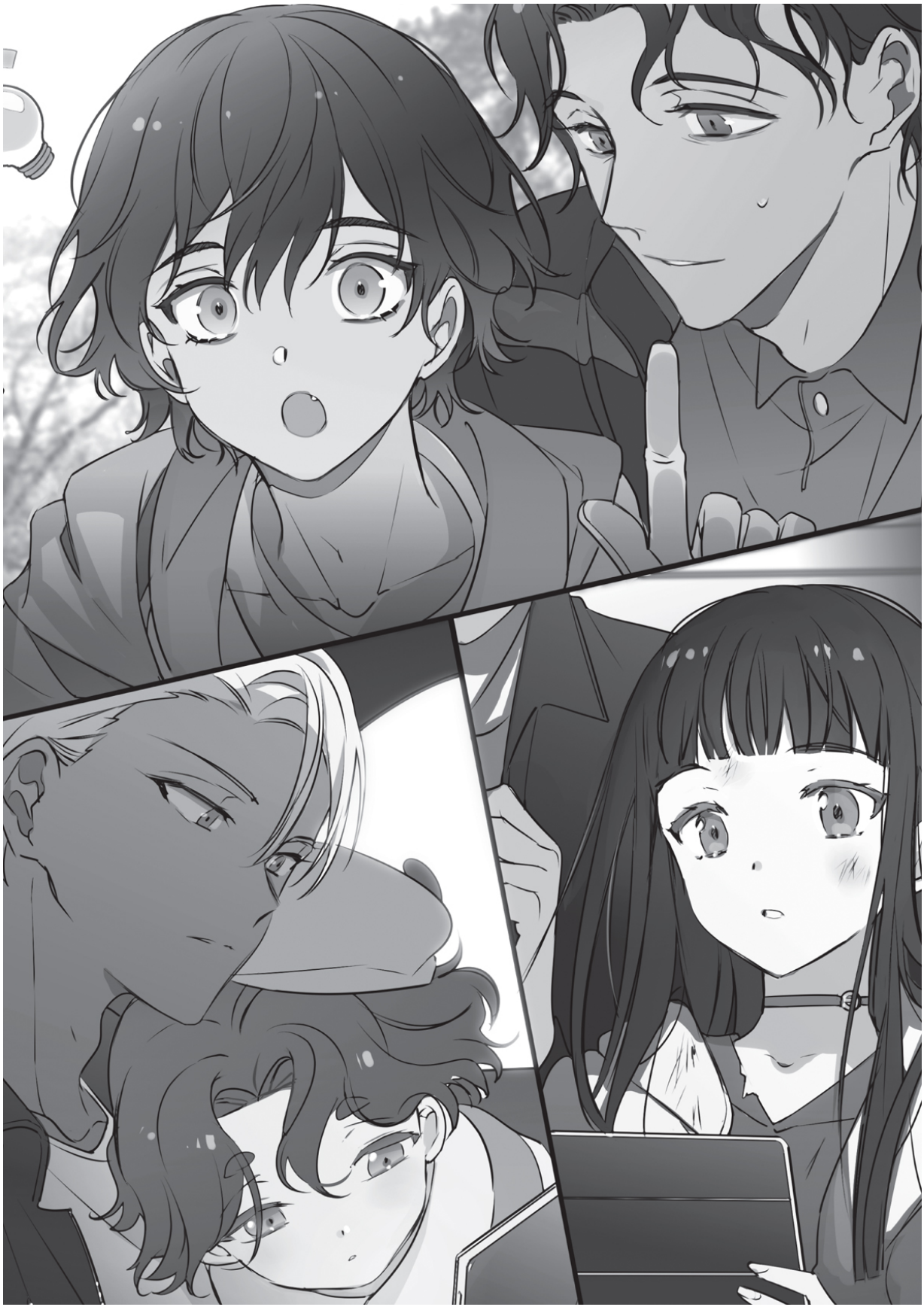
Even back when he'd applied to be a Custodian, he had lied about his age so that he could help his parents.

Now Kaguya was like his father. Eken would not hesitate to dedicate himself so nobody would forsake him again.

Children sometimes showed a twisted, blind sort of love for their parents.

"Why don't you go there?"

And so he was able to make a wild proposal—that Kaguya go to Enishi instead. After all, his master—his father—said he wanted to help Kaya.



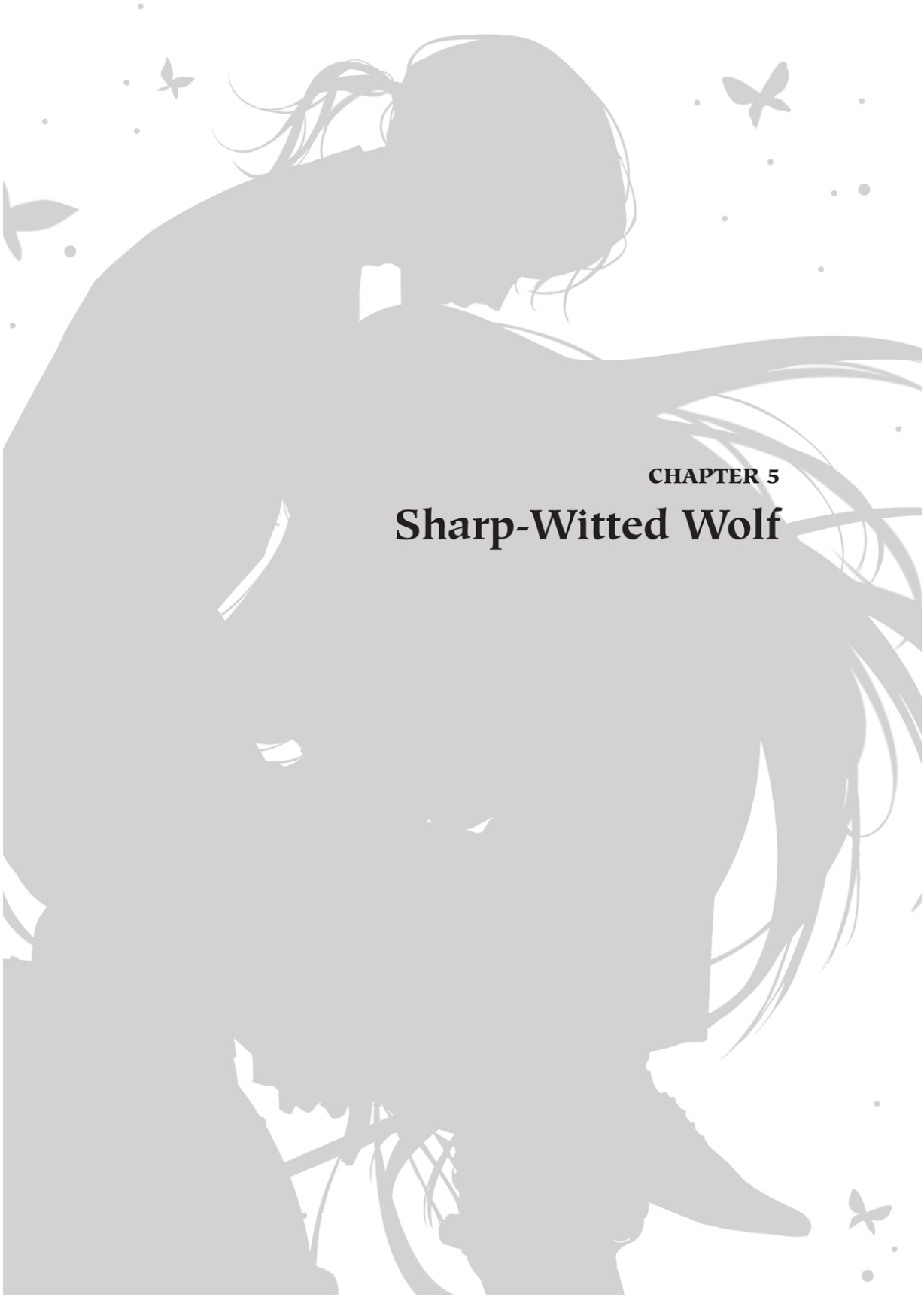


Eken loved his god, and he was always considering how to protect him, and he wouldn’t stop even if someone told him those thoughts were problematic.

After all, he was good at it. Those thoughts fulfilled Kaguya’s wishes.

“We have enough time, right?”

It took everyone some time to realize that they had been given a revelation.



CHAPTER 5

Sharp-Witted Wolf

In Enishi, Kaya listened in shock to the Custodian explain in Ryugu.

"It's, er…about four PM right now, right? You should be doing the ritual at five, but we could move it up to now, couldn't we? You black out for around thirty minutes, so we could get moving by five. No, we could save even more time if I carry you down. We normally take it easy and do two hours, but we could be down in one and a half if we hurry. So it would be six thirty by then. I know the rough flight schedule between Ryugu and Teishu from when I sneaked back to Ryugu. I actually just looked them up; let me pull it up again… Look! There's one at nine. I'll call a taxi to the foot of the mountain while you're down, we'll run there, and we can make the nine PM flight. There's still open seats. And worst-case scenario, I can sneak us in with my powers… The weight of two people won't throw anything off, right?"

Kaguya, next to him, looked even more shocked.

"Then we'd get to the Teishu airport by around eleven. No more flights until the next day, but Lord Azami just said that the Agency's private jet is there for Winter. Which means we can use it. Which also means that if we say it's an emergency request, there should be someone there to pick us up. I know it's a bold ask, but we can get them to do it, can't we? They're taking it to Enishi soon anyway. It shouldn't be a problem to make that a bit sooner than planned… should it? Maybe we could even ask Lord Winter if we can take it out of Teishu… Then we can go to Enishi. Guessing from the times for

commercial flights, it would take about three hours. As for the trip from the airport to Shiranui, I looked it up while you were talking, and that should be about two and a half hours. Let's take a taxi. Even late at night, we should be able to get a car. It would be expensive, but there's a life on the line here, and you're rich."

Eken kept talking while looking at his phone, oblivious to everyone's baffled stares.

"That way, we would be there at…about five in the morning? I don't know where Mount Shiranui's sacred area is…but if there's been a landslide, why not shoot from the foot of the mountain?"

He was so focused on explaining his strategy that he couldn't even look at anyone else.

"Enishi's sunrise is at five in this season, so there should be no problem. Lord Kaguya said that he could shoot from the foot of the mountain if he could get in touch with the leylines. He should black out for longer than usual without the sacred area's power, but I'll guard you and take you back in a taxi, so let's just do it there."

He was just an innocent child sharing the plan he thought up, but it was almost eerie.

"So we go back from Shiranui to the Enishi airport, and the way back is super easy. There's flights for Ryugu before noon, or we could take another with a layover. We'd have to do the ritual again when we're back, but I can carry you. And if we can't reach the spot

by the set time, then let's just get there when we can and shoot. Then I just have to carry you down again. See? We can make it."

Even if no one else was, Eken was still brimming with hope.

I think he's saying some wild stuff, but I don't get it.

Kaya, still in the trenches of despair, was confused by his plan.

She knew nothing about flight schedules in Ryugu or Teishu, nor about the manifestation journey of the Agents of the Four Seasons. She had gained her divine powers at a young age and only knew Enishi. She had never even taken a plane.

What was clear to her was that Eken was thinking seriously of a way to solve her situation.

However, since the entire explanation began from the unthinkable suggestion of ignoring the set time to shoot the sky, nothing that followed reached her. She had already stopped thinking.

Could they really do that?

Autumn's jaw was on the floor, too. Kaguya could not speak.

Eken was the only one who seemed to see nothing wrong with his plan.

"See, Lord Kaguya? That way, we can make your wish come true."

There were plenty of issues, but getting to the crux of it, Eken was simply doing his job as Custodian. His primary task was to get rid of whatever troubled his master. After all, the Archers brought day and night with their hearts, and right now Kaya's predicament was weighing on Kaguya's heart. If Yuzuru was saved, Kaya's burden would be lifted, and so would Kaguya's. It was a simple formula.

So Eken thought carefully while listening to everyone speak.

Solving the end issue came first, so he ignored any risk or rules in his calculations. He didn't stop to think about the problems with every step of the plan. The only thing that mattered was making his lord's wish come true.

Despite all the ethical holes in his idea, he was smiling.

That solves everything! Aren't I amazing?

Eken could sometimes be taken over by a blind and twisted love for his lord.

Everyone listening to him understood how he had become the wolf who had caused so much chaos back in summer.

What will Big Bro say? Kaya focused on Kaguya.

"Eken, you…"

Kaguya seemed a little frightened by the boy he had raised.

Eken had already demonstrated the lengths he would go to, but Kaguya often forgot what he could be like; the boy was so puppylike most of the time.

"Is it wrong, Lord Kaguya?"

He had become the wolf in summer.

"No, it's not that it's wrong, it's just…"

Love had turned him human again. Eken was no puppy. He was a wolf on a leash. But that didn't make the way he cocked his head any less adorable.

"Can't we ask Lord Winter…? From what Lord Azami said, Winter should have control of the private jet now. Whether they can let us take it will make or break this plan. Ah, but… Either way, you have to shoot the sky right now. I'll handle the negotiations. I hope I can — No. I'll do it."

"No, no, no, wait. You're acting like this is all pinned down, but I can't keep up."

"Oh, okay. I'll explain it again."

"No, I just mean…are you serious? Ignoring the time would mean breaking the rules."

Eken seemed wounded.

"But you said you wanted to help Lady Kaya…"

He was being rebuked for his efforts to help Kaguya. He was hurt.

All his thoughts surfaced on his face.

"Even so, you're breaking too many rules. And stowing away on a plane isn't something you just do casually!"

Kaguya faltered a bit at Eken's reaction, but he stood his ground.

"I—I just… I was locked up in the hospital… I barely managed to escape. And then the Fugeki clan went after me, and I thought they would kill me if they caught me… And I couldn't access my money… There was nothing else I could do to get to you…"

"Eken, you… You…"

How could one rebuke that argument?

Kaguya Fugeki, for one, could never.

After searching for words, he ended up swallowing them down.

"I shouldn't be scolding you for that. It was my responsibility…"

For now, he decided to accept Eken and his actions.

The boy was an innocent wolf, even if he didn't follow the rules of common sense.

"Okay, no more scolding… I know you just created this plan for my sake…"

"Yes… Are you mad? Because I'm butting in?"

"No. That's not the problem."

"The stowing away…?"

"That's wrong, too, but the problem is how you never stopped to consider any rule… I suppose…it's partly my fault you turned out this way… I'll try to teach you good morals and discipline moving forward…"

"Do you hate me now…?"

"No. I wouldn't… I would never… You can be sure of that."

For good or bad, it was the behavior of the adults around him that had made Eken who he was now.

He'd just offered a plan for the shortest route to fulfill Kaguya's wishes. And he wasn't pushing all the work on somebody else, either. Kaguya would have to shoot the sky and black out twice in a day, but Eken would be carrying him around and caring for him.

Criticizing him for that was unfair, even cruel.

Eken remained sad in his corner of the screen as Kaya asked Kaguya: "…Umm, Big Bro… I'd like to ask, just to know… I know keeping the schedule is important, but before that… Can the Archers of Oracle really switch posts?"

"……Yes." Kaguya replied reluctantly.

This was a shocking revelation to Rindo and Nadeshiko, too.

"I've already shot the sky in the north and the south. The myths say so, too. The gods gave our ancestors the Bows of Light and Dark… Not the Bow of Light and the Bow of Dark. Things only are the way they are now because of history. We're not like the Agents of the Four Seasons who each control their own domain. Although I've heard from one of the older higher-ups that the Seasons' powers were not divided in the beginning, either."

Eken nodded, too. Living with the oldest god incarnate had allowed him to learn some things.

"As for keeping the schedule… We can technically shift it, depending on the circumstances. For example, when there was no spring in Yamato, I kept shooting on winter time. It was inevitable, since sunset and sunrise are linked to the season. There's an invisible Canopy above us, and by slashing through it, the next one appears. But if we don't, the current Canopy stays, and no light or dark comes. We don't really cooperate to break the sky… We just have the same blessing of the gods while doing the job individually. Do you understand?"

"I…think I do…"

Kaguya seemed to have calmed down during his own explanation. He grabbed his chin with a frown.

"Eken's plan is reckless, but we could consider it. The problem is that I've only heard of Archers changing posts overseas… Technically, it should be possible…"

"Overseas…"

Suddenly, the scope of this had increased.

"I've heard of two cases. Only after airplanes were invented, obviously."

"Since they did a day trip?"

Other countries were absolutely beyond Kaya's reach. Given the new hope of saving Yuzuru, she leaned in with interest.

"Actually, I've only heard about it happening over multiple days. The Archer of Twilight's dream was unclear, and they died before finding the next one. It was a small island, so the Archer of Dawn would travel every few days to cover for their absence."

The Archers of Oracle were only human proxies for the gods, not omnipotent.

With that in mind, it was understandable that something like this might have happened somewhere in history.

"Also, up north and down south, the white nights and polar nights can continue for a month. The Archers there can go see each other and mingle… Sometimes, they shoot in the other's location."

The white night was a phenomenon where the sky remained dimly lit even after sunset.

Polar night was the opposite, when the day was dark. There was no absolute day or night.

"Apparently, the Canopy's instability means sometimes it turns a little brighter or a little darker, but they mostly don't interfere with it. And that's been going on since forever."

"Really…?"

Kaya was reminded of how little she knew about the Archers. Kaguya Fugeki was so much more knowledgeable than she was.

"Yeah, Ms. Tsukihi told me that the Lord Archers in other countries are pretty lax."

"It's not that they're lax, Eken…"

Kaya didn't recognize the name Tsukihi, but she assumed it belonged to a trustworthy friend. She decided not to pry into it and listened.

"She says Yamato is very strict. We're obsessed with accuracy. Like, you know how we stay to watch the sky for a while even after you wake up? Apparently, that's pretty remarkable."

"I'm just a worrywart, not remarkable. Going home after finishing the ritual is normal. Otherwise, what's the point of all the observatories? …Ah… Erm, going back on topic… Whether Eken's plan is feasible or not, it would be just barely possible if we try very hard, I think… The problem is Winter."

Rindo finally interjected. *"If you'd like, I could get in touch with Winter. Depending on how things turn out…getting Spring's help could make this a surer bet. I can't reveal any details, but lady and retainer of Spring are under the protection of someone capable, and it might be worth asking for their help. Do you agree with the plan, Lady Kaya? I can get things moving right away if you do."*

"Lord Azami…"

Her broken hope was piecing together once again.

Kaya looked at Kaguya. He looked worried, but he still smiled.

"How about we give it a shot, Kaya?"

His reply was simple, but it overflowed with love and solace.

"But you might be in so much trouble…"

Kaya's lips trembled. Her reckless struggles were coming together, thanks to the pure kindness and goodness of each of these people.

"No, no, it's worse for you. Eken and I can try all we can, but we can't be sure that we'll get results… There's the airplane problem, for starters. Worst-case scenario, they'll carry you to the foot of the mountain and force you up to shoot the sky."

"Yeah…"

"And then you go back to the hospital for Yuzuru. Then go back at night to shoot. It sounds like there's a chance, but who knows

how Yuzuru would hold up, and who knows what would happen to you?"

Kaya simply nodded. She knew he wasn't being mean by pointing out the risks. He was trying to make her really aware of the gamble they were taking and make the best choice, as his accomplice.

After all, he would be the one who broke the rules first.

"Not to mention the inevitable Honzan interrogation. All the grown-ups are going to gang up on you. If I don't make it, I'll stand up to defend you… But you'll be treated like the villain, even though you just wanted to protect someone you care about. Kaya…would you still do all that for Yuzuru?"

The person who should have been admonishing her set that obligation aside and asked her if she was truly prepared for what she was about to do. If she was still on the fence, she shouldn't do it at all.

"…Yes."

Kaya's answer had the resolve Kaguya looked for.

"I'll do anything… Please, everyone, help me…"

She had only one choice from the very beginning.

"…Okay. Then I'll do it, too. It would be cowardly of me to stay back here in safety, actually. I can't ask Agents of the Four Seasons to break the rules while I'm standing back and watching."

Rindo chuckled. *"You don't have to worry about that."*

"…Kaya," Eisen said.

She turned to look at him.

"You should go back to the hospital right now."

Kaya blinked in surprise. That wasn't a suggestion.

Yet there was no roughness in his instruction. She could tell he was doing what he thought was right.

He no longer felt powerless like Kaya did. He grabbed his daughter's shoulder.

"The Honzan should be here any minute. I'll trick them."

Eisen Fugeki was no god.

"Trick them? Dad…"

He was not a divine servant. He was just a man. A regular person, the kind you would find anywhere. And he was a father.

It called for tremendous courage for him to do this, but he seemed determined.

"I'll tell them you're so hurt, you cried yourself to sleep. I'll ask them to leave you alone until it's time to go up Mount Shiranui. I'm not the best actor, but I should be able to pull that off, at least. The people from the Honzan are only coming here on orders from above, like Soshi once was. They wouldn't kick down an Archer's door Custodian to interrogate her."

He tried telling her what ought to be done, as he did back then.

"Listen—you sneak behind the guards and walk outside. Watch out for the rain and call a taxi once you're out on the road. Get your mom and Soshi and tell them everything."

There was no time for *buts*.

"Soshi… I'm sure he wouldn't push you away once he hears you got help from the Archer of Twilight and the Agents. You can persuade him. It'll be okay. But I don't know about his family. Don't ask anyone else for help—just him. Tell him to welcome Autumn to the hospital and get them into his room. And you hide somewhere until night. Don't let anyone force you to do the ritual. Save Yuzuru."

"…Okay."

"We're dragging other gods into this. You cannot fail, Kaya."

Kaya repeated what she had to do, like she did back then. "…Go back to the hospital. Talk to Mom and Soshi. Make sure Autumn meets Yuzuru, no matter what."

There was no sorrow in her eyes, only strong determination.

"I won't get caught."

The girl trapped by unescapable fate decided she would fight it today, and she would not fail.

"I'll save Yuzuru."

This was much better than trying to follow him to the other world.

"Then let's put it in action. Keep your phones handy so we can get in touch at any time. Call if any problem comes up. Good luck."

Kaguya gave final directions, and the three-way call between Day, Night, and Autumn came to a close.

A few minutes later, the Archer of Twilight fired his arrow.

Every day, people watched the changes in the sky from observatories all around the world. The one in Ryugu was no different.

Night was coming earlier than usual. By the time the members of the observatory noticed and debated it, Eken was already on his wobbly way down the mountain with Kaguya on his back.

Most regular people did not notice the early sunset.

Few people in the busy modern world even looked up.

They all accepted without a doubt that another night had come. That it was only natural.

For they each had their own lives to live.

A newborn baby ate and slept today.

A child just starting school went to class and came back home, even without any friends.

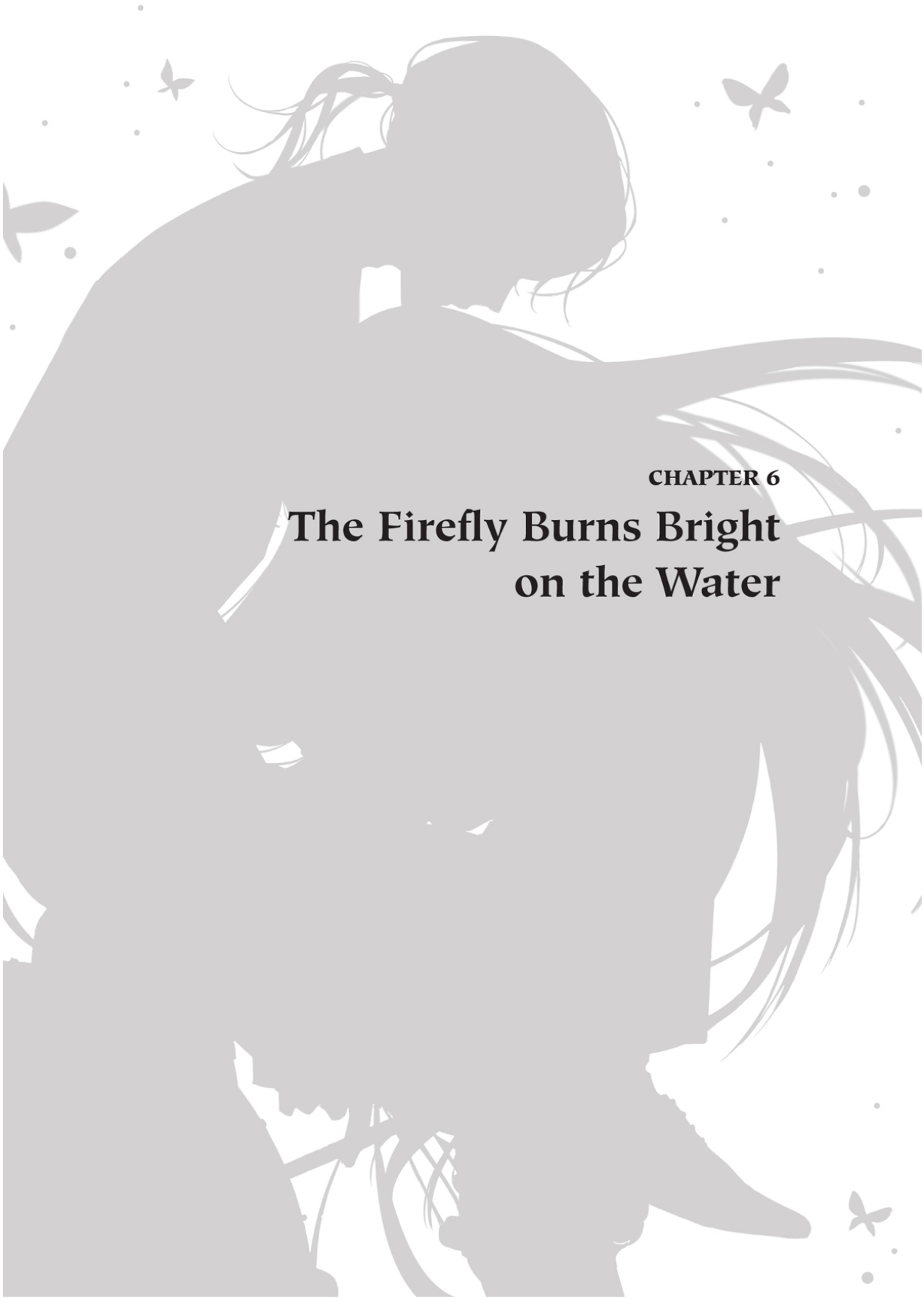
An employee worked from dawn to dusk, unable to see anything beyond the work at hand.

A waiter who forgot to hand out the change hurried outside, and it was only then that they noticed it was already night.

People lived out their own lives as best they could.

And in Enishi, the Goddess of Day ran under the rain toward the hospital.

Tears ran down her cheeks at the sight of the color of the sky.



CHAPTER 6

The Firefly Burns Bright on the Water

It was past five in the afternoon when Kaya arrived back at the hospital dripping wet.

She hadn't used an umbrella, to make sure she didn't draw attention from the guards.

Halfway there, she realized she should've brought a compact one for later on, but the only things on her were her phone and the bills and credit card her father had given her in case of emergency.

She apologized to the taxi driver for getting the seat wet as she anxiously climbed into the car.

She had lived under supervision for so long already—simply taking a taxi all by herself was a huge deal. Her voice trembled as she told the driver where to go.

A nervous young girl in ragged hiking clothes heading to the hospital—the driver guessed something serious had happened and drove the whole way there in silence.

Kaya stared at the view outside the window for a while before choosing to close her eyes during the short trip. She hadn't rested since finishing the ritual.

She had to calm herself down so she could logically explain the situation and her wishes to Soshi.

But closing her eyes in silence only brought painful memories to mind.

The dreadful sight of the blood on his head.

His limp hands.

The realization of how heavy an unconscious person was.

The blood dripping from his half-open mouth, the way he didn't answer when she called his name.

It tormented her.

If only she could switch places with him.

If only Yuzuru had never been her Custodian at all.

The flashbacks made her dizzy and sick. There was nothing left in her stomach except the acid rising to her throat.

Her brain shut off the memories in self-defense.

Even if the only thing on her mind was Yuzuru, remembering his injuries only wore her down.

Think about something else.

She had found a ray of hope. Better not let her thoughts wander into negativity.

Think of happy things.

The first thing that came to mind was yesterday's pancakes.

A recent happy memory.

They were so good.

It was the symbol of the simple life she wanted back.

Yuzuru's pancakes were perfect, so pretty, you could sell them at a shop.

Meanwhile, Kaya's looked like potholes. Not that she was an awful cook, but she wasn't the best at flipping them.

Kaya remembered moaning at how Yuzuru could make them so perfect, and the way he had chuckled.

"Yours are…avant-garde, I would say."

"They're shit; just call them that."

"There is room for improvement. Keep practicing."

"I don't really have much opportunity to."

"How about we make it pancake day whenever it's just the two of us at home?"

"You love pancakes, huh?"

"I love making them with you."

"Mm-hmm… Okay, then."

It was fun.

There was not a shred of fear between them.

"Wait, Yuzuru, those are mine."

"You have the ones I made. I'll have yours."

Yuzuru switched plates as they were about to top them with fruit, whipped cream, and chocolate. Kaya insisted hers would taste bad, but he did not listen.

"You don't get it. I want to eat my lady's pancakes."

He did not listen.

"…"

Remembering that day, she realized now how much love he had for her.

Yuzuru.

She was looking for a happy memory to pull her out of the gloom, and yet once again, tears spilled from her closed eyes. The sadness came and went in waves.

She didn't want the driver to see that. She didn't want to worry him.

She sneakily wiped the tears off just as they arrived at the hospital.

Her mother was waiting by the entrance.

Eisen had called her. Shuri grimaced at seeing her daughter, who was in rougher shape than before, but she immediately got in touch

with Soshi.

The private talk with Soshi and Shuri called for plenty of time.

Yuzuru was her Custodian, but Soshi was his father; forcing him away from his son now of all times was a horrible thing to do, and she was called out for it first. Even if there was a possibility Yuzuru could be saved, it was too heavy a loss to force on him.

"I don't care if anyone thinks worse of me."

"You should!"

Soshi finally raised his voice for once; he hadn't even yelled when he asked Kaya to go home.

The shock from hearing the plan must've been that big. He realized his volume and covered his mouth.

They were in an uncrowded hallway, but it was not entirely deserted.

A patient coming out of the examination room frowned over at them. Nobody from the Honzan had arrived yet, but they couldn't risk anyone overhearing them.

Soshi lowered his voice. "…I am glad that you're trying to save Yuzuru, but this is too reckless… And you won't be the only one tainting your reputation."

Soshi didn't seem willing to agree right away, even though his son's life could be saved.

Kaya was impatient, but she had to keep calm. Soshi could easily read her.

He shouldn't think that she came up with this plan in desperation. If she wanted to convince someone as rational as Soshi, she had to be extra coolheaded.

Kaya had spent three years living and hiking with him; she knew very well that serenity was essential to get him to agree. She worked hard to stay calm.

"I know. But let's put all the blame on me. People are trying to protect me, but if push comes to shove, I plan to say that I threatened everybody into it."

"…Lady Kaya!" He raised his voice again.

"Hey… Should we go somewhere else?" Shuri suggested.

They moved to an emptier hallway, and then Kaya continued talking.

"Soshi… I know this will cause you problems, too. They'll accuse you of showing favoritism, even if your family has produced two consecutive Custodians. If they tell you anything…say that you didn't know. I did it on my own. I'm only telling you now so you won't stop me once we begin…"

"…You want me to play dumb…?" Soshi said, more with sadness than with irony.

"No. I'm just asking you to give me tacit consent. The foolish and selfish Archer of Dawn forced the other gods to save her beloved Custodian—everyone will believe that story. I want the people who help me to be hurt as little as possible… If you could just do that…"

If damage to my reputation and whatever penalty they come up with is the only price to pay, I'm getting off easy.

Kaya wasn't being thoughtless about this.

She was expecting a punishment of some sort.

They might take her out of school. They might take her parents away. They wouldn't be able to fire her, so most likely they would isolate her and give her the cold shoulder for the rest of her life.

But if that saves Yuzuru…

She didn't care if they sent a new Custodian who only saw her as a tool.

…that's nothing.

It only mattered that he was alive. She had already considered following him in death; any punishment was light in comparison.

That's absolutely nothing.

Even if the rest of her life was gray, if she could just hear from a letter that Yuzuru was in good health and living happily somewhere far away, that was more than enough.

However, Shuri interjected. "…Kaya, you can't do that."

Her mother greatly agreed with the plan itself, but she could not stand to see her daughter suffer for it later.

"…Mom, everyone's already helping. We can't go back." Kaya responded firmly, even as she was getting outnumbered.

She couldn't lose here.

"Dad agreed. He told me to come to the hospital."

Shuri knew that. She nodded. "Yes, I get that…"

Kaya's stare asked back, *Then what's the problem?*

"…I'm not telling you to stop. I wanted to suggest that we say I was the one behind this."

Silence took over for a few seconds.

"…Mom?" Kaya's tone was asking her not to.

Soshi was getting angry again. "You too, Lady Shuri?!" He raised his voice a third time.

"Are you telling me to let my daughter take the fall, then?!" Shuri replied with her hands on her hips. "There's enough to make it believable. My daughter is a good girl, after all."

"…Mom?" Kaya repeated.

"I'm not talking about your habits, but your conduct. You haven't caused any serious trouble all this time. And now you're saying that you rebelled? That it's all your fault? Who's going to believe that?"

"Lady Shuri," said Soshi, "it still doesn't make sense. I agree that Lady Kaya will hardly be thought of as a troublemaker, but it's unthinkable to put all the blame on you."

"I'm always nagging the higher-ups, so it's more believable than blaming Kaya."

"That's because your family has influence… If anything, it would be more constructive to get your parents to protect her to the best of their ability."

"…You have a point."

"I would rather not think about it, but… If everything comes to light, Lady Kaya is the one they would make an example of. Best-case scenario, everyone gets told to stop listening to a teenager, but that probably won't happen. There's still a strong faction wanting to return to the old-fashioned administration…"

Kaya met Soshi's eyes and nodded. She knew there were people against her.

Some loved formality more than the people living here and now. And the Fugeki clan were not the only ones.

Of course, keeping tradition was important, and maintaining a sense of history was essential to making sure people wouldn't forget.

However, no person with modern values would say that violating human rights was part of a beautiful tradition.

Soshi and Kaguya were in the middle of a turning point in history.

"They will make an excuse of this. Who knows what punishment they'll deal out…? After we managed to alleviate the Archers' isolation…"

Soshi had worked to the bone for this. For the people living in the present—for the future of his son and a girl he could even consider his daughter.

Kaya was one of the beneficiaries.

She looked down.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry I'll ruin what you and Big Bro Kaguya did…"

"Lady Kaya, no… That's not what I'm saying…" Soshi's voice grew weaker.

"I know. You… You're not complaining about your job getting ruined. You're worried about the Archers' treatment growing worse because you care about me."

"…"

"I'm always worrying you… I'm so sorry."

Then she raised her head. She had to meet his eyes firmly for this.

"I know there's a lot to think about with me. You can scold me all you want once this is over. But please just say yes to saving Yuzuru's life. His future depends on what I do…on what everyone does. You want your son to live, right…?"

"…"

Soshi pursed his lips.

"Let's talk about what happens once it's over. I will take responsibility for my actions. I won't run away. I'm prepared for anything. Just please let me do this." Kaya's persuasion was sharp. Her every word was full of resolve. "You too, Mom. Please understand."

Kaya turned to look at Shuri, too.

"Kaya…"

"I know you care about him, too. What would you do in my place? I know you'd do this, too. Please think about him first now…"

Shuri opened her mouth, but ultimately, she nodded.

"Yes…"

She didn't want to see her daughter suffer, but she couldn't possibly let obligations and pros and cons cost someone his life. Shuri was convinced. They only needed Soshi, and then they could move into action.

Kaya waited for him to respond.

He was quiet, his face twisted in exasperation.

Why don't you just say yes?

Right as Kaya was beginning to lose patience…

"I want to ask you something, Lady Kaya."

…Soshi broke the silence.

Kaya straightened her back, noticing his serious expression. "What is it?"

"Why did you rely on other gods all of a sudden?"

Kaya wasn't sure how to answer the straightforward question.

"Huh? Well… For Yuzuru?" she said.

Kaya wanted to ask *why* right back at him. Why was he pondering this when they had found a way to save Yuzuru?

She was willing to sacrifice herself if he would just say yes.

Honestly, she never thought things would go this smoothly.

She was sure Soshi would be happy. That he would agree, for Yuzuru's sake.

Soshi's voice lowered, becoming murkier with heartbreak. "Did I push you to these extremes…?"

Kaya had misread him.

Soshi Fugeki was a difficult man to understand.

"…Was this because I told you only family should be with him?"

He acted for the sake of others, but rarely talked about himself.

People who met him often found him a cold man. Only after a deeper conversation would they realize how he'd really felt.

"I didn't mean to imply you were a nuisance."

Soshi kept his emotions under the surface. He most likely wore that mask from day to day on purpose.

Everyone had a mask. His just so happened to be quite thick, and he would only take it off around those he was truly close with.

When people saw the true kindness beneath it, they would be strongly drawn to him.

"Did that put pressure on you…?"

Kaya nearly sighed.

"…Did it hurt you…?"

His mask was gone.

It had been falling off since the moment she began describing the plan, but now, it was nowhere to be found.

"Lady Kaya…"

Soshi looked hurt; his emotions were on full display. His eyes were full of sadness.

"…I can't believe you did this of your own will."

Kaya understood that her reckless behavior hurt him.

He was a good-natured grown-up. That was why he believed he had hurt this child and forced her to do these things.

Finally, she understood why he wasn't happy.

"It's going to sound like an excuse now, but I wanted to hide you. I didn't want you to suffer anymore… I didn't want to see my family hurt you."

"Soshi…"

"I can't know how you must feel right now…"

Kaya grabbed Soshi's arm.

"No! You chose the right words… What you did made sense," Kaya insisted as the guilt on Soshi's face deepened.

"Please don't misunderstand. I'm doing this because I want to. I asked the other gods for help because I wanted to save Yuzuru. You didn't make me do anything!"

"…"

Soshi seemed still unable to discard the possibility that his words had driven her to this.

I'm the one pressuring him.

Back when they lived together, back when she asked him for his son, Soshi had just given her a complicated smile, never telling her his real feelings. Probably because he was the adult, and Kaya was a child. He had good judgment, a strong mask, and a magnanimous heart. But now, all she could see was pain.

"Soshi."

Kaya shook his arm. She wanted him to stop subconsciously looking away from her.

She wanted him to know she wasn't lying.

"I'm telling you the truth. You probably don't know… But Yuzuru and I… Maybe we argued from time to time, but we were Archer

and Custodian… I want to save him because I…I'm very fond of your son…"

"…"

"We were doing so well…" Kaya reflected on the time when Yuzuru was healthy—just half a day ago. "We argued sometimes, but we spent more time close together. We even cooked together yesterday. We made pancakes…"

With every word, her feelings for Yuzuru grew stronger.

"He did my hair because he wanted to keep it pretty, even on a holiday."

She remembered his face in that moment. The warmth of his hands.

She remembered him before his body was wrecked.

"He said he wanted to practice doing my hair for my coming-of-age ceremony… He wanted to send you a picture. He cared so much about me…"

She already longed for that carefree day, recent as it was.

She wanted to go back in time to when Yuzuru was okay.

"He cares about me. He always takes care of me. But even if he didn't, I care about him. It's just that no one knows…"

She wanted to go back to the past and redo everything.

"You don't know, but we…"

Kaya paused as her voice cracked.

A question popped into mind. What were they?

They were lady and retainer, but close like friends, and they also did things you would only do with family. It was hard to define; there was no perfect label for their relationship.

The only thing she knew was real was that they cared for each other.

"I'm telling you the truth…"

Soshi couldn't bear to see her groping for words anymore. "… You've been good to Yuzuru."

"Yes… And he's been good to me."

"I believe you wouldn't lie about this."

"I'm not."

"I know. I also know Yuzuru was obsessed with you…"

"Obsessed? No…"

"…He thought your meeting was destiny."

Kaya's eyes grew wide. "…No way."

Her sincere reaction escaped her; she forgot that she was trying to persuade him.

"Why would I lie?"

"But…"

"He told me that he had a feeling this would happen."

Kaya was confused. She hadn't heard about this.

"I'm sure he only said it because his fate was already decided."

He came to Enishi without a choice, in his father's stead, which was why Kaya had felt guilty all this time.

"You just brought him because I told you to. That's a made-up explanation after the fact… Maybe he was just trying to be polite."

She couldn't believe it, and yet Soshi asserted it.

"I would not have given you my boy if that was why."

Kaya flinched.

"Lady Kaya, I don't want you to misunderstand. I…I didn't want to hand you over to a Custodian who exists to serve the Honzan. I considered this carefully before asking my son, that's all. I didn't do it just because you ordered it."

Kaya stared at Soshi.

"It would be a lie to say I didn't feel discomfort when my son was named… But I concluded that was one option."

"…"

"And you were just a child back then. An adult doesn't take a child's requests completely seriously."

"But I'm the Archer of Dawn…"

"You have high standing, yes, but I spent three years guarding a little girl," Soshi continued, like he was speaking to a child. "I still remember clearly how you cried for your mother and father."

The time he should have spent on Yuzuru, he had spent on Kaya.

"I had the responsibility to take care of your future, and I cared about you. That was not your decision, but mine, as an adult. If I had to leave you, then at least I should leave you with a member of my family…"

He didn't seem to be a deeply emotional man, but there was no doubt he loved Kaya.

"…"

Kaya simply felt bad about everything she had made Soshi do and Yuzuru feel.

"I'm sorry…"

All she could do was apologize.

Of course, repeated apologies could get frustrating for the one hearing them. But Kaya could do nothing else.

Right now, she was not the Archer; she was only a sixteen-year-old girl.

"Why do you apologize…?"

"I've made you put up with so much…"

"…I know that you are the one who has to put up with the most, Lady Kaya. I didn't realize that you'd been tormented by this since I left… I should be apologizing to you… I forgot that you tend to overthink more than other people…"

Soshi.

He was not saying it just to put her at ease.

After he left, the only way for him to know what was going on was through his son. Now that he was with her again, face-to-face, he was finally seeing the results of his choices. He was taken aback, too.

"…No, it's my fault."

Soshi was right; Kaya was an overthinker. She was too hard on herself.

"…Lady Kaya. You haven't changed since you were little."

Kaya blinked, unable to understand what he meant.

"Do you remember what you told me when you were chosen as the Archer?"

She didn't. Kaya thought for a few seconds, and after coming up with nothing, she gave her best guess.

"…I hope we get along?"

Soshi chuckled. "No. You told me: *Did God choose me because I'm a bad girl?*"

Kaya faintly remembered that, now that he mentioned it.

Shuri bit her lip with frustration.

"I told you no. But maybe that was the rationale you chose to help you accept what was happening…"

An Archer needed a paradigm to help them accept the lack of freedom.

"…Seeing you now, I can't help thinking about that moment. I'm happy that you would save Yuzuru… But I don't think it's right…for you to sacrifice yourself in exchange… Yuzuru wouldn't be happy about it, either…"

"Soshi."

The older man hadn't yet given her his word. He only seemed moved.

"You might think everything I do is foolish. Maybe my plan seems vague and worries you. I can't promise you anything, either. But please… Just let me try…," Kaya said. "I want to save Yuzuru. I'll also be happy if he's alive."

I want to thank him, and apologize.

"It's not that you blamed me… It really isn't that…"

I don't care about what happens to the rest of my life.

"I'll do what I can to shield you and your family. Lady Autumn and her honorable Guard are already on the way. Big Bro Kaguya and Eken are also helping. I'll do the rest, if you just say yes. Please…"

I want to see him.

She had cried so much already, and yet the well wasn't dry.

"Please… Give me your permission… Soshi…"

She could probably spend the rest of her life crying for Yuzuru.

He made her weak. His love made her weak.

And because she was weak…

"Please… Soshi…"

…she wanted to be strong for him now.

Soshi remained quiet for a while before grabbing Kaya's hand on his arm.

"Soshi…"

He turned it over so that he could warm her palm.

"…"

He said nothing for a little while, but finally, he agreed.

"All right. Lady Kaya… Let's do this together."

Even though he must have still had his qualms.

"I'll speak to my wife. We can't do this without her help."

This wasn't about interests or reputation. She simply wanted to save the boy who had been so kind to her.

In the end, his love for this girl who loved his son won out.

"After hearing what you said…I want to tell my son."

"…What?"

"That his lady loves him very much."

That went without saying, Kaya thought. But maybe Yuzuru didn't know about many of her feelings. If not, she wanted to tell him herself.

"I also want to speak with him again… It is not my place to say this, but please, could you save Yuzuru's life?"

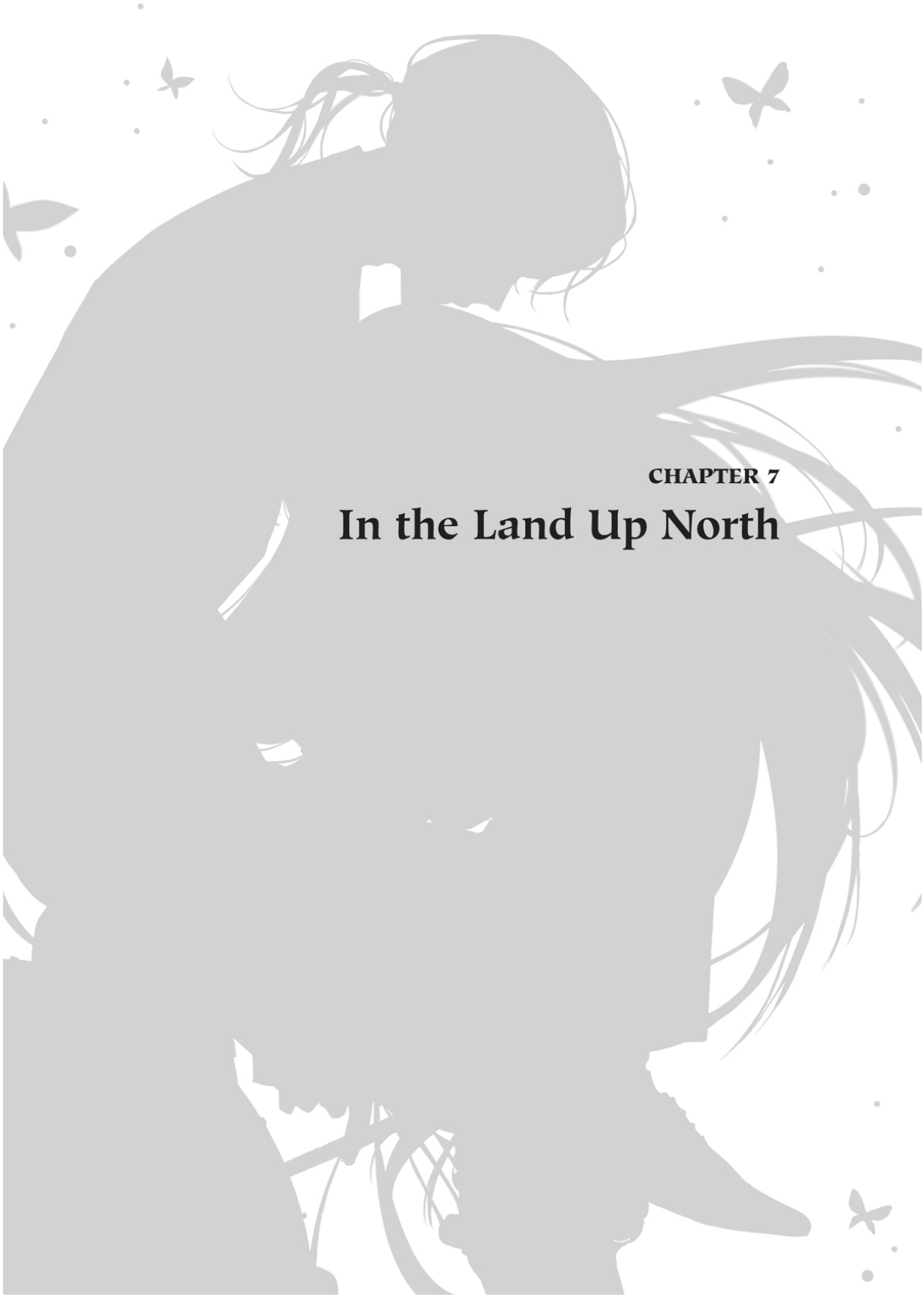
Soshi bowed deeply.

He looked so much smaller than he had when they lived together.

Kaya shook his hand and agreed.

"I've got this. I can do anything for Yuzuru. And I'll prove it."

So began the gambit of Day, Night, and Autumn.



CHAPTER 7

In the Land Up North

Things were happening everywhere after the call between Day, Night, and Autumn.

In the northern island of Enishi, while Kaya headed to the hospital, Guard of Winter Itecho Kangetsu received a call from his colleague.

"Got it. We'll get moving immediately. No need to rely on the Kayo boy. It's under our control already. We still have some manifesting to do in Enishi, but we can just say we're changing our plans for security reasons and ask them to move it ahead of schedule. We were just attacked by insurgents, so it'll be a good excuse."

They had just finished manifesting winter in their current location.

Itecho's breath was white, and a silver carpet covered his surroundings.

Scentless petals fell on the forest as Itecho and the Agent of Winter's other escorts watched the perimeter, their guns drawn. Despite the emergency situation, the Winter team was imperturbable.

"Really?! Thank you… And sorry to call you at such a bad time."

"Don't worry, we already dealt with it a while ago. I was just checking my phone to see if I missed any calls when you called."

Rindo couldn't know whether he was telling the truth. Itecho Kangetsu was considerate with everyone, every time; that was part of everyone's trust in him.

"Is anybody injured, Lord Kangetsu?"

"No wounded on our side. My Winter put them all on ice."

Itecho chuckled, glancing over at his lord.

Agent of Winter Rosei Kantsubaki sat idly on a chair a few steps away.

The young man was handsome all the time, but he was especially attractive when he was in the midst of snow.

He looked like he'd stepped out of a painting, sitting under the snowfall in the middle of a dark forest.

He was waiting for National Security to arrive and pick up the captured insurgents.

"Rosei," Itecho called.

Rosei immediately ran up to him, thinking it was his sweetheart on the phone.

"Is it Hina?"

"*I'm sorry…*" Rindo whispered, having overheard.

"It's Azami. Rosei, we're moving the private jet we're using for winter now."

"That's sudden. Why? Not that I mind, but is Autumn gonna use it?"

"No, the Lord Archer of Twilight and his Custodian."

"The Archer and the wolf? But they can't leave Ryugu, can they?"

"It's an emergency. Do I have your permission?"

"Like you didn't say yes already. It's your call."

Itecho chuckled again. "Okay, then. We'll send four of our men. Two for you and two for Twilight."

"Nadeshiko's coming, too? What's going on?"

"Lord Kangetsu, what about your own security?!"

"It's fine, Azami. I'll send backups from the Town. We won't lose anybody here. We always have people on standby to deal with insurgents. They'll be out the door almost as soon as we put in the call. Don't worry and just be glad for them."

"But then you'll have fewer backups…"

"We have people from the Agency here, too. And National Security will escort us to the hotel, since we were just attacked. It's fine. I'm more worried about you."

"…Are you really sure? It doesn't feel good to take advantage of you like that…"

"Hey, it's nothing. And who else is going to back you up if not us? Enishi's our territory. What's the point to Winter if we can't do this much?"

Nicely said. Rosei slapped his back.

Itecho responded by putting his fist on his lord's head.

Rosei kicked his leg.

"Cut it out."

Like it was already custom, Itecho stayed calm on the phone while gently kicking Rosei's back with his long leg. He then reached for Rosei's face and grabbed it.

"I'm on the phone. Behave yourself."

"Ow!" Rosei yelped.

Itecho ignored him and said, "Sorry, Azami. So, how many are there on your side?"

"…Um… Did I just hear Lord Kantsubaki…?"

"Don't worry about that."

"Ouch!"

"…"

He hardly minded, but he responded quietly.

"…Me, one escort, and Nadeshiko. Just us three."

Itecho looked up at the sky.

"Just the elite team, huh? You can get on anything, then… A chopper ride would be tough at night. And there's no heliport over there. I guess a car is the best after all…"





Rosei wrestled and escaped from Itecho's wicked iron claw.

He kicked Itecho's leg again before saying, "…Hey, so, they can't rely on National Security for this?"

Itecho received the kick in silence and placed his index finger on Rosei's mouth.

"Twilight and Autumn are trying to save Dawn's Custodian. National Security would try to stop them. And the Agency, too."

Rosei blinked. "That's big news…"

Itecho nodded before talking back to the phone.

"Azami, what're your current plans for transport?"

"A taxi. I heard we could be there in two and a half hours."

"The hell?" Rosei exclaimed, listening. Itecho shot him a scolding glare, but he did not back down. "I mean…it's winter in Enishi. Do they know what they're dealing with? I already began manifesting the season. Where the snow is falling, everyone's driving slow with winter tires. They can't go that fast even at night, and the taxis might even refuse the ride at this time of year."

"Rosei, stop butting in without knowing the full picture. They're going to Shiranui."

"Oh. My winter hasn't reached there yet."

Itecho kept quiet for a few seconds before talking again. "Should I get a couple armored cars from the Town? Security will be thin, so you should be bulletproof."

"Itecho, get the Shiranui Winter villa supervisor ready to receive guests. Tell them there's a bonus for off-duty staff. I'll pay for it."

"They didn't say they'll be staying overnight."

"They'll need a place to rest. Nadeshiko might come down with something if she's gonna be saving someone's life. Whether they end up using it or not, just get it ready. I don't want a reputation for being inhospitable to Autumn when she's visiting our territory."

The corners of Itecho's lips curved. Rosei was firm in decisive moments like this.

"Good thinking. Thanks, Rosei… Azami, did you hear that? Here's the plan. Don't worry about anything and take Lady Nadeshiko to the plane. That's going to keep you busy, so let's communicate by text. We'll have escorts waiting for you to arrive at the Enishi airport. I'll get in touch with Lord Kaguya to talk about his side. I need him to tell me what they need. And I haven't said hi since Summers' weddings."

The route was already mapped in Itecho's head.

People tended to envy those who were highly intelligent, but at Itecho's level, it was hard not to admire him.

"…Thank you so much, really. I will repay you somehow in the future."

"Don't worry about that. I'm glad to help out a fellow Guard. I'll ask for your help when I need it. And it's part of my duty to protect our country's Autumn and Night."

Rindo was reminded of the power of the Four Seasons Alliance.

And so, with Winter's help, the issue of transportation was solved.

While Rindo and Nadeshiko sighed in relief, Twilight ran through the mountains of Ryugu, breathing heavily.

Eken noticed he had missed a call from Itecho once they were in the taxi, and he quickly called him back.

Kaguya and Eken were grateful to hear that they could just get on the plane in Ryugu, and Winter would take care of everything else.

Although the plan was excellent on paper, simply reaching an unknown land quickly was a great task for Kaguya, a first-time traveler outside of Ryugu, and Eken, an inexperienced child who only knew how to use modern technology.

They gladly accepted Rosei's and Itecho's kind help.

They took a taxi from Mount Ryugu to the Ryugu airport. They were able to book tickets and board without a problem.

It was the first time Kaguya had flown on one of these since his flight to Ryugu long ago. His face turned pale.

"Eken. I'm flying."

He was afraid of planes. Not that he feared high places, as he climbed to the sacred area in Mount Ryugu every day, but the flying itself was not for him. The travel was far more shocking to the captive god than anyone would have expected.

"…Lord Kaguya, you're sweating."

"How can you be all right? And look at that woman. She does this every day?"

"The flight attendant?"

"The sky is beautiful, but I think I better take an aisle seat. Switch with me, Eken."

"Wait, wait. We can't stand up yet."

"Really…?"

"Wait until they say we can. I'll show you an illusion like you're home. Just bear it until then, yes? It'll be okay."

"…You seem so reliable now."

"And you look very adorable."

Thanks to Eken's consideration, Kaguya managed to survive the flight from Ryugu to Teishu. Yet one more flight awaited him once they arrived.

Itecho had come through, and a member of the company who managed the Agency's private jet was waiting for them once they got off the plane, guiding them to the next flight.

The guide had only heard that two VIPs would be taking the plane. He was suspicious of the father and son who didn't resemble each other, but as a professional receiving guests to such an important plane, he did not pry further.

Kaguya was not yet used to flying, but the successful first flight helped him relax a little on the second one. Both of them fell asleep in the private jet. The seats were just so soft and comfortable.

By this time, Autumn had finished their trip from Tsukushi to Teishu to Enishi.

Nadeshiko had fallen asleep on the plane. Rindo carried her out and found a man and a woman in suits waiting for them outside the arrivals gate.

"Is it you?" Rindo asked cautiously, and they bowed gracefully.

"We are from the Town of Winter. You are Lord Azami, Lady Iwaizuki, and their Autumn escort, correct?"

"Give us one moment. We'll call Kangetsu and have him confirm our identities."

Once the Winter escorts were correctly identified, they ran to the airport's parking lot and got in the car.

Another sigh of relief. Rindo looked at his companion, and they both smiled.

They'd been successful so far, which was a heartening prospect.

They still had to reach Shiranui, but the Winter escorts would take care of keeping them safe and support them all the way there.

Winter had sent one woman, probably out of consideration for Nadeshiko. She quickly took out a lap blanket and plushie and everything a little girl could need.

Rindo was even more grateful after hearing the woman had a child her age.

"Lord Azami, have you eaten yet?" the man asked as he turned the wheel.

"We had food on the plane, so please don't worry."

"Roger. We heard you came only with what you had on your person, just to help the Goddess of Day. We've prepared a change of

clothes in the Winter villa for all three of you. Once everything is done, please make yourselves at home there."

Rindo was surprised by how considerate they were.

"That is very kind of you… Forgive us."

"Please, don't worry. Our king insisted we be attentive. Please ask us if you need anything."

This *king* must've been Rosei. Rindo snorted, and it woke Nadeshiko up.

"…Is it time to get up, Rindo…?"

"Oh, I did I wake you? You can stay asleep for a while longer." Rindo responded softly, holding her hand as she leaned on him.

This was normally Nadeshiko's bedtime. It was a shame she could only nap, but there was no way around it.

"Rindo… I know I can do it. Wake me up when it's time…"

"Yes. I will."

Rindo kissed the crown of her head, praising her for her dedication.

Nadeshiko giggled before going back to sleep.

Rindo gazed lovingly at her face for a while before moving his attention up to the starry sky beyond the window.

Now, the question is whether he's still hanging in there.

How long would the man at their destination hold on to life?

Rindo prayed for the survival of the Custodian he had never met.

A few hours later, the date changed. It was two AM, November 9, Reimei 20.

A girl left the hotel nearby the hospital—the Archer of Dawn, Kaya Fugeki.

Shuri had gotten a room for her to hide in.

Kaya hid away out of reach from the Honzan's envoys. If she was found out and sent back home, her father's efforts would be for nothing.

The plain hotel room was a suffocating place for Kaya to wait.

She looked at her messy face in the mirror and thought it would be rude to Autumn if she didn't clean herself. She took a bath and dried her clothes, but she didn't really get to catch her breath for a moment.

The hands of the clock moved oh so slowly.

She jumped every time her phone rang.

What if they were calling to tell her Yuzuru was gone?

Every time she checked her phone in fear, it was only reports of her collaborators' progress.

Eken texted her about getting the taxi; Rindo texted her about meeting Winter's escorts. She had so much to thank Winter for.

At first, Kaya had intended to make a sort of threat, asking for repayment for what she did in summer, but now she felt only repentance and gratefulness.

She had to apologize to Winter once it was all over.

Everyone's coming to help you. Hang in there, Yuzuru.

Now it all fell to Yuzuru's fight for survival. The doctor had already said that his condition could worsen any moment.

Please, God of Day, save him.

Anytime she wasn't answering texts, she prayed.

Then, a text from Rindo came, saying they had reached Shiranui. They would be at the hospital in fifteen minutes. Kaya replied she would be waiting and flew out of the hotel.

Everything is coming together!

Kaya had to sneak into the hospital to become Yuzuru's life resource. His family had stayed the night there to watch over his last moments.

They should have discussed it with the hospital staff, but they had chosen not to for now. Who knew whether Yuzuru's life could truly be saved? Yuzuru's family would get the staff to open the back door.

She hadn't heard that Kaguya had arrived, but they had reported that they were on the private jet already.

Winter's escorts were supposed to bring them here once they arrived.

Yuzuru.

Kaya ran, barely breathing in the middle of the cold night.

The moment she reached the hospital, a yelp nearly came out of her throat.

Multiple people were standing in front of the hospital's front door.

Kaya quickly changed course and ducked into the shadows of the buildings.

It was hard to see from this distance when it was so dark, but their phones' lights allowed her to see they were men in suits.

Honzan?

They did not seem like hospital staff just coming outside for a breath of fresh air.

She had no idea who they could be, but she wouldn't be surprised to learn they were Honzan men looking for her.

It was time for her to begin climbing Mount Shiranui, after all.

Eisen was pretending that she was cooped up in her room. They were probably suspicious that she hadn't left already and had come here to check.

Eisen hadn't texted her, so he was probably being interrogated.

He couldn't possibly call her in front of the Honzan representatives. The cat was probably out of the bag. Kaya had to make her own choices now.

She was a very normal high school girl, except for the way she shot the sky in the mountains. This trial was too hard for her. But she had no time to waste whining.

I can't go in from the front.

The hospital grounds weren't locked, so she would have normally gone in from the front, before circling around to the building's back door.

If they're here, maybe they don't know about the back door?

Even if they had come to check on the Custodian while there was light, it was hard to believe they would have checked all the emergency routes.

Kaya circled from the outside until she reached a hard-to-see place and climbed up the wall. She landed on the grass inside and walked through the darkness to the back door.

"…!"

But she came to a halt as she saw someone there again.

What now?

They didn't seem to have noticed her yet.

It could be hospital staff, but even then, she wouldn't want to speak with them.

While she considered what to do next, the person looked her way.

I gotta run.

She turned back to where she came from.

She hid under a white birch tree. If only that were enough—but the person was searching for her.

They weren't going to the front door. Was it a Honzan member told to be on standby there?

Please just go.

It would all be over if they found her now.

If the adults pinned her down, any struggle would be useless.

Go away.

Autumn was heading to the hospital right this moment. The Honzan didn't know them, so it didn't matter if Autumn was seen. But Kaya could not afford it.

Please, please.

Kaya could only hide in terror.

Please don't find me.

Everything was going perfectly, and it would be ruined if she didn't reach the hospital room.

Please let me go.

Kaya stopped breathing.

"…"

The person stood in silence for a moment before returning to the back door.

Kaya took a shallow breath.

The person looked back quickly at the sound.

Loud steps approached her.

Kaya shook in fear. She didn't know what to do. She couldn't move.

The person reached her.

Kaya was fused to the tree, but she had already been discovered.

"Lady Kaya?"

Kaya raised her head.

"…Is it you, Lady Kaya?"

It was a woman with a familiar voice.

"It's Reiko Fugeki. If it's you, please let me know."

Kaya responded with a voice as small as a mosquito's. "Yuzuru's mom…?"

She sounded like she was about to cry. Reiko crouched down and gently caressed her.

"Yes, we met around noon today. I'm Yuzuru's mother."

"…I… Lady Autumn is almost here, but then I saw all the men at the front…"

"…"

"Um…?"

"Sorry… It's just that I was surprised by your very normal reaction?"

"…I'm very normal outside of shooting the sky…"

"…Yes… Of course…"

Reiko went quiet again. Kaya wondered if she had said something wrong.

"I've been waiting for you to come back. Did you climb the fence?"

Kaya nodded a couple times. Reiko offered her hand and helped her stand.

Reiko was shorter than she was; Kaya had to look down.

"…"

Kaya couldn't find the words to say. She'd apologized a lot in the hospital, but after greetings, Reiko hadn't said anything.

Kaya thought she was probably struggling not to say anything offensive.

"Your hands are cold… How long have you been outside?" Reiko's voice sounded tired, but firm.

"Just a little… I didn't know how to get in…"

"…You've done so much for my son. Let's go inside. I was waiting by the back door because I also heard it was almost time. Thank goodness I found you…"

"Thank you… Ah, but I should tell Lord Azami."

Kaya called Rindo to tell him to take the back entrance—by circling around and climbing up the wall like she did, if possible.

"Understood. We are already here and were just wondering what to do. The suit gang looks very suspicious."

"It seems they don't know where the back door is yet. They probably think I ran away right before they came… You should be able to get in by climbing the fence. Can you do it…?"

"I'm a Guard. It's no problem. Would you please stay by the back door, Lady Kaya?"

"Yes, of course!"

The short call ended, and Kaya and Reiko waited by the door.

Being alone with Soshi was no problem, but given how much she had taken from Yuzuru's mother, it was an awkward moment.

Kaya couldn't stop looking at the fence, suffocated by the silence. She prayed for Nadeshiko and Rindo to come quickly.

"…Lady Kaya."

Reiko broke the silence, and Kaya flinched.

"Yes."

She couldn't prevent her voice from sounding afraid.

Reiko was the symbol of her guilt.

"…I'm sorry for what happened yesterday."

"Yesterday?" Kaya parroted. She had no idea what Reiko meant.

"…I think I was rude to Yamato's Day."

Kaya replied anxiously. "Oh, no, not at all."

Kaya found no reason to think that, since she had barely spoken, but the bitterness in her eyes was clear. Perhaps that glare was rude.

However, it was a natural emotion for the woman who had given birth to him.

"…There is no fault with him. If there's anyone to be punished, it should be me…"

"Punished…?"

Perhaps she thought of Kaya as a tyrant.

Kaya replied with even more anxiety. "N-no, no, no. I have no authority! And even if I did, I wouldn't ever punish my precious Custodian's mother!"

Her voice came out too loud; Kaya looked around before continuing in whispers.

"…Your son protected me, and I put him in danger. You deserve to resent me."

Reiko frowned. "But… That's his job…"

"It's my fault for relying entirely on him. He's a wonderful Custodian…and so reliable…but if I was stronger, that wouldn't have happened."

These were her sincere thoughts. Yuzuru had made her go down the mountain because he thought she couldn't handle what had happened.

If he had trusted that they would be able to get out of danger together, he would have told her about it. If she was mature like Kaguya Fugeki, he would have asked her for help. Kaya was not capable. Yuzuru could not rely on her.

Reiko seemed sad to hear that. "…That's not your fault, Lady Kaya."

Reiko explained that, realistically, it wouldn't be possible for her to physically carry him down the mountain. Yuzuru was tall and muscular. A shorter, younger girl couldn't haul him down the sloped path.

Even a man would have had trouble; Eisen's efforts couldn't be understated. Reiko concluded that Yuzuru wasn't wrong to have Kaya go down alone to call for help.

Kaya was expecting a fight if they ended up together alone. She was on high alert for anything Reiko would say, but the woman turned out to be very calm. A lot more than when they first met.

That said, Kaya did not think Reiko would be ready to forgive her.

"…No, it is my fault. I am so sorry…"

Kaya bowed deeply. She had already lost count of how many times she had done that today.

"Lady Kaya… Please raise your head…"

"…There is nothing else I can do." Kaya kept her head down when the voice from above turned teary.

"Please… Don't…"

"…"

"I know…"

Reiko's voice was shaking.

"The landslide hurt you, too. There's no reason to blame you. If there's anyone to blame, it's the heavens for handing down such a cruel fate…"

"Disasters will occur. What matters is—the problem is—that I wasn't able to make the correct decisions in the situation. I'm his lady."

"…No, no…" Reiko talked in between sobs. "My husband said that while Yuzuru ended up like this because he became your Custodian, you did not choose to become the Archer of Dawn… We shouldn't be blaming anybody. And yet…you care so much about Yuzuru that you are trying to help him, despite the cost to your future. He said that I shouldn't behave myself that way again…"

"…"

That wasn't necessary, Soshi.

Kaya wanted to yell at him for saying that. She would rather shoulder all the blame than see Yuzuru's mother cry. And she would feel better if she had someone to blame, too.

"I…I didn't know where else to direct my emotions."

Kaya raised her head little by little.

"You were apologizing, but I simply ignored you…"

Because she saw drops soaking the ground in front of her.

"There's no room for doubt…that you were only dragged into misfortune…"

Little by little, she could see Reiko's face.

Once her head was fully raised, she saw Reiko's tears glimmering in the faint exit light at the end of the back door corridor.

"…I was only thinking about myself when I blamed you. I am truly sorry."

Her small body shrank even more. Kaya felt a weight on her heart.

"No, it was right of you to do that. You have the right to resent me, and you should. I am fully aware that I don't deserve your compassion."

"But…"

"…I may be a child, but I'm also one of Yamato's gods. You must've been disappointed by my blunder, but please let me make up for it now. I will do everything I can, if you'll let me."

"…Lady Kaya."

"The only innocent one here is you," Kaya stated firmly, without room for argument, just as they heard a noise. Someone climbed up from the wall. They landed gracefully and received a small child from someone else outside.

Then multiple people jumped off the fence.

"Lady Kaya, is that…?"

"I'll go. You stay here, please."

Kaya timidly walked toward the newcomers. They noticed her, and one raised their hand in greeting.

"Lord Azami…?" she asked.

The silhouette holding the child to his chest approached her.

"Are you the Lady Archer of Dawn?"

The lamp lit up the Guard of Autumn, Rindo Azami. In his arms was the drowsy Autumn of Yamato. The details of their faces became clearer as they approached.

"Yes, I am Kaya Fugeki. It's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for coming all the way here…"

Kaya shivered all of a sudden.

They're Yamato's Autumn.

She had seen their faces during the video call, but seeing them in person was overwhelming.

Each one of them was already overwhelmingly charming, and when put together, they were divine. They had an aura around them; it would be easy to believe they were the only two people in the world.

"Lady Autumn… I apologize for bringing you here so late at night. I am very thankful for your support."

Kaya bowed with a sense of guilt. She was used to being awake at this time, but she felt terrible forcing a little girl to stay up like this. The Goddess of Autumn was just so young.

Nadeshiko frowned for a moment. Kaya was a mess, which made it clear how bad her mental state was when she had asked for help.

Nadeshiko asked Kaya to raise her head and looked into her eyes with a smile.

"Good evening, Lady Kaya. I'm Nadeshiko Iwaizuki. Please don't worry. I am honored to be of help to the Lady Archer."

The child was more considerate than many adults. After saying that, she placed her tiny hand on her mouth in remembrance.

"Oh… No, that was wrong."

The goddess turned into a little girl.

"Good evening? …No, should I be saying good morning already…? I'm sorry, Lady Kaya. Give me a second… Rindo, what's the correct greeting?"

Nadeshiko looked at her retainer for help. He smiled.

"I believe *good evening* should be fine."

"Okay. Sorry, Lady Kaya. Let me do that again."

"Y-yes!"

"Good evening, I'm Nadeshiko Iwaizuki. This is my Guard, Rindo."

"Guard of Autumn, Rindo Azami."

"G-good evening. Allow me to redo my greeting, too. I am the Archer of Dawn, Kaya Fugeki. The one behind me is Reiko Fugeki, the mother of Yuzuru Fugeki, the man I've asked you to heal. Ms. Reiko…"

Once the greetings were done, Reiko hurried into the group and bowed. She looked nervous standing near the Goddess of Day and the Goddess of Autumn. Meanwhile, the meeting let Kaya relax. The presence of a small child was soothing.

"Should we cut to the chase, Lady Kaya? Where is Lord Yuzuru?"

But there was no time to rest. Kaya nodded.

Everyone stealthily followed Reiko into the hospital.

With Reiko in the lead, the one nurse who spotted them said nothing. She probably believed they were more relatives coming to see him.

Soshi was standing outside the room, and he bowed deeply to Kaya, Nadeshiko, and Rindo. He opened the door, and inside were two men, whom Kaya believed were Yuzuru's brothers. They both looked exhausted.

"Kaya…"

Shuri was there, too, in a corner.

Kaya met her eyes and nodded.

The person at the center of the whole commotion lay on the bed with tubes all over his body.

Yuzuru's face seemed cleaner than when he was rescued, but he looked like he was only waiting for his life to expire. He lacked the vitality even a sleeping person would have. His soul was nearly expired. The sight struck Kaya with anxiety.

Could they really save him? While another wave of fear washed over Kaya, Nadeshiko and Rindo skipped the greetings, as they were racing against time.

"He's still breathing. We can do this. What do you think?" Rindo said.

"Yes, I agree," Nadeshiko responded.

"What about the leylines?"

"No problem. It's very easy to connect to them in the dale, I see. So that's why the Town is surrounded by mountains."

"My Autumn is so clever. Can you drink the antipyretic first? Open your mouth… Now drink some water. Good girl. Anything else you need?"

"I just need you to be where I can see you."

Kaya was reminded of the rescue team she saw at the foot of the mountain. They showed no surprise at Yuzuru's condition and

focused on what they had to do.

Her eyes welled with tears, looking at Yuzuru, but Nadeshiko and Rindo inspired her to hold them back. She had to be strong.

The preparations seemed to be finished, and Nadeshiko looked around at everyone.

"Let's begin, then."

She was no longer a small child. She was a goddess.

"Could the men help us bring Lord Yuzuru to the edge of the bed? Lady Kaya, you get beside him."

Yuzuru's brothers hurried to comply.

Kaya looked at the open space on the bed. "Should I lie down there?"

Nadeshiko nodded.

Kaya needed to be lying down so she wouldn't collapse when she blacked out. Everyone whose life force was absorbed by Life Putrefaction either lost consciousness or never woke up again.

Shuri grimaced from the corner of the room. Her calmness was succumbing to concern for her daughter.

"It's okay, Mom."

Kaya comforted her before taking her shoes off and lying down next to Yuzuru.

"Would you mind if we tie your hand to his? We'll have a better flow of energy."

"Don't worry about me. I'll do anything you ask, Lady Nadeshiko."

They looked for something to bind her with, but there was nothing at hand. Rindo took a Winter escort's necktie and tied Kaya's and Yuzuru's wrists together.

"Is it too tight?" Rindo asked with concern.

"No, please tie it as tight as you can…"

She had no idea what would happen to her once it began. If she was going to struggle, then she would rather have them tie her whole body up so all her life force went into Yuzuru.

"Lady Kaya, you'll probably feel dizzy or sleepy and will lose consciousness immediately. It won't hurt, however, so please rest assured," Rindo said.

"Yes…"

"Healing is normally quick, but she'll be taking life force from you and no one else, so it might take longer than usual. We'll be checking your pulse; please forgive me touching your hand."

Rindo explained everything so she would not be afraid.

Kaya nodded. "I'm in your care. Do whatever you need to save Yuzuru."

"Nothing you fear will happen. Don't worry."

"…He's working hard right now, and so will I… I am his master, after all."

Rindo blinked. His voice softened. "…Lord Yuzuru would be encouraged to hear that. It's a great honor for a retainer."

Being a retainer himself, he was moved by her words. And although he wasn't intentionally trying to encourage Kaya, his reply had such an effect.

Let's do this. We're coming, Yuzuru.

It was all in the Agent of Autumn's hands, but Kaya had to make sure strong energy flowed into Yuzuru.

She also identified with how much Nadeshiko trusted this man.

"Nadeshiko, she's ready."

"Yes. It'll all be okay, Lady Kaya. Let's begin. Rindo, if you please."

"Yes, Lady Nadeshiko."

Rindo sat Nadeshiko down between Kaya and Yuzuru.

The bed was not very big; Nadeshiko only fit because she was so small.

"I'm sorry for bumping you with my legs."

"It's okay, Lady Nadeshiko. Whatever makes it easier for you."

She had to touch both of them in order to circulate the life force.

The stigmata on the palm of Nadeshiko's hand declared that she was the Agent of Autumn; she pressed that hand to Kaya, and the

other to Yuzuru.

"I'll begin taking your life force and channeling it into Lord Yuzuru. No matter what happens, don't stop…"

Nadeshiko's statement was cut off as she heard a knock on the door.

The knock was rough; this interference did not come from a worried family member.

"Is Mr. Soshi Fugeki here?"

A man's voice came from outside.

"I'm the man from the Honzan you met in the afternoon. There is something I would like to ask you…about Lady Kaya…"

It didn't take much thought to know what this meant. They suspected someone was hiding her.

Everyone in the room gasped and looked at one another, silently asking what to do.

"I'll go." Soshi stepped forward, until Shuri intervened.

She shook her head; Yuzuru's father should stay with him.

"No, I'll go. Lock the door once I'm out," she whispered.

Yuzuru's brothers got near the door. Shuri took a deep breath and threw it open.

"Do you have any idea where you are?!"

Shuri pulled the door shut behind her, and Yuzuru's brothers quickly locked it.

They could hear Shuri yelling outside.

"What is wrong with you?! What sort of sensible person comes to a hospital room like this at this hour?!"

"Umm…"

"No one but family and a supervisor is allowed inside, and I've already taken the role! What're you trying to do?! You're making them work in a time like this?!"

The Honzan man flinched away from her intensity. The people inside reacted similarly, even though they knew it was an act.

"Er… And you are…?"

"Shuri Fugeki! Kaya Fugeki's mother!"

"…Ah, I apologize for my rudeness."

It sounded like Kaya's mother was widely known. Her husband called her a sheltered princess, and she was; she was a VIP's daughter, and the mother of the current Archer of Dawn. Naturally, anyone from the Honzan would know about her position.

Shuri Fugeki was not normally one to wield her family's power, but she could not hold back today.

The man sounded flustered.

"Er, please do not misunderstand. We were looking for Lady Kaya…"

"Isn't she in the mansion?! I haven't seen her since I sent her off with my husband. She's certainly not here!"

"Well, it seems she escaped from her room. Lord Eisen seemed very worried, too… We're currently searching around there."

So Eisen had done a good acting job himself.

"…Oh my. You should've said so sooner. In any case, was there a need to knock so hard on the hospital room of a grieving family?"

The man didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry, but let them be. Kaya is our problem. I don't want to take away their time, when they're already feeling the loss of their son. Do you? And you're bothering the other patients. Have a little consideration for others. Now, move."

Shuri glared daggers at him.

She was drawing inspiration from every person who had ever said something similar in her life. From indignant yelling to calming down and leading him away, she did it all great. The man ended up pulling back subconsciously.

"I wouldn't want to take time away from their grieving, no…"

"You see? It's inexcusably rude. And going back to Kaya… You don't think she went up the mountain alone? She has to do her job

even after what happened to Yuzuru, and she probably wouldn't want you nagging at her on the way."

"That is a possibility… But it would be dangerous, especially when a landslide just happened."

"You're right. Let's go find my husband. We'll search together."

Their voices were getting quieter and quieter.

Everyone in the room let out a breath of relief.

"…Let's get back to work," Nadeshiko said with quiet strength. Kaya nodded at her.

The Goddess of Autumn closed her eyes and let her consciousness sink.

"High up in the autumn sky shine bright the constellations, the stars, and the comets."

Nadeshiko looked at everything from above.

Her body was in Shiranui's hospital, but she was following the leylines to Mount Shiranui.

She imagined herself pulling the leylines and stretching them toward the hospital.

"Across the starry sky flies Goddess Tatsutahime."

In her mind, the path of light underground flowed into the room.

She circulated the power pouring into her body.

Nadeshiko looked at Kaya from above. Her body was glowing with same kind of light as that of the leylines.

"Rejoice and rest, dance and sing."

What a wonderful thing you have here.

The thought popped into her mind as she redirected a bit of Kaya's light into Yuzuru.

The radiant handful melted into his body as though it had been his all along.

"Dance with the colorless wind, for one day you may reach the moon."

Lord Yuzuru was waiting for this, too.

Knowing that, Nadeshiko let the opening flow wider.

From Kaya to Nadeshiko. From Nadeshiko to Yuzuru. The current of life force was truly endless, and so comforting.

She didn't have to call out to him this time; he was alive. Only Nadeshiko's skill and focus was necessary.

That, and her trusted retainer.

Kaya had already lost consciousness by then, but everyone else could see the bruises and cuts in Yuzuru's face healing.

Meanwhile, Kaya's face was growing pale, almost transparent.

Soshi stepped forward in worry, but Rindo stopped him.

"It's okay. She's breathing. She has a pulse. Nadeshiko, how is Lady Kaya?"

"Wonderful," the goddess replied abstractly.

Rindo translated. “Lady Nadeshiko says that her life force will not run out. She will continue.”

“And Yuzuru…?”

“Nadeshiko, how much does he have?”

“Sixty percent.”

Rindo smiled at Soshi.

“Rest assured. He will have to get checked for any complications afterward, but he is healing. It should be done in a few minutes.”

Soshi glanced at his wife. Reiko was taken aback for a moment, and then tears spilled down her cheeks. She covered her face.

“Thank you. Thank you so much, Lady Autumn…”

Soshi bowed deeply.

Nadeshiko realized she hadn’t given much information and supplemented Rindo’s explanation. “If I take too much energy, the process will be hard on Lady Kaya. Since he’s stable now, I’ll narrow the opening…and take it slow from here…”

She had matured quite a bit to be able to speak while she was busy healing. The rookie goddess had been practicing since spring.

Yuzuru’s brothers watched her godly feat with emotion, too.

Soshi’s eyes were wide.

“It’s really done in the blink of an eye…”

Rindo shook his head. “Only because the conditions were perfect. This is a place made for the gods to live, so it has the leylines. And Lady Kaya has a special body… That’s why.”

“…Yes.”

“The only problem now is what will happen to Lady Kaya and the morning ritual. From my experience, those whose life force has been absorbed take at least half a day and at worst a few days to be back up. One of the aftereffects is weakness in her immune system. It’s like a cold fatigue. Lady Kaya recovers with sleep, so if we can give her some time to rest, she should be able to go back to her duties tomorrow…”

Rindo took his phone out of his jacket pocket as he spoke.

He had a notification. Upon reading the text, he smiled.

Rindo held the phone out to Soshi, who kept looking at Kaya with worry.

"Look at this. Sorry, I'm checking her pulse, so could you take the phone?"

"What…?"

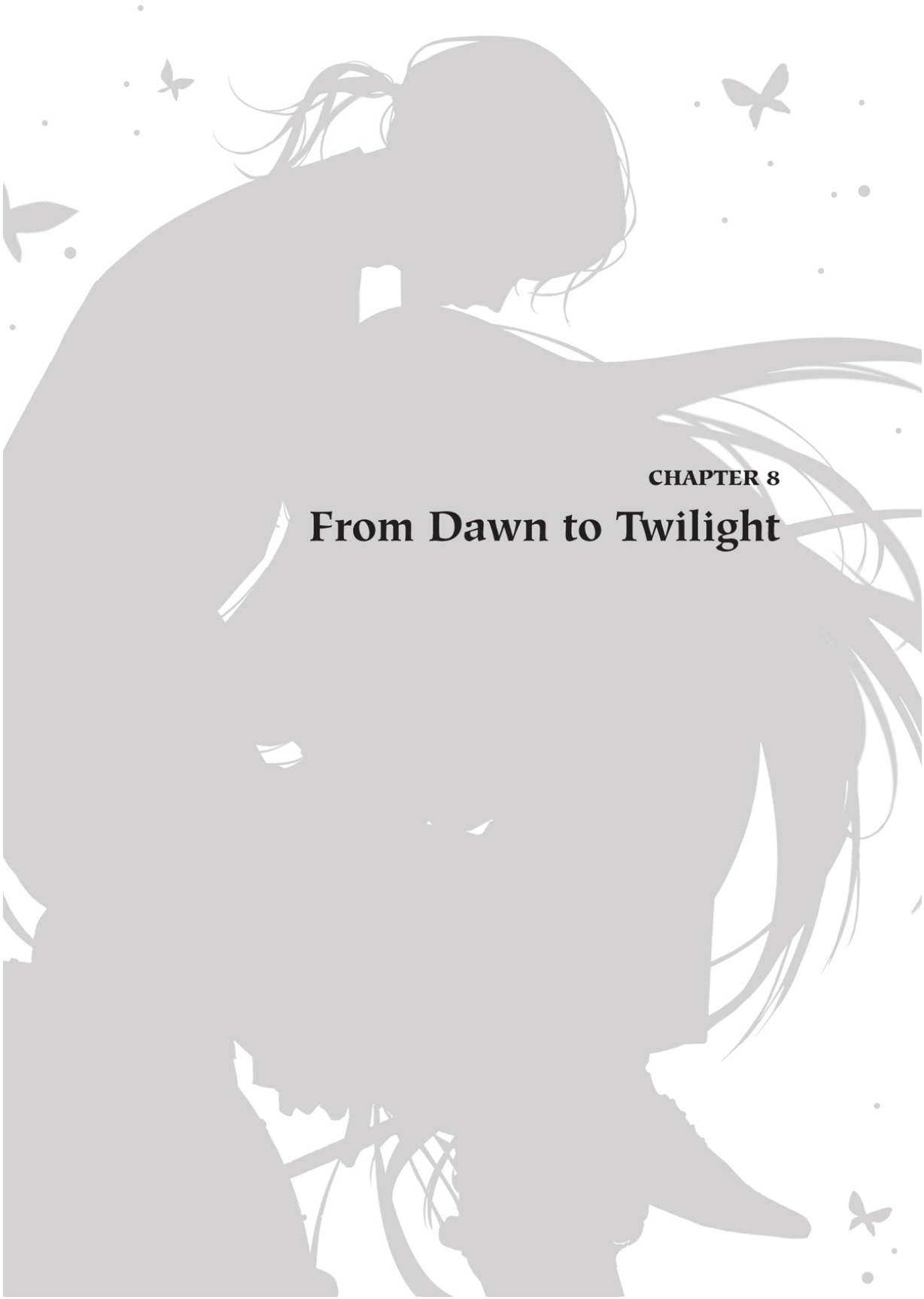
Soshi was shocked, and Rindo smiled.

"The Lord Archer of Twilight has arrived in Enishi."

The text read:

"Sorry for the late reply. We met the Winter escorts, and we're in the car right now. How are things on your side? This is my first time seeing Enishi; what an awe-inspiring place."

The message was full of kindness and wonder, and the former Custodian smiled and shed a tear.



CHAPTER 8

From Dawn to Twilight

A little while ago, two burly men had greeted Kaguya and Eken at the Enishi airport.

"Don't worry. If you pass out, Lord Kaguya, we'll carry you."
"We lift weights heavier than you."

Eken compared his biceps to theirs and despaired at the contrast.

Itecho knew that they would have to get moving immediately after Kaguya lost consciousness, and he knew they would need people with strong bodies.

The armored car was roomy, but with all of them inside, it was as full as a can of sardines.

"…What do you eat to get like that?" Eken asked.

The two friendly men explained their training and protein regimens on the way. Kaguya listened with as much envy as admiration while he watched the view out the window. The world was dark because of his night, but this breathtaking panorama was nothing like Ryugu's. From the roadside trees to the buildings and the spacious roads, it was all so interesting.

It felt like visiting another country, even though it was just the north.

"So there really was a world outside…" He sighed in amazement.

Kaguya was not born in Ryugu. He was taken there when he was young.

Memories of his childhood were already faint. He had been in Ryugu for so long, he had forgotten about everything else.

The Winter escorts heard his sigh of awe.

"Lord Kaguya, we were told to escort you back all the way to Mount Ryugu, too."

"Huh? Really?"

"We heard you will be doing the ritual two times in a day. As citizens of Yamato, we believe we should do what we can."

"Thank you… And sorry for all the work…"

"Please, it's nothing." The escort was humbled by the god's attention.

"We'll get the plane scheduled according to Lord Eken's instructions, too. We'll leave Shiranui right away. We should arrive at the Enishi airport soon, but you'll have time to relax there. Although we don't know how long it'll take you to wake up… Worst-case scenario, we will have to take you on the plane while you're unconscious."

"…I won't know, either, until we get there… But even if the air is different from Ryugu's, they are both surrounded by mountains and trees. Depending on the quality of the leylines, it should only be a couple hours. I might have to get help from you to walk, though…"

"I'll help!" Eken raised his hand.

"We'll stay in Ryugu for a few days, too. We can help," offered one of the Winter escorts.

"He already has me…"

"Oh, no… We don't want to take away your job. But thinking logically, if you have to help him up the mountain, you won't be able to take the backpacks and everything. We heard you carried him down the mountain. Was it hard?"

Eken lowered his voice. "…Yes. I left one backpack in the sacred area…"

"Kangetsu asked us to help you with that. Kantsubaki also asked to watch over you."

Eken gave in. He couldn't defy orders from Winter and his retainer.

The escorts grinned. As adults, they found the boy and his loyal efforts adorable.

Kaguya was just intimidated by the perfect reception.

"If there is anything you want to eat before flying back, please tell us now. The airport has most of Enishi's delicacies, and we can make reservations."

They were so, so considerate.

"Oh, please don't mind us." As an adult, Kaguya answered the invitation with a smile and nothing else.

"There are also hot springs in the airport. If you wish, you could refresh yourselves before heading back to Ryugu."

"Huh? Let's go!"

But he could not turn down the hot springs.

What should have been an intimidating trip ended up being a luxury tour for Twilight.

Kaguya got in touch with Rindo from the car, and the positive reply gave him peace of mind.

The Agent of Autumn was already healing Yuzuru—all that was left was for Kaguya to do his part.

The one issue was that people from the Honzan were searching for Kaya around Mount Shiranui.

National Security was on the move, too. This was a major incident now.

When they were about thirty minutes out from Shiranui, Rindo called Kaguya.

"Lord Azami? We should be arriving at the foot of Mount Shiranui no problem… How are Yuzuru and Kaya doing?"

"Lord Yuzuru is already fully healed. He stabilized much quicker than expected, thanks to Lady Kaya's strong life force."

"Oh, that's wonderful… Bless Lady Nadeshiko."

"We'll have a doctor check him and set up a blood transfusion now. I, Nadeshiko, and our companion from the Town will leave the hospital to stay in the Winter villa. I'm a bit embarrassed that we have to run away, but we would rather avoid interrogations…"

"Yeah, wouldn't want the doctors prying into her miraculous powers…"

"Exactly… Even the doctors in the Town of Autumn can be an issue. It only gets worse with people who don't really understand the Agents' powers…"

"So what reason will you give for his recovery?"

"The hospital knows who he and Lady Kaya are, so we'll make it a miracle of the Goddess of Day."

"You think they'll believe that…?"

"It's a little forced, but we can't exactly be honest with them… It is a confidential matter, and it would mean pulling common folk into our world, which means they would have to vow never to tell anyone, which is a secret they'd have to keep for the rest of their lives… I think keeping it at a miracle is better… Now the question is Lady Kaya."

"Is she not well?"

"Not at all… She's been waking up, blacking out, then waking up again for a while… And she insists on going to the mountain… We're all working to keep her here."

"The mountain…? Why am I even here, then? Why would she say that…?"

"You will shoot the Canopy, of course, while Lady Kaya will be collapsed somewhere in the mountain. She says that if she's found unconscious, they'll assume that she shot the Canopy all by herself. It's the perfect crime…"

"…"

"…"

"I see, so she's trying to protect me. But I already left the island after shooting at the wrong time; they'll find out anyway."

"Of course… I thought the same thing…"

Kaguya smiled bitterly, thinking of her struggle. "Lord Azami, could you put her on the phone right now?"

Rindo agreed. He went into the hospital room; she was awake again, but still too tired to stand.

"Kaya," said Kaguya.

"…Big Bro…"

There's no way she can do it, he thought, hearing how feeble her voice was.

It was so obvious she lacked her usual energy, and yet she was still trying. Another smile escaped him.

"Kaya, listen. Lady Nadeshiko told you that you should stay by Yuzuru's side after she healed him. Even if he's stable now, you can't leave him. He's getting a blood transfusion soon, right? Did you forget why I came here to begin with?"

"…But… But…"

"Kaya, I won't run away, and I don't regret this trip. You did something amazing. Your courage got all these people to help. We Archers of Oracle… It can feel like we're lonely prisoners, but this made me realize that we're not."

"…I want to…lessen the impact…on everybody…as much as I can…"

"Then do that once you're in good shape. Listen, I'll be on the mountain soon, and I'll go back right after I shoot the sky. If you want to do something for everyone… Then look at the sky and call your parents the moment it turns bright to let them stop lying. I don't want people to have to search the mountain any longer than they have to. And you need to explain why you did this soon. Eken will be calling the Honzan as soon as morning comes, but you'll have to do the explaining on-site. So? Can you do that?"

Kaguya's request was realistic and harsh, but at the same time, it gave her relief.

It gave her determination. She had to bear all the blame once Yuzuru was saved.

"You did well, Kaya. You did great."

She was a goddess, but also a child. The grown-ups had to cover for her where she fell short.

"And I got to go on my first trip thanks to you. It's not all bad, see? Enishi is a beautiful place. I'll treasure this memory for the rest

of my life…”

He heard Kaya sob on the other end of the line.

“Now leave it to your Big Bro to wrap everything up.”

Kaguya ended the call, sure that she would be okay now.

Eventually, the Archer of Twilight shot the Canopy from the foot of Mount Shiranui.

Kaguya never doubted he could do it, although he couldn’t say why, and the closer he got to Mount Shiranui, the surer he was of it.

He felt the leylines running under the dale of Shiranui without being conscious of it.

Eken had calculated exactly when daybreak should come in Enishi, and the Canopy fell just in time; the veil of night was slowly stripped away to reveal the sun.

The young pup was impressed once again by the beautiful sight of his lord’s archery. No matter where he was, the event was breathtaking, Kaguya shot with precision even in an unfamiliar location. A mature Archer could make the world go round anywhere.

Up on Mount Shiranui, Eisen Fugeki noticed the changing color of the sky and tapped his wife on the shoulder, then pointed up.

The sight of her pure smile made him want to hold her hand for the first time in a long while.

Shuri was speechless.

As she squeezed his hand back, a phone began ringing. The couple quickly let go of each other.

It was a call from their beloved daughter, giving them good news of Yuzuru Fugeki's recovery, and a sad call for condemnation.

Shuri and Eisen didn't know how to respond at first, but they soon found the only thing that needed to be said.

Good job. Your efforts were all worth it.

Kaya shivered as the words reached her ear, and her tears stained the white sheets in Yuzuru's hospital room.

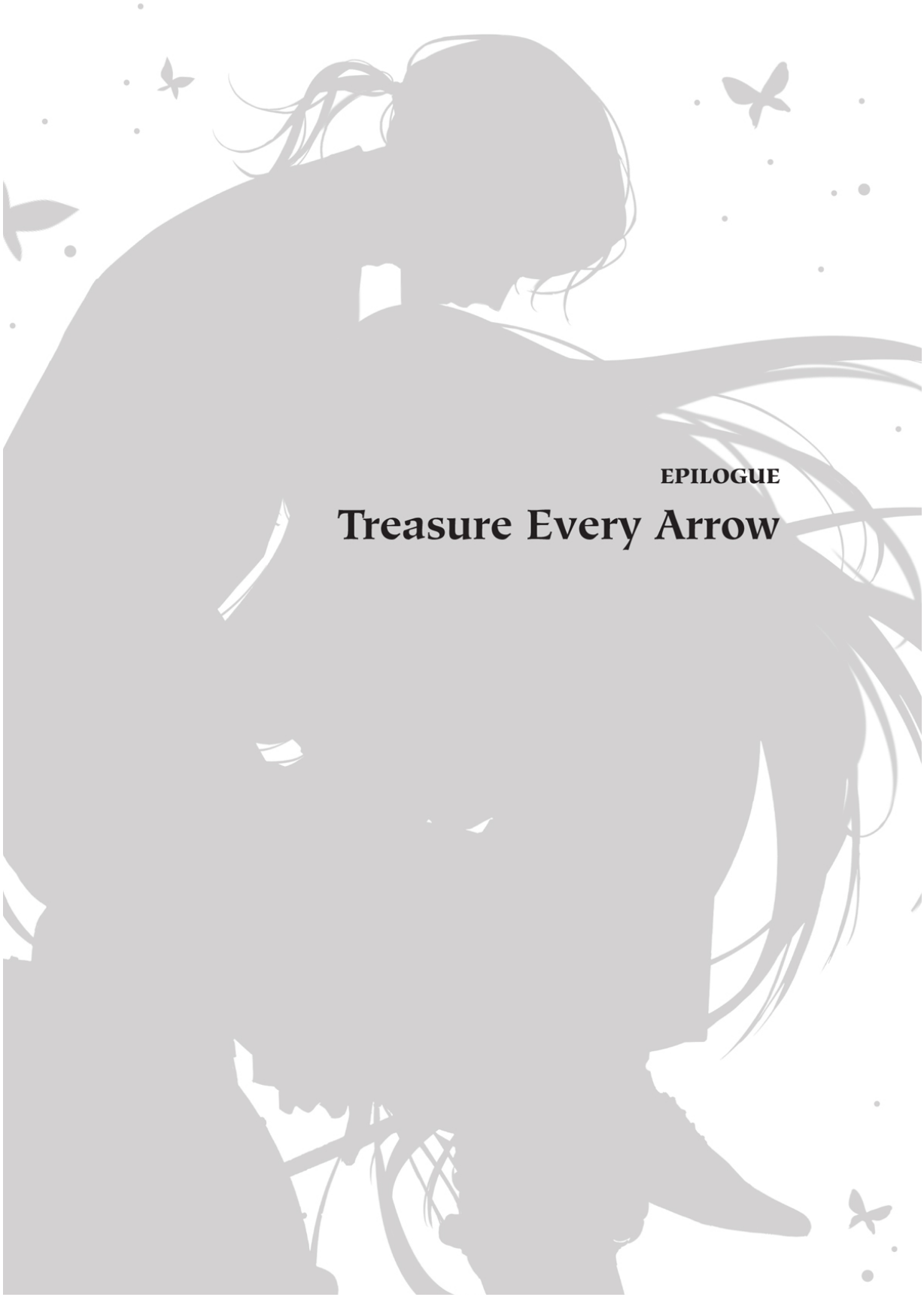
Thank you. And I'm sorry.

She thanked her parents again and again.
Who knew what punishment would await her after this?
But she'd done it. She'd saved someone—someone dear to her.
The reality hadn't hit until her parents praised her.

It's a good day. Today is a good day.

“Lady Kaya…”

Kaya heard the voice of her favorite human, and she smiled at her good fortune in this new day.



EPILOGUE

Treasure Every Arrow

December 31, Reimei 20. The Touji solar term.

The days had flown by since the events in late Rittou surrounding Dawn and Twilight; Yamato was now ready to welcome a new year.

It was New Year's Eve. Even today, the arrows of the Archers of Oracle had to reach the sky.

Kaya Fugeki awoke in the silent mansion and got up from bed.

Thank you for the night, Big Bro.

Kaya stretched after checking the darkness outside the window.

She headed downstairs to ready herself.

The mansion was completely quiet. She could hear no one else.

Because no one else was there; Kaya lived alone.

Kaya turned on the lights automatically.

She prepared herself a meal and gathered everything for hiking without any help like she once had.

First, I have to defrost the food.

Her parents had been taken away from her as punishment for inciting and using other gods incarnate for her own benefit. The Archer could not be removed from her job, so her sentence was isolation.

That was it. Even the helpers who once commuted to the mansion were gone.

Text Mom and the security gate. Tell them I'm up.

The Archer of Dawn's routine had greatly changed since Rittou.

School was on winter break, but she was put on temporary absence.

A Custodian replacement hadn't been found yet, and Honzan agents were living in Shiranui, taking turns attending her.

It's getting cold. Better leave the heat on.

A lot had changed.

While she checked her backpack, her phone rang. She needed to leave soon, but she answered anyway.

"Hi, it's me."

"Lady Kaya, it's Soshi. Are you well?"

Kaya smiled. "I'm wide awake. You don't need to call me every day… Should I put you on my mailing list?"

"No, I want to call you daily."

"No need. I've got things under control."

Soshi hated to see the Archers' living conditions go back to the old ways, and this was how he showed his concern from a distance.

"I have news for you today. They've reassessed your circumstances, and…they'll be lifting the penalties next year. They finally listened. Your family will be able to go back starting January first. Tomorrow. And you can go back to school. We have to thank Lord Kaguya for his incessant petitions to the higher-ups…"

"Whoa, really? You didn't need to do all that…"

Soshi was taken aback by her nonchalant response.

"What are you saying? You're alone!"

"Yeah… But it hasn't even been two months. Does it really count as punishment…?"

"Lady Kaya…you are a high schooler. You shouldn't be living alone."

He was angry, too. How could he not be? This goddess had saved his son's life, and this was how she was treated.

Kaya guessed this conversation could run long, and she stopped packing to instead sit down on the couch. With no one to sit beside her, she could stretch her legs out now.

"But I'm pulling through. I'm not the only lonely high schooler in the world. Plenty of kids have no one."

"That may be true, but things need to get better. Not just for you, but for your successors."

"…I can't argue against that. You fought hard to change the rules, and I ruined it… Sorry… To both of you…"

"Please don't apologize. You've been hurt the most… Lord Kaguya has been indignant ever since Rittou, and now he'll finally be able to welcome the New Year in peace. We've notified the Four Seasons, too. Please let them know, too."

"Got it. I already was planning on giving them a call for New Year's, so I'll do it then. Thanks. But Soshi…I really don't want you to worry that much. I accept the outcome," Kaya gently said to the angry man. "We're on good terms, but I hear there's been some tension between the Four Seasons Agency and the Fugeki clan since summer. I hurt both sides, and punishing me resolved everything. I think they just needed a common enemy."

"…"

Soshi had been frustrated by how mature Kaya had been acting since the events.

"Now it's just up to the bigwigs to make amends. The Four Seasons and the Fugeki are connected; sunrise and sunset change with the seasons, after all."

"I see you're aware that you were sacrificed to reach that compromise…"

Kaya frowned at the sadness in his voice.

"I don't think of myself as a sacrifice. I'm just the ringleader of the whole thing. Honestly, I feel like isolation was too light of a punishment…"

"You were punished for helping someone else…. For helping…my son…"

"Yep. And that's why I'm not sad at all. I'm way happier to know that you two are okay."

Kaya evaded anything he had to say. Soshi sounded restless.

I am worried about you, actually.

His standing within the Honzan had to have worsened, and yet he didn't mention any of it. Instead he only showed concern for her. It reminded her of how much she loved her kind former Custodian.

"…You don't want to see your parents?"

He must've thought he'd hit her with a good one, but Kaya remained calm even then.

"Mmm, I mean, they live nearby anyway… They got kicked out of the mansion, but they found a loophole and rented a house in Shiranui… They were here today, and they'll be coming after I'm done with the ritual."

Eisen and Shuri had accepted the punishment as well, but they showed resistance in their own way. They would not let their daughter be alone. Although her new life had come with hardship, now everything was calm, and there was a good reason why.

"And besides, I realized…"

"What?"

"I feel like my parents are…doing better living by themselves…"

"How do you mean?"

"As a couple."

"…Seriously?"

Soshi had seen Eisen and Shuri argue to exhaustion back when he lived in the mansion.

After everything, he couldn't believe that had been solved.

"I've seen them holding hands recently. But they let go whenever I'm around. It's like they're embarrassed."

"That is amazing. A huge step forward."

"But I don't know how to feel about it… Isn't it the child that keeps them together, normally?"

"Yes…"

"Doesn't look like it with them. My dad wants Mom to give him all her attention, and she seems to think better of him after all that happened. They get all lovey-dovey without me."

"Lovey-dovey…"

Kaya giggled when Soshi repeated her expression.

"Yeah. You realize some stuff spending time away… I think this life isn't too bad. I've grown up some, and they've grown closer. So what I'm getting at is… Please don't feel guilty, Soshi."

"…"

"You did nothing wrong."

"Lady Kaya…"

"How's your relationship with your wife? Is Reiko doing well? Tell her I loved the jam she sent me the other day."

"We've never been on bad terms… Which of the jams did you like?"

"The apple one."

"All right. I'll get her to make you some more. But please don't eat only toast just because it's easy to make."

"I know."

"And drink more than soda."

"I know."

"…Reiko and I would like to meet with you after New Year's. Would you mind?"

"You're always welcome."

"I'm sorry I made you end up alone…"

"C'mon, stop saying that. Also keep an eye on flights, since the snow can stop them in Enishi."

"…Yes, Lady Kaya. And thank you for bringing morning on this New Year's Eve."

"I haven't done it yet." Kaya laughed.

They wished each other a happy New Year and hung up.

Then Kaya began getting ready to hike again.

I should wish a happy New Year to Lord Winter, too.

She had met the curt God of Winter once, after the whole ordeal.

He had been furious when she told him that she would be living alone after what she did.

The handsome man who was his Guard seemed upset, too, and he'd given her the local Winter villa's contact information in case she needed anything.

The people running the villa did visit with food frequently, so she felt protected.

It's not all bad.

Truly.

Losing protection did lead to gratitude.

I'm blessed.

Others were living alone, too, under this cold sky.

Others must be even lonelier.

Let's keep it up.

Kaya talked to that uncertain someone else.

She wanted to speak to that lonely person out there in the world —not to offer pity or cheap consolation, just to tell them to hang in there with her.

This was New Year's Eve, after all.

The day to wish everyone a happy New Year.

The depth of the dark and the coldness of the snow shocked her every day she went outside, as the sunrise was even later than in Rittou. The Agent of Winter had visited Shiranui already, and the world was coated in silver.

A car was on standby as she reached the security gate.

The snowplows couldn't keep up with the snowfall. The road was narrow, but just wide enough for a car. Kaya brushed the snow off her head and shoulders before getting in the car.

It was two AM, already the new year.

"Happy New Year. Sorry you have to work today."

"Happy New Year. It's nothing compared to your work, Lady Kaya. And there are more people working today than you might

think.”

Kaya nodded in response to the driver.

Some people worked every day, and the world went round, thanks to them.

Kaya had the duty to bring morning to everyone.

In the same way, she made the world go round.

“Do you know who’s coming with me today?”

“The shift table is in the security booth. Should I call them?”

“No, it’s okay. We’ll know when we get there.”

They isolated Kaya, but the Archer needed a supervisor.

Due to the higher-ups’ contradicting instructions, she had to meet her Custodian delegate at the mountain. It was an inefficient way to do things.

“Honestly, I think this system is stupid… They don’t understand how things work here on-site,” said the driver.

“Oh, but I heard they’re lifting restrictions this year,” said Kaya. “I think I’ll be getting someone else to see me off… Thank you for all your work up to now.”

“Whoa, are you sure? I don’t want you getting some weirdo. Why not let us in the security gate do it? The bigwigs are too stubborn. And they won’t stop pestering you…”

Kaya answered his well-meaning indignation with a kind smile.

The car stopped at the foot of Mount Shiranui, and the driver yawned.

Kaya thanked him and got out of the car.

She had to walk for a while to the secret entrance, since the path had changed after the landslide. This was where she always met up with her companion.

“Will you be okay? I’ll keep the road lit for a while.”

“Thanks.”

“Tell your companion to give us a heads-up once the ritual is over. Some of them tend to forget. It’s annoying. And worrying, waiting for you here… It’s like they don’t understand their responsibility to take care of you.”

The people at the security gate hadn't changed since she was ten years old, and they saw her as family.

"Yeah. See you." Kaya waved at the kind driver.

She held a flashlight in hand while also relying on the car's headlights. As the car's lights became dim, she saw a silhouette ahead.

"Good evening," Kaya called.

It wasn't quite a blizzard, but the wind was loud.

The view was darker than the deep sea, and the snow only made it harder to see.

Kaya pointed the light toward the unresponsive person as she approached.

"Good evening," she repeated. Finally, she heard an answer.

"…Lady Kaya."

It was only her name, but the sound of it was more than enough.

Kaya turned around. The car's lights blinked, as though in applause.

Oh, no way.

Kaya was always slow on the uptake.

There had been so many hints up to then, yet she didn't understand until it finally happened.

You could call her narrow-minded, or perhaps single-minded.

Soshi had said the punishment ended from January 1. And today was the first day of the new year.

Kaya reached out for his scarf.

And took a good look at his face.

Kaya's greatest punishment was pulling her away from her beloved.

They hadn't talked after his recovery. She wasn't even allowed to speak to him through Soshi. After his recovery, the Honzan had

sent him to a shrine in the mountains of Teishu, where there was no reception. They didn't know what to do with him.

They took him away as punishment, but they couldn't treat him badly after one of the Agents of the Four Seasons saved his life; they were afraid of the gods incarnate and their reactions. They must have considered eventually sending him back the whole time.

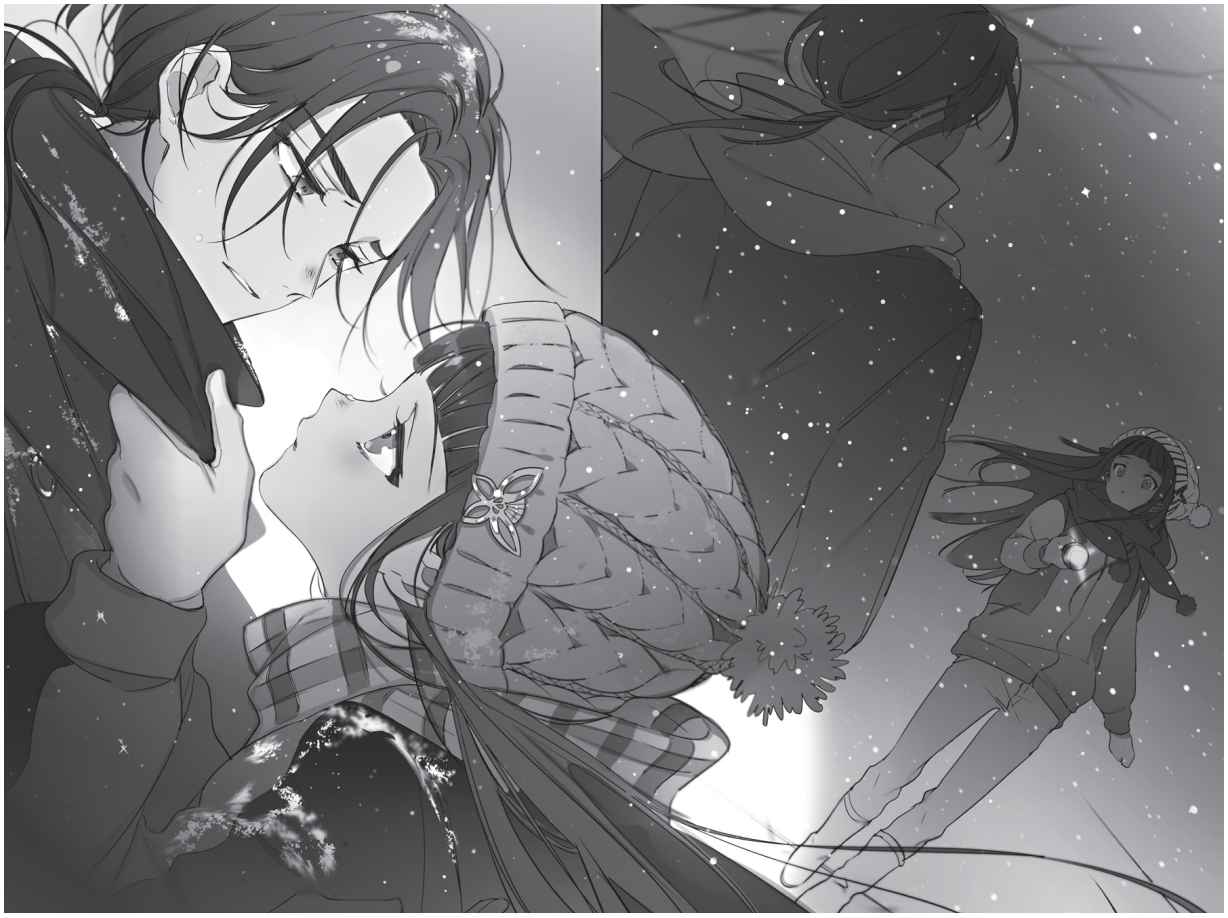
Nobody wanted to be the Custodian of this troublemaker. The delegates did their job quietly because they knew it was a short-term job; they would riot if they were told to live in the mountains of Enishi for the rest of their lives. One could say that this outcome was inevitable.

Yuzuru had been sent to the shrine under the excuse of training, but she had no idea what he learned there.

"Welcome home, Yuzuru."

That was the first thing that came out of her trembling lips. Partly because of the cold, but mostly because of his strong, piercing gaze.

"…" Yuzuru said nothing. Maybe she was being too intimate after so long away from him.



Kaya let go of his scarf and took a step back.

"Welcome home, Yuzuru," she repeated. "Welcome home, Yuzuru. Welcome home."

She said it again and again.

"Wel—…"

After a few repetitions, Yuzuru reached out for her and cut her short.

Kaya was taken aback as his gloved finger met her lips. Was she being too annoying?

She had no idea what it meant, since he wouldn't speak.

"…Yuzuru, do you…hate me now?" she asked quietly.

Was he here out of a sense of responsibility? Or emotion? Kaya was sure it was the latter, but she couldn't be sure without hearing it from him. It could be the former.

Yuzuru's poker face broke at her question.

"How could I feel anything but love for you?!" he cried out, and Kaya blinked.

"…How can you say *welcome home* like that, like nothing happened…?" Yuzuru looked like he was about to cry. "It's very bold of me to show up here; you could have been indignant…"

She was hit with the full force of the guilt he'd been carrying while they were apart.

"How can you look so happy…when you went through all that saving me…?"

He had destroyed her reputation. He'd made her live alone.

And he'd been suffocating in his own powerlessness.

"…Yuzuru." Kaya patted his hand and pushed it away. "How can I not be happy…?"

Although she felt bad, she wanted to be sincere.

"I found something I could do for you."

"…Lady Kaya."

"Thank you for saving me, Yuzuru. I wanted to see you again."

"I…"

"Should I not have said *welcome home*? You're not back for sure?"

Yuzuru shook his head hard. "…I could never leave again."

"Really…?"

"…I will not leave."

"I'm shocked Soshi did this to me. He could've said you were coming… I… I could've…"

"I asked him not to… Forced him, really… I wanted to see you again…"

"…Really? Uhm, so, happy New Year."

"…"

"Happy New Year, Yuzuru."

"…Could you stop acting like everything's normal? …How can you be so calm?"

Kaya smiled. "I'm not calm…"

Smiling made her chest squeeze. Her mouth was dry.

"I imagined this moment, us meeting again, so many times… I wanted to see you, so, so bad… I forged ahead, thinking I could see you again one day. It's how I made it through…"

She thought she had cried all the tears she had for the rest of her life, yet they welled up again. Big drops ran down her cheeks before melting away with the snowflakes.

She didn't want to let him see her cry, but that desire vanished at the sight of his face.

Yuzuru was crying, too.

"Lady Kaya…"

The simple sound of her name was full of so many emotions.

It said many things— *Thank you; I'm sorry; I wanted to see you; I missed you; I love you.*

"Yuzuru."

The two of them had lived in the depths of this mountain, without thanks from anyone.

"Thank you for saving me."

And that would stay the same in the future.

"I'm sorry I made you go through all that."

And this role let them connect.

"…I'm a bad boss. You should have quit."

They were allowed to meet.

"But I…I miss you when you're gone."

They understood, for the first time in their lives, what it meant to love somebody.

"It's too hard. I can't take it."

Whether this love was romantic or not didn't matter.

Whether it would lead to something more or not didn't matter.

"…Please come back."

I only want you to stay healthy.

But I don't want you far away. I want to see you alive, right by my side.

I don't care if you call me selfish.

"I want you. Please stay with me, Yuzuru."

Don't leave me—Kaya's wish was granted with Yuzuru's embrace.

"…I was always going to spend the rest of my life with you, milady."

Up north in Enishi lived the Goddess of Morning.

The Archer of Dawn.

The medium who summoned a bow of light to shoot down the Canopy in the sky.

She had no hopes for her future.

She was not allowed to leave the sacred mountain.

She would spend the rest of her life going up and down the mountain.

Her name was Kaya.

Just a normal girl, trying to live her life, like anybody else in the world—even you.

AFTERWORD

I hope this message finds you well. It's been some time. I want to keep this moment in writing. From dawn to daybreak, the sky is welcoming sunrise around this instant.

Kaya must be up on the mountain, wishing for this to be a good day.

I wish for it, too, but sometimes, you don't have the room to pray for others' happiness. This moment, as when the Archer finishes their job for the day, I finish writing this story for you. It's the perfect time for praying.

How are you doing? It's cold over here. How is it on your end?

I wish for you to be healthy, to be able to savor at least a bit of happiness today, and for tomorrow to bring you the same.

The story of the Agents of the Four Seasons began in the country of Yamato, but there are more countries outside in this world, and now people from places I've never been to have been able to read the story.

Hopefully, the wonderful translator is translating this same line, too.

This story deals with a concept that, while different in every place, is found everywhere.

Some of you might live somewhere without the clear flow of the four seasons.

But I’m sure that they exist in your location; perhaps named a little differently from here and with your own gods incarnate. We are connected through this story—we are not alone.

Some of you might live somewhere the line between day and night is vague.

Perhaps your Archers have a tough job, but the sky above your head is beautiful, and that beauty must give you courage. In that way, we are connected.

Some of you might live in Yamato.

Please, enjoy the cycles of the world outside. You are able to enjoy this story at its fullest.

If you have a friend from another country, and you connect through this story, please say hello to them for me. I live in a small and closed space, and there is too much I can’t convey without your help. In any case, wherever you are, please do not forget that there is at least one person in the world who prays for your health. And it would be wonderful if you could also wish the same for someone else. Please consider it.

Now then, it is time to drop the curtains on this story. Everyone involved in the production of this book has my gratitude. Bookshops, publishers, designers, editors. Artist Suoh, who brings beautiful, dreamlike color to this world. Thank you, as always.

And you, who stayed by my side up until this moment. Be well. I hope to meet you again.

I pray that, as you close this book, today, and tomorrow, too, will be a good day.

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