

# **CardCaptor Fai**

An adaptation of *CardCaptor Sakura & Tsubasa Reservoir Chronicle*

## Prologue



*Year 2000*

Ashura was not yet so far gone that he could not admit to a misstep. His charge had been closer to the boy bleeding out before them than he had originally thought, and it was much too soon for Fai to discover the truth about him. Fai wasn't yet powerful enough to topple him — even with all the love Ashura held for him, Ashura's instincts would kick in and he would defend himself and Fai would die.

That was unacceptable.

Fai was doing his best. He'd accumulated all the cards but one, even with his yet meager abilities, but they were all discarded now along with his fluorite staff in favor of sobbing as he pressed his jacket into Kurogane's wound, hoping to keep the precious blood inside where it belonged.<sup>1</sup> Secretly, Ashura was a little proud that Fai knew to do so when he was yet only 10.

That was another reason it was too soon — Fai's mind wasn't equipped to handle this turn of events. He couldn't process fully that Ashura would do this, that Ashura wasn't someone to be trusted. So when Ashura stepped forward and placed his clean hand on Fai's shoulder, Fai did not flinch away, even as Kurogane croaked out a quiet warning. No, Fai instead turned hopeful eyes his way, pleading eyes that begged Ashura to fix all of this somehow.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the same staff we see Fai arrive with in TRC.

“What will you do now, Fai?” Ashura asked, voice smooth and soothing, a vague smile across his features.

Fai sniffed as he shook his head emphatically, desperately. “I don’t know. I don’t — I don’t want him to die,” he started, unsteady and rough from crying, and Ashura could feel Fai’s magic accumulating unbidden, preparing to respond to Fai’s wish even though Fai was not conscious of wielding his will so. Fai clutched Kurogane tighter, and the final card that Ashura held shone brightly within him along with all the cards scattered on the ground. “I don’t want Kurogane to die!”

There was a sound like a chime, and unbeknown to Ashura, everything stopped.

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In the next breath, Kurogane could see that everything outside himself and Fai was frozen. He’d seen it before when he had used Time to help them, but something about it seemed wrong this time around. Fai’s eyes had never been so vacant before, and the cards had never lifted themselves into the air before, hanging around Fai’s body looking much like ornaments suspended from a tree.

One by one, each card dissolved before him, and he knew — somehow Kurogane knew what was happening, and he reached out weakly. “No,” he managed around the still-consuming pain, one that was slowly replacing the disappearing wounds of his body. “No, this is too cruel.”

But the forces that held the world together had no concept of cruelty and justice, and so as lights like shooting stars flung themselves away from Fai’s still form and his staff reverted to a key once again, Kurogane found he didn’t recognize the boy before him anymore right before his world went black.

## The Windy



*Year 2016*

On nights like these, Fai didn't really understand why Ceres was becoming a ghost town. Between himself and Ashura, they were powerful enough to protect the citizens from any possible threats, and Ashura was a kind, fair ruler besides. In the years since Ashura had found him on the beach, 10 years old with no memories whatsoever, they had not only shored up the infrastructure and chased away the beasts that had once threatened the valleys, but they had improved the quality of life so much that Ceres should have been the envy of the world.

Even the weather was gorgeous, Fai mused, looking out from one of the castle's windows overlooking the beach. It was cool but not unpleasantly so, and the breeze carried the scent of the ocean into his rooms. Below, the waters were crystal clear and calm, lapping at fine white sand, and above the crescent moon was just kissing the horizon, only barely washing out the skies above with its light. Ceres really was perfect in Fai's opinion, he thought as he sipped the wine that had gotten him so introspective that evening. So why did it seem like people were fleeing?

A voice caught his attention below, sweet, high, and gentle on the breeze. It just barely registered to his ears and he couldn't make out the words, but it pitched up and down, notes both long and short in song. The melody was haunting and familiar, but Fai couldn't place it, though he was sure if he got close enough to hear the words, he would surely remember. So when he spotted a young, dark-haired girl dancing further down the beach, one he couldn't

recall seeing before, Fai gathered up some of his magic to make a breeze, bringing himself from his window high above to the sands below.<sup>2</sup>

He lost sight of the girl as he landed, her form disappearing behind a dune, but Fai hadn't wanted to startle her by floating down from the sky so close. Instead, he walked unhurriedly, following the melody as he scaled the dune with ease, but as his head broke over the rise of it, the melody stopped and the girl was nowhere to be seen.

A little worried she may have fallen into the sea, though these parts of their shores were shallow, he sprinted the rest of the way over the hill and down to the beach, but he couldn't see a trace of her, not even footprints in the sand. Perhaps she had been a ghost, Fai wondered, though he had never seen one before, and as his eyes scanned the area once again, a light in the waters caught his attention, something shining in the water.

Maybe the girl had been a spirit attached to whatever it was, Fai thought, and he waded into the water to retrieve it. The waters were nearly still, lapping at his ankles when he stooped down to find a necklace. It was a simple thing, just a cord attached to an ornate key of silver and blue, but something about it seemed familiar, and when he reached out to touch the key —

*Two voices shouting, indistinct, overlapping. Children's voices, too young to be so angry, so frightened. Flashes of scenes. Monsters, attacks, magic. Running. Standing. Fighting. Rage. Joy. Sorrow. A calling, a calling a calling*

*A calling*

By the time Fai managed to release his grip from the key, he was panting in exertion. There was no life in this key, only an item of some form of power, and yet inside it held memories of some kind. Fai could scarcely believe he had been swept into them so easily, that he hadn't so much as detected any magic within the item and that it could overwhelm him so.<sup>3</sup>

Just as he was about to touch it again, more cautiously, better prepared, that sweet voice sounded from behind him, laughing, and Fai whipped around, the girl he had been seeking having slipped his mind completely up until just then. Shoving the key in his pocket, Fai ran back over the hill to find himself alone again, barefoot on a beach with no people, the cuffs of his pants soaked in seawater.

Idly, Fai touched the pocket holding the key as he wondered at what exactly was happening in Ceres.

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<sup>2</sup> This is Tomoyo

<sup>3</sup> Kero is not in this story, so there needed to be a device that would give Yuui the information he needed to use the staff. Yuui is never able to read anything from the key because the information is originating from Fai within him.

The key seemed immune to scrutiny in the following days. Nothing Fai did to it seemed to incline it to reveal its truth to him, and even when he had worked up the courage to touch it again, it had been inert, unwilling to show him those brief flashes twice.

Something in Fai's gut told him not to reveal the key to Ashura just yet, and it was kind of nice, having a mystery all of his own to solve. Up until now, he and Ashura had worked together to solve everything they had come across, but Fai was 27 now, and Ashura was aging. Eventually, it would be up to Fai to work alone, and he would have to learn how to someday. A small mystery of no apparent import seemed to be a good place to start.

After a week, though, Fai had to admit he was stumped, that maybe he had imagined the surreal scene on the beach. If there was a secret, though, he believed it would reveal itself in time, so he wore the necklace around his neck, under his clothes. If the key wanted to speak again, it would in due time. Until then, he would keep it close and let it reveal itself when it was ready.

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### *Year 2017*

It wasn't an unordinary day by his standards at all. Fai and Ashura were each seated on their respective thrones attending to matters of state. Most of them were simple matters: petty disputes, requests for provisions to offset shortages, petitions from lands across their borders. A representative from a village to the south had come to request aid, and something of his tale caught Fai's ear. A demon wind had come down from the mountains and had been wreaking havoc in the town, tearing up fields and damaging buildings. Injuries had been minor so far, but there were fears that it would become stronger and eventually kill someone.

Fai smiled and went with his gut. "I think I can handle that," he stated breezily.

"Oh?" Ashura returned with some amusement, "Not 'We'?"

Fai rose easily, waving a hand in a somewhat dismissive manner despite the nervousness he held behind his mask. He and Ashura had always tackled such things together, but something whispered in Fai's heart, telling him he ought to solve this on his own. "I think I should be enough for a little ol' wind. No need to send the both of us out there."

Fai could feel Ashura's scrutiny and wondered briefly if he was behaving suspiciously when he thought he could see something flash behind Ashura's eyes. It was gone in a moment, though, and Ashura relaxed even further back into his throne. "I suppose it is time for you to leave the nest, young Fai. I have faith you will resolve the matter swiftly and without incident."

Fai's bow then was low and sweeping, but most importantly, it allowed his face to be hidden just then against any flaws there still may have been in his mask. "I will not fail you, my King."

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The journey to Mithril had taken the better part of a day, but when Fai arrived the weather was calm, the air almost unnaturally still. The representative that had escorted him joked that perhaps the wind had caught word of Fai's arrival and fled.

Fai suspected that wouldn't be too far from the truth.

There was nothing to do, though, but wait and see if the wind would return, so Fai settled in at the local pub, ready to sample what brews the village had to offer. The bartender selected a mead and set it before him, declaring it to be on the house, but Fai would have none of that. "Absolutely not," Fai refused with a laugh as he plucked up the tankard. "Bill the palace at the end of my stay and we'll reimburse you. Our affairs are not so dire that I can't properly pay my tab."

It was as if the declaration had released any lingering tension in the air, and where just before the people had been giving Fai a wide berth, some of the more daring (and already intoxicated) individuals drew closer to regale Fai with tales and rumors they'd heard. It wasn't an altogether unfamiliar situation for Fai — he was the crown prince, and that fact tended to make people nervous around him, at first. He'd learned, though, that a well-placed smile here, a show of his humanity there, and he could be accepted into nearly any fold when he had been held on a pedestal before.

Seeing the prince in an open state of tipsiness tended to put the people at ease as well, and Fai was very much unopposed to engaging in such a way.<sup>4</sup>

It might have been hours that he lingered there, drinking and joking and laughing with the people to the point that they had drawn a crowd — people who had not been at the pub that evening, and perhaps only rarely patronized it, gathering in an easy revelry that Fai found himself swept up in. It was nice to feel like just another person, for a while, distanced from his own royal heritage.

"You know what — you know what this reminds me of?" one man asked the crowd at large, red-faced from drink and slurring over his words. "It's been, what, almost twenty years since the last time the prince defeated the demon wind?"<sup>5</sup>

Fai's breath caught in his throat and he froze with his drink nearly to his lips. This wasn't something he had heard of before.

"Right, right!" another person cut in, some of her drink sloshing over her glass as she swung her arm around. "You know I almost forgot about that?"

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<sup>4</sup> In TRC when the group is in Ceres, we see a memory of Ashura commenting on how Fai prefers liquor to food. Yuui in this story has the same affliction.

<sup>5</sup> Mithril has always been a part of Ceres, though it is right on the border, and that is how it escaped the Cataclysm the first time.

“He was so young then! And still so powerful — amazing. Couldn’t believe my eyes!”

“Wait,” Fai asked, gathering himself enough to put a hand on the first man’s shoulder, “I’ve done this before?”

He didn’t have a chance to hear the answer as just then a gust burst through the windows, sending glass everywhere as it forced its way past the panes, and Fai chased the gale outside after only a moment to gather himself from where he had instinctively blocked the shards. The wind whipped about, throwing up dirt and some of the lighter objects lying around as it spun on itself in a miniature tornado, and Fai wrote in the air, sending a sealing spell its way, only for it to be rebuffed with seemingly no effort at all.

At that moment, Fai hesitated, eyes wide in disbelief. That spell usually worked, and he had never seen it fail against an elemental entity before. It should have wrapped around the wind, packaging it neatly for Fai to dispose of properly, and yet —

The wind caught the cord of his necklace, and Fai grasped at the key when it floated into his vision, worried that it might be torn away in the gale, and the feeling of the key was hot in his hands for the brief second he stayed in control.

Then, it was as if something had pushed him to the back of his mind, and he felt as though he was watching himself from a distance. Fai struggled against the sensation, knowing full well the dangers associated with possession, especially at his own level of power, but nothing he tried seemed to do any good. The hand holding the key moved until it was central to his body before opening up, allowing the key to hover just above his palm.

With a start, Fai realized he could hear his own voice, dull against the wind. *“Key that hides the forces of darkness, show me your true form! By the covenant, I, Yuui, command you. Release!”*

The key lengthened slowly, revealing a silver staff with blue stones dangling near the top, and Fai was left feeling powerless as whatever force was puppeteering his body grasped it firmly.<sup>6</sup> Who was Yuui? Was it some spirit in the key? Why was it doing this now? How had it taken control over him so easily? He didn’t understand, and it felt as though the harder he tried to push himself back to the front, the further away control of his own body moved. Dimly, he found his voice was speaking again, wielding the staff against the winds. *“Return to the form which you were meant to be, Clow Card!”*

The staff pitched forward sharply, and before Fai’s eyes, the wind was drawn into the shape of a card, and it was only when that form solidified and started to fly his way that the staff returned to the shape of a key, and Fai was back in control of his own body so suddenly that he collapsed onto his hands and knees from the suddenness of it, leaving Fai panting in the dirt. As he

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<sup>6</sup> Though it is technically Fai doing this, he’s been an integral part of Yuui long enough that he was able to invoke the staff in his name. The cards, having a degree of sentience and some powers in conjunction with the staff, also supported the action.

snatched up the card, the villagers rushed forward in celebration, praising him for a job well done.

Fai allowed it, knowing it wouldn't do to show that the matter had been entirely outside of his own control. If nothing else, he had to maintain the peoples' faith in Ashura and himself, so he smiled in triumph and allowed himself to be swept away in their cheers not knowing that all the while, a pair of red eyes were scrutinizing the entire scene.

## The Fly



To say that Kurogane was displeased would be an understatement, and he made it known as he stormed into their shared room at the inn in a fit of temper. “Just how much have you been slacking, Tomoyo?”

Tomoyo only giggled from her seat at the table, tea already at the ready. “I can assure you, I’ve been quite busy, cousin.”

Kurogane doubted that, and he sent a finger her way in accusation. “You’ve been here six months — six months! — and you haven’t captured a single card!”

“Cousin — ” Tomoyo cut in, ever calm.

Kurogane just continued on his rant, throwing his cloak onto the bed in a snit. “And now that damn prince of all people has the staff and who knows how many cards, and — !”

“*Cousin,*” Tomoyo tried again, just a little more forcefully, taking up one of Kurogane’s hands and patting it serenely. “Do you trust your mother?”

“Yes,” Kurogane admitted at length, not because that was in doubt, but because he knew Tomoyo, and he knew she was walking him into a trap of some kind, using nothing but her words against him.

“And you trust my sister?” she asked as Kurogane plopped down into the chair across from her, hand still in both of hers.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, with an exasperated roll of his eyes, though whether he liked Kendappa or not was a completely separate matter.

“Then have faith that we have everything under control,” she advised, releasing Kurogane’s hand in favor of taking a sip of her tea. Kurogane hated how easily she was able to take all of this in stride, but maybe that was because she hadn’t been born yet for the previous debacle. 18 years ago, he had been sent here with the same mission he had now: find the Clow Cards and capture them so they would not bring harm to the people. He couldn’t remember exactly what had happened then, but he had failed, though not catastrophically so. The cards had been sealed, or at least made dormant, and Kurogane had returned home in shame, back then.

Six months ago, Kendappa had had a vision and had sent Tomoyo ahead to confirm if the dream had been true. It was only two weeks ago that Tomoyo had been able to prove that the cards were becoming active again and to send for Kurogane to join her. And now, just when Kurogane had been on the precipice of capturing a rogue card, sealing staff or no, that blasted prince had to step in, with the damn staff, and throw a wrench in their plans.

Or so he thought. Tomoyo seemed to have a different opinion. If she was hiding important information from him, Kurogane was of a mind to wring her neck. For now, Kurogane rested his cheek on a fist, considering what options they still had. “What do we do about the prince?”

“Nothing, for now,” Tomoyo declared, voice just short of making an order of it, despite being 13 years younger than him. “We will proceed as planned until ordered to do otherwise.”

Kurogane didn’t like it, but how he felt didn’t matter in this situation. He would collect and seal the cards, and if the prince proved himself to be a threat, Kurogane would destroy him. He would not return a failure again.

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The next week was a lesson in frustration for Fai. He began his research anew, but nothing in the castle’s vast archives had any information on Clow Cards, or a magic key, or of the elusive Yuui. Nothing in the hall of records had any information on previous attacks by a demon wind, much less any of Fai’s own involvement against such, or any other incidents prior to being found empty of everything all those years ago.

It wasn’t as though either the library or the records were not expansive — the library itself was the envy of neighboring nations for its breadth and wealth of information — that Fai would find absolutely nothing on any subject of his search didn’t make any sense.

Still, Fai wasn’t entirely empty-handed. He retained his memory of capturing the card, and the rituals he’d participated in in the act of doing so. He also wasn’t wholly unfamiliar with the concepts of them — will and whim carried on words to become binding forces through a conduit.

In fact, he was well-versed in the theory behind them. He wasn't completely blind and helpless, being a magician more accomplished than any he'd ever known — barring Ashura himself.<sup>7</sup>

That it had never occurred to Fai to involve Ashura in the search at all would be a fact that would evade him for some time yet.

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*The dream played out much in the same way the incident had occurred a week ago. The wind was strong, but so had been Fai, though these hands he had were much smaller than the ones he had now. He used the same words, wielded the same staff, met with the same results, but small things were different. Where it was nearly summer now, this dream had him surrounded by snow. Where he had fought alone before, the Fai in his dream could feel someone at his side — someone he didn't see, someone who was calling out, voice unclear. A single syllable. A name.*

Fai awoke in an instant, not startled but no less confused, and with the Windy card clutched in his fingers, though he had left it in the drawer the night before.

Fai didn't understand, but he intended to, and he would keep searching until he found his answers.

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This time, it had been a great bird, soaring across the skies, mostly harmless except for the sheer amount of food it consumed, threatening to cut dangerously into their stores when the harvest the previous year had already been weak. Once again, Fai faced it alone. Once again, his spells bounced off the beast like pebbles against a wall.

Once again, the key burned, and Fai took a chance.

“Key that hides the forces of darkness, show me your true form! By the covenant, I, Fai, command you. Release!”

Nothing happened.

The key remained dormant, and the great bird flapped its wings, sending Fai backwards with a yelp against the ground through the wind it generated. That couldn't be right, the key had responded to those words before. Surely, it would do so with Fai in command of his faculties. Nothing had changed.

Except, he realized, the name. Gathering himself, Fai tried again: “Key that hides the forces of darkness, show me your true form! By the covenant, I, Yuui, command you. Release!” That seemed to be the difference, and once again the key was expanding into a staff, and Fai rushed

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<sup>7</sup> Do not be mistaken. Yuui is just as ridiculously overpowered and versed in magical theory as his TRC self.

forward, ready to end the encounter with the next spell: "Return to the form which you were meant to — !"

The beast flapped again, sending Fai backwards once again before it dove his way, and Fai just barely managed to scramble out of its path before it struck down at where he had been lying moments before. He grimaced, staying out of sight for the moment while he thought through the situation. None of his spells had worked against the damn thing, and it wasn't going to leave him alone long enough to seal it. The bird had allowed him to cast spell after spell its direction, but had retaliated when he attempted to seal it, which meant the staff, at least, was a threat.

And if the staff was a threat, Fai realized, then perhaps something that had been captured with the staff would also be a threat. Fai reached into his pocket and produced the card he had captured a scant week before, deciding to use it as he had tried to use the bare wind minutes ago. "Card of wind, become a binding chain!" and he thrust the card ahead, bringing the staff forward to meet it before finalizing the command with its name: "Windy!"

The wind gusted forward, and just as Fai had hoped, it wrapped around the bird, forcing it to land and holding it in place. Taking his chance, Fai rushed to meet it, taking one more shot at the sealing spell. "Return to the form which you were meant to be, Clow Card!"

Just as before, the form of the bird broke up, manifesting into the shape of a card before coming Fai's way, landing easily in his waiting hand. With a dismissive wave, he released his spell over the staff, reducing it in form back to a key. "The Fly," he read aloud, studying the card for any hints he may have missed on the previous one — any clue that could help him understand just what was going on — but there was nothing there that he could see.

Needing rest, he gave up for the night and began the trek back to the castle, deciding any more research could wait until morning.

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Morning had Fai laying back on the bed, dangling the necklace with the key in front of him as he considered it. Using it to capture the wind could have been considered an isolated incident. Using it twice now had to be more than a coincidence. Would there be more cards to seal? Were there any other forms of magic that would work against them? Having to rely on unfamiliar magic made him feel like he was being manipulated in some way, like someone was backing him into a corner to see him lash out. To what end was he being pushed?

"Why do you respond to 'Yuui', but not 'Fai'?" he asked it mildly, half hoping that it would send him the answer if he only asked, but the key clarified nothing for him. It all set him on edge, but for now, there was nothing else he could do but keep his people safe. Eventually, all truths would emerge into the light, but right now —

Right now, Fai could protect what was his and hope whatever was orchestrating these grand events was not a malicious force.

## The Thunder



“Return to the form which you were meant to be, Clow Card!”

Fai was vaguely surprised to see it work, considering the staff was not touching the body of the card itself. He tucked the memory away with The Silent, glad to know he could use The Shadow in such a way, only for the feeling to be chased away by the sensation of eyes on him.<sup>8</sup>

He pivoted, darting in the direction he thought he had felt those eyes coming from, but when he reached the alley, a dead end, it was empty of any human life, not for the first time. With a quick motion, Fai dismissed the staff back into the shape of a key, staying alert even as he did so.

The last few incidents, the feeling of eyes had become ever stronger, and it was no longer something he could afford to ignore.

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“Windy, Fly, Shadow, Watery, Rain, Wood, Jump, Illusion, Silent,” Fai recited one by one as he placed the cards before him before finally grasping the cord around the key and removing it from his neck, placing it down by the cards, “And the staff.” Aside from the staff, all had been collected in just over a month, and Fai was still short on answers. As he had done before, he

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<sup>8</sup> In CCS, Sakura seals The Silent from another room by touching it with the shadow of her staff.

held his hand above the collection. “Items of magic, reveal your truths. Show to me your nature and origin.”

A faint glow passed from his hand to the cards in turn and finally to the staff before fading out of existence, but as every other time, nothing became clear to Fai. It was frustrating at best. Surely by now he must have gathered enough of them to be able to read through their magic. Either there were still a great many left, or whoever was releasing them was significantly more powerful than Fai himself was. He wasn't sure he liked either option.

Resigned, he gathered the cards back up again, slipping them into a velvet pouch before bringing the cord back around his neck. Even the internet hadn't seemed to hold any information for him. At this point, Fai was willing to accept rumors as plausible facts, but there had been nothing. It was as if the cards and the staff existed in an unbreachable void.

And then there was the growing sensation of eyes, watching him from somewhere that Fai had been unable to trace.

Maybe, he considered, it was time to bring Ashura in on the situation.

Fai liked to trust his gut, and when his instincts told him that he should try to solve this himself, he was quick to agree, but after such a long period, with magic so powerful and causing such trouble, surely there had to be a point in which he involved the king. Still, he hesitated to do so, not entirely sure why. He'd always been able to be honest with Ashura, and the man had never given him any reason why he shouldn't. So why did the very idea inspire such anxiety in him? Was it a fear that it meant a failure on his part? Was it the influence of these cards — and if so, could that influence be trusted? Or perhaps it was something else, something like the villagers remembering him conquering such a wind before when Fai's mind had no recollection of the events?

As a storm gathered outside, Fai continued mulling all of this over, hoping that an answer would come to him if he just thought hard enough, until the key again grew hot against his chest.

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“I've had enough,” Kurogane declared suddenly, after what had felt like hours monitoring Fai's actions together with Tomoyo, gathering himself to march outside and take matters into his own hands.

“Had enough of what?” Tomoyo asked as she watched Kurogane march toward the door.

Kurogane thought she was playing dense on purpose to rile him up. “Of waiting around while that damn prince collects all the cards.”

Tomoyo remained seated where she was, looking regal much like a princess in her own right. “We’ve been advised to observe,” she pointed out, knowing that what they’d been told to do no longer mattered once Kurogane’s mind was made up.<sup>9</sup>

“I’m not going to sit by and let that guy gather them up and do who-knows-what with them,” he shot back, visibly trying to keep a hold of his temper. Tomoyo was just the messenger; his mother and Kendappa were the ones issuing the orders. “Enough is enough.”

Tomoyo knew better than to intervene, especially when this had been something she had foreseen. Kurogane’s offensive powers far outweighed her own, and she had no desire to fight him besides. Still, there were other forms of magic she could wield with only words: “Be safe.”

Kurogane nodded once, and then he was gone.

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“Jump!” Fai managed at the last second, barely dodging the beast he had found — a creature of lightning he wasn’t sure he was equipped to defeat. It had burned through wood, was resistant to using Shadow the same way he had caught Silent the night before, and all his other elementals had simply fallen apart around its force. He’d just barely managed to force it to take its animal-like form as it was. It was all he could do to keep up defensive barriers and stay outside the thing’s reach, and it wasn’t giving him time to act, much less come up with a strategy to beat it. Maybe he could trick it with Illusion, he thought. At least that might give him enough time to plan, but as he thought to bring it to fruition, he landed on a bad tile and it slid loose under his foot, sending Fai crashing down on the roof, foot falling at an awkward angle.<sup>10</sup>

In the next moment, when Fai was expecting pain or possibly death, something interfered, and Fai looked up to see a man with a sword sending the beast tumbling back to earth. In amazement, Fai watched as it staggered to its feet, having clearly taken damage, but he didn’t have much time to wonder at it, because soon the man was barking orders at him. “Hurry up and wrap it in Shadow, idiot!”<sup>11</sup>

Not wasting any more time and only barely cringing when he put too much weight on his ankle, Fai obliged, and soon the beast was wrapped up nicely in an easy-to-seal package. Fai didn’t waste any time then, though he had his doubts on how effective the seal would be through another card: “Return to the form which you were meant to be, Clow Card!” It worked, Fai realized with a bit of breathless laughter, and the card flew into his hand as all the others had done. Now wasn’t the time to celebrate, however, and he faced this new man directly but with caution. Not that he allowed the suspicion to show on his face as he reverted to a smile as the

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<sup>9</sup> This is in parallel to Kurogane’s original attempt to seal the cards, where he reinterprets his orders. See Chapter 25: The Light.

<sup>10</sup> When Yuui doesn’t take it easy on his ankle after this, it weakens it permanently, leading to him injuring it again in Chapter 26: The Earth

<sup>11</sup> This is how the card is captured in the anime version of CCS.

man sheathed his sword, coming to land on the ground a scant meter away. “How did you know I have Shadow?”

The man scoffed, folding his arms in front of himself in a manner Fai assumed was supposed to be intimidating, but Fai was only relieved to see it. It was much harder to use magic when you didn’t have free use of your hands. “I know more about you than you think.”

“You’re the one who’s been watching me,” Fai concluded airily.

“Someone has to,” was the gruff response, and it told Fai more than Kurogane could know.

Fai did not rise to the bait. “What’s your name?”

“Kurogane,” Kurogane answered, hackles rising at the interrogation. “And you’re the unlucky prince.”

Fai, again, chose not to rise to the bait. “Well, thanks for looking out for me, Kuro-grump — ” Kurogane swiped at him for that, but Fai dodged the blow neatly, bringing Fly out for use instead “ — but it’s time for me to be getting home.” With that, he alighted on his winged staff, deftly flying well out of Kurogane’s range and waving down his way with a grin. “I look forward to our lasting friendship!”

“Fuck you, asshole!” Fai didn’t have to look back to know Kurogane was shaking a fist at him, but right now, that wasn’t his problem. Fai was exhausted and had an ankle to wrap, and was certainly in no shape to be fighting another magic user whose abilities he didn’t know.

“Kurogane, huh?” Fai mused as he approached the castle grounds. Whether Kurogane had intended to watch out for him out of kindness (which Fai doubted), saw Fai as a threat, or was the threat himself, having that name gave Fai a chance to continue the research which had ground to a halt. “Thanks for the lead.”

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“Did you get the card?” Tomoyo asked brightly, already knowing the answer as Kurogane stomped back into their room, heading straight for the bathroom for a shower.<sup>12</sup>

“Shut up,” he growled before locking himself away, and Tomoyo didn’t even try to stifle her giggle. Kurogane had always been a bit predictable.

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Fai didn’t get a hit on Kurogane’s name on any sites he spoke the language for, but he did find an obscure Japanese site that mentioned the name to be a title passed down along a family of sorcerers.<sup>13</sup> It wasn’t very surprising, and it explained why nothing came up when he attempted

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<sup>12</sup> Tomoyo knows full damn well he did not get the card.

<sup>13</sup> As Crown Prince, Yuui speaks multiple languages.

to scry the name before resorting to an internet search. Still, being a family title likely meant Kurogane wasn't acting alone, and that did give Fai pause.

If this family knew enough about the cards that they knew which ones Fai had, and that Kurogane could tell him off the top of his head that of the cards he had, Shadow was the one he needed to use, then maybe the cards belonged with them. Maybe it would be best to surrender the ones he had to them and wash his hands of the whole affair.

Still, Fai couldn't discount the fact that these incidents were happening in Ceres and not Japan, nor that the staff was responding to him — that the spell indicated a contract, and though Fai had no memory of entering into one, allowing the staff to fall into another's hands while he was in effect bound to it would not be a wise decision.

And Kurogane wasn't exactly the most friendly of characters, their albeit brief interaction had proven that. It was possible that his intentions were less than honorable. There was a good chance that he had been the one to release the cards on Ceres in the first place, though to what end, Fai could not be certain.

In any case, Fai needed more information, and with that in mind, he completed his notes and went to sleep.

## The Sword



*Again, his hands were so small, his voice so small, and the thunder beast was before him. Even in the dream, Fai could feel his fear, could see how his hands trembled where they held the staff.*

*And then, from his right came a huge breeze, and a gruff voice instructing him to use his sword. Fai did, his staff becoming one on command, and he struck down the beast before sealing it. He turned towards his ally and — <sup>14</sup>*

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Fai woke just a little angry at himself for choosing that moment to do so. He had no doubt that these dreams were of significance, and the identity of who had been at his side that whole time must have been important, and yet he could never stay within the dreams long enough to reveal them. This had been the first one where he had been able to hear their voice clearly, so he must have been making progress. Perhaps he wasn't strong enough, or maybe he simply hadn't collected enough of these cards. In any case, waking at such inopportune moments was immensely frustrating.

Another aspect of the dream stood out to him, though, and after a quick breakfast, Fai returned to his rooms and released the key into its staff form, being mindful of his sprained ankle still.

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<sup>14</sup> This is how Thunder was caught in the manga.

That much, he was already familiar with, but the dream had revealed another form that he would surely find useful. “Sword!” Fai called out with some confidence, only to be met with nothing.

Fai wasn’t too surprised. Fly transformed the staff as well, but he needed the card to do it. Perhaps in order to wield the sword, he would have to capture Sword as well, assuming Sword existed. Fai hadn’t yet dreamt of a card he hadn’t encountered, so it seemed unlikely that he should start now.

Or it would, until that night.

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Kurogane had detected the presence of the card while Tomoyo was downstairs eating dinner, so he wasted no time leaving to intercept. It didn’t take long for him to track the source down to a bleary-eyed woman attacking another, and he instantly recognized the weapon in her hand.

She may have been possessed by the card, but Kurogane was quicker and he disarmed her in an instant, letting her collapse there in the alley, surrounded by the debris she had been an accomplice to making. Kurogane didn’t know how long she’d been under its influence nor how many people she may have injured, but he also didn’t care. What was important was disabling the card in front of him before it could cause any more damage. Kurogane brought all his power to bear within his own sword.

And then his world fell away.

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For once, Fai had sensed something was wrong before the key on his chest reacted, and the intuition had him summoning Fly — which was rapidly becoming his favorite — again to investigate.<sup>15</sup> As he drew closer to the source, he slowed, eyes scanning through the carnage that drew a path through the back alleys in an already seedier part of town — one where money could buy anonymity and where Fai most certainly did not frequent when he had physical cravings to resolve, absolutely not.<sup>16</sup> Some people lingered, checking the damage to both people and property, and that made Fai’s stomach grow a little cold.

Up until this point, the cards had been relatively harmless. Sure they caused some damage and threatened to become increasingly destructive if let alone, but no one had been hurt — not until tonight.<sup>17</sup> Feeling a bit more urgent, Fai spent a little more of his power to move faster, sailing

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<sup>15</sup> With more exposure to the cards and their magic, Yuui becomes more sensitive to them and is able to sense them passively. Fai, working through Yuui, has to wait for the cards to communicate with him or catch the presence when he actively scans for trouble. Yuui’s preference for Fly is an early indicator of his wind affinity.

<sup>16</sup> Yuui absolutely goes around here to get laid under a glamour. This is alluded to again in Chapter 27: The Earthy.

<sup>17</sup> In CCS, we rarely see the cards be a threat to life and property. This is not so in this story.

above at speeds that made him a little queasy until a clatter below caught his attention and he dove down to the ground out of sight.

He cast Silent, hoping to keep the more nosy and foolhardy away from the scene, at least until they were through, and peered around the corner to see something he didn't quite expect: Kurogane bashing some crates open with a sword. Fai cringed a bit at the sight. He knew Kurogane was a potential threat, but he hadn't clocked him as the rampaging type. Kurogane had come off to him as someone who only dealt with their opponent directly, and was harmless to anyone not involved. Combined with the fact that anyone brazen enough to carry a sword like that was likely skilled with one, the sheer size advantage he held over Fai, and the major gaps of knowledge Fai had regarding Kurogane's skills and abilities, Fai wasn't looking forward to this encounter.

Still, he had to do something, and Fai selected the card he thought would be most helpful in this case. "Become a cage to hold my opponent," he whispered before tapping the staff to the card in his hand, "Wood!"

From his vantage point, Fai could see Wood spring up around Kurogane, halting him in his tracks, and it was with a bit of relief that Fai came out of hiding to check his work. Kurogane seemed good and stuck as Fai made his way around the magic trees, but something still seemed wrong. Kurogane's eyes, even as the man struggled in the hold, seemed empty, and the sheath at his side already held a sword, so where had he been storing that sword in his hand?<sup>18</sup> A sword, Fai realized slowly, that he had seen before.

It was pure instinct that had Fai leaping backwards just as Kurogane managed to cut away the branches holding him in place, just barely missing the swipe down that could have cleaved him in two. Fai was able to at least keep pace, leaving just enough room between himself and Kurogane to avoid injury, but his ankle was not pleased about it, and Fai knew he wouldn't be able to dodge forever.

He needed a distraction — anything to get Kurogane's attention focused elsewhere long enough for the man to hesitate — and Fai pulled out another card. "Take the form of the one he most loves, Illusion!"

Fai didn't wait to see if the strategy was effective, washing himself with a barrier as he rushed forward into Kurogane's space to slam his staff down over his hands.<sup>19</sup> Kurogane's grip faltered and the sword clattered to the ground. As Kurogane collapsed beside him, Fai's ankle also gave out, but he didn't allow himself a moment to correct his stance as his knee hit the ground hard. "Return to the form which you were meant to be, Clow Card!"

Card in hand, Fai used the staff to lever himself into a standing position, keeping as much weight off his throbbing ankle as possible. Using four cards in rapid succession in addition to his

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<sup>18</sup> Kurogane, being a magic user with training regarding the cards, is still aware and putting up a resistance to Sword here.

<sup>19</sup> This is the first fight where we see Yuui mix Clow's magic with his own.

own magic combined with the physical exertion was taking its toll, and it was only the fact that Kurogane was stirring and that Fai didn't want to telegraph his current weakness that Fai managed the will to keep standing. "Good morning," he called, taking a bit of joy in seeing Kurogane's face sour at his voice.

"You sealed it?" Kurogane asked as he pulled himself into a seated position. No questions about what happened or whether there had been any casualties — just whether or not the card was sealed. Either Kurogane was at least partially aware during the havoc, or it was beyond his capacity to express care regarding anything else.

Fai would remember that. "It's sealed," he confirmed. Distantly, Fai could hear approaching footsteps, and he wasn't exactly itching to be caught right then, so he drew Fly out one last time — it at least didn't seem to take as much of Fai's energy to wield as some of his other cards did. "You should get moving before the authorities get here," he advised, tapping the staff to the card.

Kurogane scoffed at that. "Like you can't stick around."

"I have my reasons," Fai assured him as he alighted the staff once more. "Take care, Kuro-grump!" With that, Fai soared away, leaving Kurogane to fend for himself.

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Fai woke late the next day — well, later than usual — and he cursed himself for it as he redressed his ankle and selected an ensemble designed for once to draw the eyes away from his legs.<sup>20</sup> Of course, he knew that he would need extra time to recover, but sleeping in too long would just draw suspicion, and he was still hesitant to involve Ashura, or anyone else, into the affairs.

As he entered the throne room, Ashura greeted him with a warm, amused smile. "Good afternoon, young Fai."

"Good afternoon, my King," Fai greeted in return, schooling his face carefully to keep how much his ankle was bothering him from showing as he settled beside Ashura. "Have I missed anything interesting?"

"The guard reports there was a rampage last night," Ashura replied easily. "It appears the perpetrator has not been apprehended."

Though he didn't know why, Fai felt a little relieved at the news that Kurogane had gotten away, and he decided to think more on that when he had a bit of privacy, instead electing to wave a hand vaguely. "Oh that?" Fai said, tone flippant. "It was a simple case of possession. I took care of it last night."

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<sup>20</sup> Yup, he's a leggy blonde.

“Ah,” Ashura said, not sounding surprised in the least.<sup>21</sup> “Then there would be no mortal criminal to be had.”

“Precisely.”

“And that was how you injured your foot,” Ashura continued, brightly.

Fai cringed internally at that. He should have known Ashura would notice. Ashura seemed to be aware of everything. “A minor sprain,” Fai explained, as if it were of no consequence at all.

Ashura’s hand found Fai’s and concern fell across his features. “If you are hurt, then you should be resting.”

“I’m resting now,” Fai assured, squeezing back. “I’ll stay off it, I promise.”<sup>22</sup>

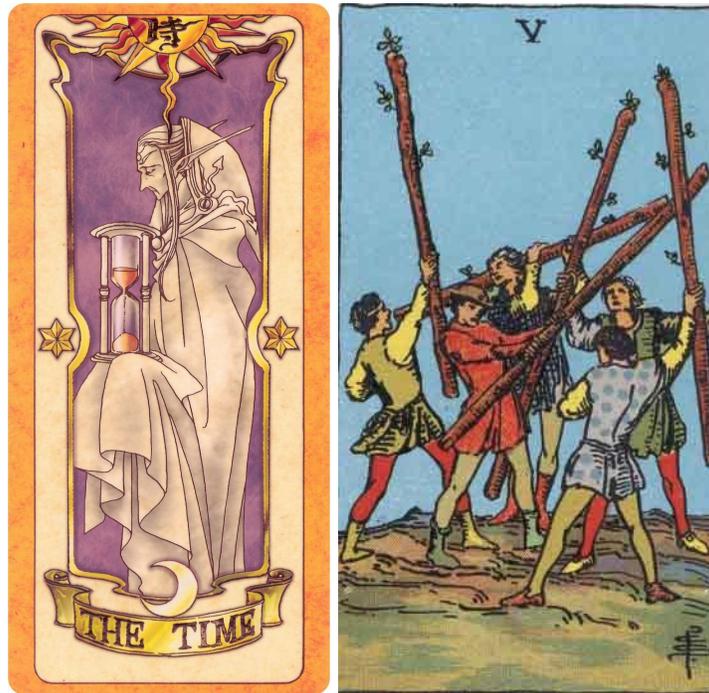
Ashura’s expression was dubious, but it seemed he elected to trust Fai just then, signalling for an attendant to bring Fai something for the pain, and Fai allowed it, knowing this was just the way Ashura showed that he cared for him. The sensation of it was warm in his chest as Fai basked in the feeling of being loved.

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<sup>21</sup> Ashura is in the know. See Chapter 28: The Nothing.

<sup>22</sup> Yuui is a dirty liar.

## The Time



It was as if the cards had known Fai was injured and took pity on him.<sup>23</sup> Over the next week and a half, two more cards appeared which were easily caught, barely requiring Fai's presence to do so, and he was secretly relieved. It was nice to know that there were cards that were passive, and nuisances at worst. It helped to soothe away the suspicion that the introduction of the cards had been an attack on Ceres, and some of Fai's anxiety about the situation had lessened. He didn't need that on top of the reports of an entire village being found abandoned just the week before.

Still, if it wasn't an attack, Fai still didn't understand the motive, and he was tempted to send the guard to find Kurogane and bring him in for questioning. The only reason he decided not to was that it would call his own actions into question, and Fai really didn't want the scrutiny just then.

Kurogane had been suspiciously absent in those two encounters as well, and Fai was left to wonder at why and what the man could be planning next.

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When Fai next sensed the presence of a card in the middle of the day, he took a car down to the market to try to follow its presence. Normally, it wouldn't be a terrible walk, but his ankle still

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<sup>23</sup> This is more or less exactly what happens.

wasn't quite healed and without knowing how potentially violent the card was, expediency was of the essence.

Once he got down there, he tried to take it easy, leaning upon structures for a bit of support to get some weight off his bum foot as he attempted to suss out the source, being too proud to walk about with a cane. It was difficult as the presence seemed diffused throughout the area, and for a moment, he thought maybe he had imagined the whole thing and thought it would be best to return home to the palace.

Then, he felt eyes, and glanced that way to spy Kurogane lingering about, eyes meeting his own as they both spotted each other. Kurogane levelled a glare his way, but otherwise didn't react, instead opting to continue whatever he was doing, which seemed to be to wander as apparently aimlessly as Fai had been just before.

Fai's nerves were calmed slightly knowing that Kurogane wasn't interested in causing a scene, but that didn't mean he should let the suspicious man out of his sight. As he made to move away from the wall he was resting against, though, a merchant grabbed his attention. "Oh, what a treat, what a *treat*, to see the Prince here among us lowly peasants. Perhaps I could interest his majesty in some of our wares?"

Fai regretted not having the foresight to cast a glamour over himself, but it was too late now, and not wanting to sour his reputation — Kurogane's remark weeks ago about being the Unlucky Prince still crept into his mind from time to time — Fai put on his best smile. "Oh, no thank you. I'm afraid I'm in the market for something very unusual."

The merchant waggled their eyebrows at that, voice dipping down to an innuendo. "Why, if the Prince is interested in some *unusual* merchandise, we certainly have some here in the back! Right this way, right this way." As the merchant set their hand against Fai's back, Fai realised he had lost sight of Kurogane altogether and, resigned, he allowed the shopkeeper to lead him to the back where indeed he had some very unusual items.<sup>24</sup>

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It was nearing midnight by the time Fai had made it back to the palace, completed his duties, and readied himself for bed. The merchandise of the shop certainly had been unusual, though not really something that piqued his interests. Still, Fai grimaced at the idea that the visit may spark a new round of rumors about him and his tastes, and that they may get back to Ashura later on.

He didn't have much time to think on that though as his eyes grew unnaturally heavy as the clock tower rang out the time, and Fai was swept under to the world of sleep.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> These items were sexual aids.

<sup>25</sup> This is an echo of how events preceded in CCS and also the Clow arc of TRC.

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The next morning played out much like the day before, and the presence of a card had Fai returning to the market as soon as he was able. The journey seemed as doomed as the first, however, when Fai found he once again could not pick up the trail. Nearly sulking, he folded his arms and rested against a wall, and as he glanced up, he again found Kurogane's red eyes staring his way.

Determined, Fai pushed off the wall ready to march his way, only to be accosted by the same merchant as the day before. "Oh, what a treat, what a *treat*, to see the Prince here among us lowly peasants. Perhaps I could interest his majesty in some of our wares?"

Fai faltered only a moment, wondering if this was a strange joke, though the shopkeeper seemed to be wearing exactly the same expression as before. Recovering himself, Fai erred on the side of patience. "Oh, no thank you. I'm afraid I'm looking for something very specific today."

The merchant hardly seemed perturbed as they placed their hand against Fai's back. "I can assure you, we cater to some *very specific* tastes here in the back! Right this way, right this way."

Again, Kurogane was gone, and Fai let himself be led to the back, certain that there was something strange going on here.

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It didn't stop with the shops. Fai worked through the same business he had the night before upon his return to the palace, and though he was able to finish the job more quickly, it did nothing to settle his growing unease. What was worse was that no one else even seemed to be aware of it, and when he brought the topic up to an aide, she had only asked if Fai was feeling under the weather, and suggested that he take an early sleep that night.<sup>26</sup>

As midnight loomed closer, Fai had taken to pacing despite his slight limp, trying to suss out exactly what was going on, but as the clock tower chimed the hour, Fai felt his strength leave him, and he collapsed unconscious to the floor.

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Fai awoke in his bed, uncertain as to how he got there, but he was starting to get an idea. He was served the same breakfast, and was put through the same morning exercises as he had the last two days he had experienced — the last two days which his staff had not. This time when he made it down to the market, Fai found Kurogane quickly, and the man jerked his chin once eye contact was made. Not having any better ideas, Fai followed him into the less-travelled alley.

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<sup>26</sup> In CCS it is determined that those with low or no magical ability were unaware of the repeating days.

“Were you planning on sealing the damn thing anytime soon?” Kurogane snapped as soon as they were away from prying eyes.

Fai, at least, made the effort to be diplomatic. “So it is a card, then?”

“Of course it’s a card!” Kurogane barked. “What else would it be?”

“Well, Kuro-pup — ” Fai took some delight in the sneer that crossed Kurogane’s face at that nickname “ — in my experience, there is a lot of magic in this world. It wouldn’t do to assume every incident is the work of a card without evidence.”

Kurogane loomed close, but Fai was not one to be easily intimidated. “If you want your evidence, it’s there in the clock tower. Now are you coming or not?”

“What’s wrong?” Fai asked with false innocence. “Can’t the big bad warrior seal a measly card all on his own?”

“Time isn’t a measly card,” Kurogane shot back before stomping away, and Fai, having no better plan, followed.

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By some miracle, Fai was able to talk Kurogane into waiting until the last of the attendants had left for the night before they made their move, citing that anything to trigger public panic would only make things more dangerous for everyone involved. So instead they waited, hiding away in a disused stairwell that led up to the top, where Kurogane proved himself to be more or less immune to all of Fai’s attempts to lure him into conversation.

If Fai was being completely honest, this truce made him more than a bit uneasy. Last he had checked, Kurogane wanted nothing to do with him, or at the very least was content to stay hostile. So why would he lead him straight to a card?

To be fair, Fai had met the man twice before — the first when Kurogane had saved his life and talked him through how to beat Thunder, and the second under the influence of Sword. Maybe Kurogane wasn’t such a bad guy — unsociable, but not an enemy. At the very least, he didn’t seem to want to wreak havoc on Ceres, unless of course, he was simply biding his time. Perhaps he needed Fai to collect more before he could make his move.

What Fai needed was more information, and Kurogane had clammed up tight.

Just as the sun was setting and the last of the attendants left the building, Kurogane’s eyes finally slid open to unerringly meet Fai’s. “Don’t startle it. If you do, we have to start over again tomorrow.”

Fai’s chuckle then was amused. “Oh~ so that’s what Kuro-grump needs me for! He couldn’t seal it with his mean, scary face.”

“Shut up,” Kurogane grumbled. “And it’s Kurogane!” he corrected as he started up the stairs, mumbling something like *Damned prince*.

“Whatever you say,” Fai commented airily, but shut up all the same after summoning forward his staff. In truth, he had no desire to live through this day again, and didn’t want to find out the hard way there would be consequences if the situation were allowed to continue for too long.<sup>27</sup>

Kurogane peeked back his way, spotting the card Fai had selected. “You’re not seriously going to try to catch it with Windy?” he shot back with a harsh whisper.

“I guess I could try to trap it in Shield,” Fai mused quietly.

Kurogane’s face told Fai that he thought him to be an idiot. “We’ll need Shield to protect us from Time’s effects. Don’t you know anything about these cards?”

“I understand the theory,” Fai began placatingly, “But I’m making up the details as I go. There’s not exactly a lot of information out there about these things, you know.”

Kurogane did not look reassured. “What cards do you have?”

Reluctantly, Fai pulled out his stack, 13 cards in all, and Kurogane studied them disapprovingly. It ticked Fai off, but he covered it with a grin. “How about you?”

Kurogane at least had the grace to look faintly embarrassed. “None yet.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, Kuro-sulk.”

Kurogane didn’t dignify that remark with a comment, and he returned to studying the assortment of cards. “Out of these, Shadow is your best option.”

Fai let a questioning hum escape his throat. “And why’s that?”

Kurogane sighed, a bit resigned. “Shadow falls under the Sun; Time and Windy are under the Moon. Time is a higher powered card like Windy, but we have a better chance with Shadow because the Sun tends to overpower the Moon.”<sup>28</sup>

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Fai commented as he put the unneeded cards back in his pocket, a little surprised that Kurogane would actually take the time to explain it all, though he supposed a well-informed ally was better than an ignorant one — assuming Kurogane was an ally, that is. “Ready?” Kurogane only nodded, so Fai called on Shield and they continued their ascent. It

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<sup>27</sup> This is a reference to the Clow arc of TRC. The people of Clow were stuck in a stable time loop that was disrupted by Syaoran, Mokona, Fai, and Kurogane arriving and changing things, leading to destruction.

<sup>28</sup> In CCS, Clow’s magic favored the Sun over the Moon, making the deck unbalanced in that regard. Sakura’s Star power becomes the balancing force. This is also reflected in their magic circles on the back of the cards.

didn't take long for them to climb high enough for Fai to spot Time sitting among the clockwork, and he sent Shadow along to wrap him up nice and tidy as he'd done before.

This time, though, the card managed to slip through and for a moment, Fai thought it would escape entirely so he readied a spell of his own, but as Time reached a window, it activated a ward that had been placed there, trapping it in an electric field. "Do it!" Kurogane commanded, and Fai complied only because he wasn't sure he'd get another chance.

"Return to the form which you were meant to be, Clow Card!"

Once the card was complete though, it floated up above Fai's head, and into the hand of one smirking Kurogane.<sup>29</sup> With a dark chuckle, Kurogane waved the card in triumph. "The card goes to whoever did the most to overpower it," he gloated, "I've won this one, prince."

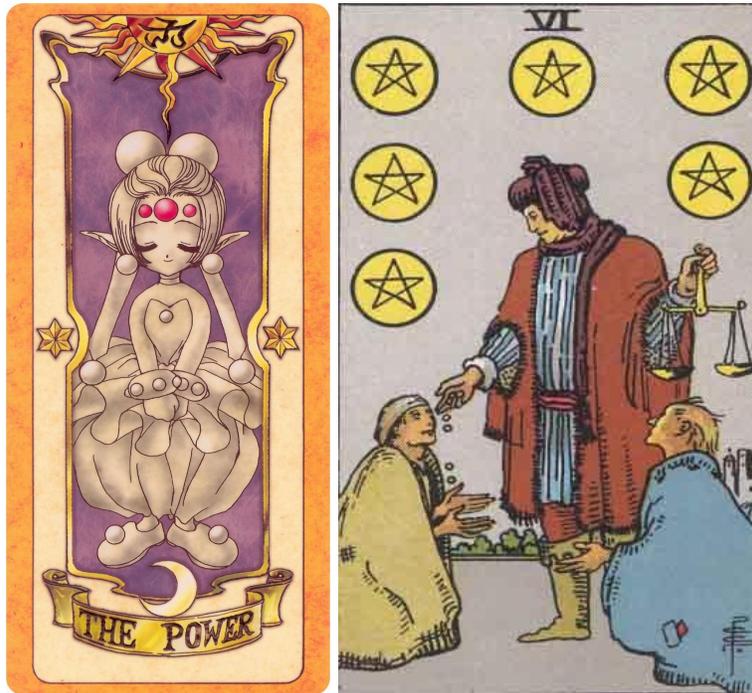
Fai glowered only a moment before hiding it behind a cool smile. He'd known from the start that there was something strange about Kurogane actively seeking him out, and yet he'd gone along with the plan anyway. There wasn't anyone he could blame but himself, and there was no shame in being out-maneuvered once as long as the damage was minimal — something Ashura had taught him long ago. Instead of dignifying Kurogane's victory with a response, he primly stepped over to one of the windows and effortlessly stripped off the wards there, relishing the surprise on Kurogane's face at how easily he could disarm them. The wards weren't weak things, but Fai wasn't either. If Kurogane really wanted to move against him, Fai intended to make him aware of just how outmatched he really was.

With a flourish, Fai activated Fly and settled regally upon his staff. Just because Kurogane won the battle did not mean Fai would cede the war. "I don't need a rival, Kuro-grump, so take care if you intend to make an enemy of me. Ta ta!" With that, he soared out the window and began the short flight home, leaving Kurogane alone with his victory.

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<sup>29</sup> In CCS, Syaoran also captures Time by tricking Sakura into sending it into one of his wards.

## The Power



To say that Kurogane was irritated at his victory cut short would not have been inaccurate. Certainly, he had heard the rumors about the prince being powerful, but seeing Fai strip away Kurogane's wards as if they had been inert pieces of paper was something Kurogane had not been prepared for.

And Fai's threat had not been an idle one, indirect as it was, that Kurogane was sure of. It seemed the plan to allow Fai to collect lower-powered cards and use trickery to collect the more powerful ones themselves — one Kurogane had not made himself, and wasn't all that proud to accept in the first place — was hopeless. Even if he could overpower Fai with the Clow, Kurogane doubted he would be able to beat Fai directly unless he was very, very careful, even having wrested control of Time.

"Is something bothering you, cousin?" Tomoyo asked from where she was playing a card game at the table, as if she was in any way unsure about the answer. She'd inherited the powers of a dreamseer and related abilities from the family line where Kurogane had not. He had no doubt that given time, and if she grew an inclination toward fighting, Tomoyo would eventually become stronger than he was. It was sheer dumb luck that she wound up being a pacifist. Kurogane was

a fighter and a tactician, but as far as magic went, he was useless without a conduit, and the best one he'd found so far had been his family's sword.<sup>30</sup>

Altogether, it painted a grim picture of their possibilities of accumulating the cards fairly. "We need to rethink our strategy."

"Oh?" she prompted, sounding disinterested, though Kurogane was sure that much was calculated. Tomoyo was a tactician herself, in her own ways.

"That damn prince is too powerful," Kurogane supplied as he crossed his arms, considering their options. "At this rate, he'll wind up with all the cards."

"Is that so bad?"

Kurogane glowered her way. "In case you forgot, we've been ordered to collect and seal them."

"We've been ordered here for harm reduction," Tomoyo countered, still keeping her attention on the game. Kurogane wasn't going to argue the specifics with her when they were both technically right. "If the prince gathers the cards himself, that's just less work for us, isn't it?"

"And how do you know he won't harm people with them?" he shot back, not understanding how she could be so passive in all this.<sup>31</sup> If Fai won the cards, then there would definitely be no way that Kurogane could stand against him — possibly not even with their entire clan to back him up.

"Call it women's intuition," she said with a laugh in her voice before finally glancing Kurogane's way. "We haven't received a negative premonition about the Prince yet. Have patience, cousin."

Kurogane, frankly, was sick of her shit and he snatched up his sword in preparation to get some space before he did something he regretted. "You might be comfortable gambling people's lives on dreams, but I'm not. If the prince proves himself to be a threat, I will cut him down."

Unphased, Tomoyo returned to her game, and when the very next card she drew was The Moon, she knew it was time.

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<sup>30</sup> I maintain that TRC Kurogane's sword attacks are not just energy and have a magical component. Historically, the ruling family of Suwa contained both warriors and high priests which were the living embodiments of the god Takeminakata, often depicted as a dragon.

<sup>31</sup> Kurogane is not sure if it was the cards themselves or someone who managed to obtain them that led to the Cataclysm that created the AUZ, and he definitely does not want a repeat. See Chapter 16: The Dash.

“A dreamseer, huh?” Fai commented after looking over the credentials he had been presented with as he lounged on his throne, Ashura absent attending to other matters of state.<sup>32</sup>

“I am,” Tomoyo confirmed, matching smile for smile, “And I would be honored to be permitted to study beneath you, Prince Fai.”

Fai was not a fool. The young lady before him and Kurogane at least had a similar ethnic background on top of both being magic users, having eyes of a similar shape and skin holding similar tones, though Tomoyo seemed pale in comparison to Kurogane.<sup>33</sup> To assume they were entirely unrelated would likely prove to be a grave error later on down the line. The question was why would she put herself willingly into Fai’s hands. Fai ached to know. “And?” he prompted, “Have you foreseen my answer?”

“I find that dreams frequently yield not answers, but more questions,” was her bright response, giving even the fakest of Fai’s smiles a run for their money.

Oh but she was a smart one, Fai thought ruefully, and certainly much more diplomatic than Kurogane was, almost disarmingly so. It was not necessarily a positive trait. Still, nothing about this young woman spoke to Fai as a threat, and he couldn’t deny that having her in his court could work towards his favor. “We have not had a dreamseer in our Court for some time,” Fai remarked. “I look forward to your service.”

If Tomoyo was satisfied, she hid it successfully behind a sweet smile and a well-timed hand to her face. “Thank you, my Prince.”

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Over the next several days, Tomoyo continued to be nothing more than a complete angel. Her manner was sweet and her wit was sharp as a tack, despite her young age. If Fai hadn’t known better, he would have sworn that Tomoyo had been navigating royal courts her entire life with the way she managed herself around him and everyone else she happened to cross. It almost made Fai jealous, the way she seemed to ease her way into the new environment seamlessly. Fai himself had needed years of training to be at her level, but Tomoyo seemed to have a talent for the often oblique ways of court.

So when Tomoyo came by Fai’s rooms one morning with a bland excuse of “Today would be a good day to take a walk, I think”, Fai knew there was something else there behind her words.

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At first, the walk seemed aimless, as though Tomoyo herself wasn’t sure which direction she wanted to go. For over twenty minutes, they meandered through town until suddenly, it was as

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<sup>32</sup> Ashura is not attending to matters of state and another border town goes missing before the events of Erase come to a head.

<sup>33</sup> I know this can be read as Yuui being a bit racist here, though I want to believe Tomoyo and Kurogane do look very similar and not in an all-asians-look-alike way.

though Tomoyo had caught the scent of something and she directed the two of them in a more assured fashion, heading toward the shipping district — not exactly the scenery Fai would choose for a mere walk.

“Tomoyo..” Fai began, but the rest of his question died in his throat when a great crash came from down by the docks. He made to dash that way, but Tomoyo caught him by the sleeve, not in a hold Fai couldn’t break, but still urgently enough to give him pause despite the shouting coming from the direction of the crash.

“It wants a challenge,” Tomoyo informed him unprompted, for the first time allowing some worry to overcome her smile. “You’ll have to beat it in a test of strength.”

Another crash sounded, followed by screams, and Fai knew they wouldn’t have time to argue, so he only fixed her with a stern look that brooked no arguments. “We’ll talk later,” he informed her, before taking his key in hand and rushing towards the scene.

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The prince, Kurogane concluded from his perch on the roof, was an idiot. Sure, it had probably seemed like a good idea at the time to throw up a barrier to contain the card — locking himself in with the thing was another matter entirely. It was a stroke of pure dumb luck that Kurogane had happened to be within its confines at the time. At first, Fai had attacked with Sword, which Kurogane had to admit was ballsy, but Power had been nearly unaffected by the attack, and that seemed to be where Fai’s plan fell apart. Kurogane watched for over ten minutes while the mage played keepaway, testing his other cards in an attempt to restrain Power, and he understood the strategy: use minimal energy; hope the damn thing tired itself out.<sup>34</sup> It would normally work, but not on a card like that one. At this rate, the idiot would pass out and Power would continue its rampage undefeated and barely weakened.

And Kurogane still wasn’t sure what Tomoyo was thinking. At first, he had assumed she had infiltrated the palace for intel — to prove once and for all whether the prince was a threat or not. He hadn’t expected her to lead him straight to a card at the first opportunity and provide advice, of all things. Not that the mage seemed to be taking it.

It wasn’t looking good, and Kurogane was sure he was going to have to make the call of either rescuing the prince himself or letting him die the moron he was when Fai managed to surprise him.

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Fai hadn’t thought he would actually manage to catch the pole when the card had swung it at him not unlike a bat, but he somehow kept his grip until his feet found purchase again, and he held it if only to not get knocked about the head with it. Besting the card in a sword fight hadn’t worked — which considering the lack of sword on the card’s side, seemed obvious now in

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<sup>34</sup> We see Yuui fight using a similar strategy 3 chapters later.

retrospect — and Fai was low on ideas on how exactly he was going to beat the thing. He was obviously outmatched in strength, and if this kept up much longer, there was a good chance the damn thing would kill him. It was unfair, seeing just how tiny it was. If nothing else, Fai should have been able to win by leverage alone.

Which, as it suddenly dawned on him, may be possible now that he actually had the pole between them. If he could just lift the card up and cause it to lose its traction, he could carry it to its defeat. Having no better ideas and not sure how long he could keep the card from wrenching the pole out of his grasp, Fai cried out “Tug of war!” and the card suddenly went still.

Consciously keeping his breathing under control even as his ribs protested each breath, and just glad that the card was no longer trying to bash his head in, Fai continued: “I challenge you to a match of tug of war.”

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“What the hell is he thinking?” Kurogane muttered to himself, thinking Fai must’ve taken a hit to the head to have such a dumb idea until he caught sight of the prince’s stance. Fai wasn’t planning on pulling, but lifting — carrying Power across the line magic drew in the sand to victory. Maybe the mage wasn’t such a moron after all, Kurogane thought absently as he watched, waiting for Fai to heft the card skywards and end the rampage.

Except, Power didn’t move, and that set Kurogane’s face to a frown. It shouldn’t have been that heavy, and Kurogane had no doubts that Fai had some enchantment up his sleeve to make himself strong enough to lift a pole with a child on the end high into the air, but it seemed they were deadlocked. It had to be magical interference of some sort, he concluded irritably, which meant the mage was going to lose, and Power would be free to continue as it pleased. Already there had been injuries. Unchecked, there would probably be deaths as well, and Kurogane wasn’t confident that he could overpower the card himself if it could be tricky in such ways — no one could.

Which meant the mage *had* to win.

Cursing himself, Kurogane drew out his sword and the only card in his possession, before activating Time and leaping down to the ground below. He only hesitated a moment before ducking down and cutting below Power, turning what had been solid ground below its feet into loose dirt and gravel, before returning to where Time was waiting and cancelling the spell.

Time resumed. Power lost its footing and fell to the ground allowing Fai to seal it, and Kurogane only had a vague hope that his contribution would earn him the card, but as he figured, it flew straight to Fai’s waiting hands.<sup>35</sup> Kurogane told himself that this was fine. No one else would be

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<sup>35</sup> This is very similar to how Power was caught in CCS. Syaoran stopped time and got the tug-of-war grip out of Power’s hands, causing it to lose the match. This card also went to Sakura.

hurt today, and so it was fine if the mage got one more card. Kurogane would just have to catch the next one, that was all.

He caught Tomoyo's knowing eyes only momentarily before he slipped away to return to his room. She could think what she wanted; Kurogane had his duty, nothing more.

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Fai had to hand it to Tomoyo, she didn't look nervous in the slightest, though that possibly had to do with the fact that Fai had decided to conduct the interrogation over tea. Truth be told, Fai was exhausted and in no mood to play the part of a brute, especially with the bruised ribs catching that pole had earned him. Besides, something told him Tomoyo would be more receptive to friendliness anyway. It was all smiles between them when Fai picked up his cup after dismissing his attendants. "I take it you are aware of the situation?"

"More than you are, it seems," Tomoyo replied, voice not unkind — just stating a fact.

"Quite," Fai returned, not offended. "Would you care to enlighten me?"

Tomoyo hummed to herself briefly before wondering aloud, "Where to begin?" She only considered a moment longer before coming to a decision. "You may want to write this down."

Fai produced his phone and set it to record, placing it between them face up. "Will this do?"

Tomoyo clapped her hands in front of her. "Perfect! Now — " and she launched into a brief summary of the Clow Cards and their structure: 52 known cards falling under two jurisdictions, split into 3 houses each, created by a great magician who had passed long ago by combining Eastern and Western magic. Each card possessed great power, and it was rumored that whoever could collect them all would become the new master of the deck. The cards had been missing for some time, and had been thought to have reemerged earlier this century, but had apparently vanished again until recently.

"And how did you come upon this information?" Fai asked with some cheer. The information Tomoyo had provided seemed plausible enough, and Fai chose to believe he could trust that she at least believed she was conveying the truth.

"The knowledge has been passed down my family line," Tomoyo returned briskly.

Which explained why Fai couldn't find the information elsewhere, he realized. "A family with magical abilities?"

"For the most part."

"Of which Kurogane is included?"

"No comment."

That gave Fai pause. It seemed there were limits to Tomoyo's helpfulness. Fai tried from a different angle. "Are you able to confirm your relationship with Kurogane?"

"I'm afraid I have only been authorized to provide you information about the Clow Cards and myself, my Prince," Tomoyo came back, still sweet as sugar and calmer than the shores of Ceres.

"And your dreams?"

"When appropriate."

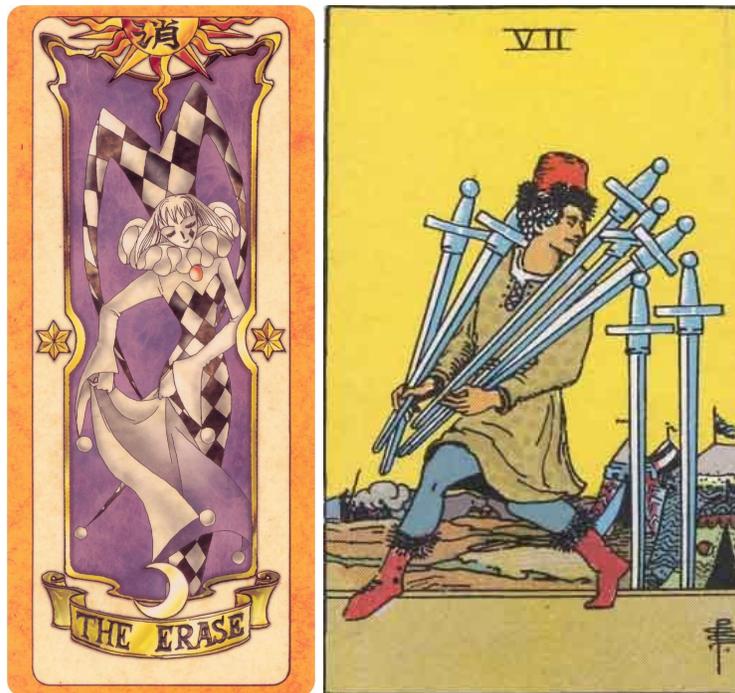
Fai sat back in his chair at that, smile relaxing just a bit as he mulled that over. If Tomoyo was following orders, then it would be prudent to take any information she provided with a grain of salt, plausible as her explanation may have been. She seemed trustworthy, but Fai himself had been schooled in how to appear trustworthy — it wouldn't be a stretch to assume Tomoyo had gone through the same. And she hadn't denied Kurogane entirely — not even bothering to question who he was before declaring that she had nothing to say on the subject.<sup>36</sup> That in and of itself was telling. Only time would tell, Fai decided, and he set his cup down with some finality, though he maintained his congeniality. "Thank you, Tomoyo. You're dismissed."

Tomoyo did not seem bothered at all, but still made no move to stand. "If it's all the same to you, my Prince, I would prefer to stay." The way her smile brightened just then made Fai want to believe she was well and truly on his side. "You are the one who holds the sealing staff afterall!"

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<sup>36</sup> This was a deliberate choice on her part and an example of Tomoyo's penchant for malicious compliance. She is still following orders by not discussing Kurogane, while letting Yuui know she is familiar with him by not pretending not to know him at all.

## The Erase



It was with some reluctance that Fai sealed the Storm away, knowing it would fall to Kurogane, but the choice was to do so or risk it becoming active again, and so he did it. Kurogane didn't even bother to gloat, just snatched up the card and stalked away.

It was frustrating, but not unbearably so. Fai had 15 cards in his possession, and to his knowledge, Kurogane had two. It was more the fact that Fai was the one still expected to seal them away, knowing that Kurogane would receive them that ticked Fai off. If Kurogane really wanted the cards for himself, why couldn't he muster up the power to do so himself, and if that was impossible, then it would have made sense that he would have at least tried to steal the key by now — along with the cards in Fai's possession.

He didn't, and Fai could only guess at why.

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Another couple weeks went by and Fai caught another card (with no interference from Kurogane — it turned out the man did not have the means to become airborne, and so Fai had had the advantage when capturing the Float), bringing the total to 16-2.

Tomoyo, at the very least, seemed pleased by the turn of events. "You're doing very well, my Prince," she commented during the walk home, "We're already more than a quarter way done!"

It would have been encouraging if Fai's mind hadn't been elsewhere. It seemed as though people were disappearing with increasing frequency, and no longer just in the borderlands, but right here in the capital. Some disappearances had even been reported by loved ones who had turned to the guard in distress — family and friends apparently vanishing without a trace.

"Prince?" Tomoyo cut into his thoughts, concern evident on her features, and Fai felt vaguely guilty for worrying her so, so he smiled wide and waved his thoughts away.

"It's nothing. Now, about Illusion..."

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"And no one else has come or gone?" Fai asked the guard again, just to be certain.

"No, milord," the guard confirmed. "Our outposts have no record of anyone leaving town by road."

"Thank you," Fai said, keeping his pension off his face, "Dismissed." It was only when the guard had left and Fai was the only one remaining in the conference room that he allowed the worry to come over his features. He could feel the life forces within the city dwindling, and yet there were no reports of people leaving, except in the name of regular trade, and no bodies to be found. It simply didn't add up, and the remaining people in the capital were uneasy — much longer, and he would have a panic on his hands.

Perhaps, Fai considered, it was time to issue a quarantine, but to what end? If it were a disease, there would be bodies, or at least beds taken at the hospitals, and yet there seemed to be no sickness. And who knew how long a whole family could be disappeared without anyone realizing if people were confined to their homes.

Two sharp knocks at the door had Fai pulling his mask back on again. "Enter," he called, and was answered by Tomoyo sweeping into the room, velvet pouch in hand. "How can I help you, Tomoyo?"

"I think, my Prince," she began, settling in the seat to Fai's right, "That I can help you. I've been reviewing your cards." And here she drew them out one by one, naming them in turn: Windy, Fly, Shadow, Watery, Rain, Wood, Jump, Illusion, Silent, Thunder, Sword, Flower, Shield, Power, Mist, and Float. "And of course, Time and Storm have also been captured. That is 18 cards, 5 of which are of air, and 4 of those you have. It indicates you have a strong affinity for air, which is associated with information."<sup>37</sup>

Fai picked up Windy, turning it idly in his hands. All he had done was catch them as he found them. It didn't necessarily indicate an affinity he had — not unless the key and his own personal

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<sup>37</sup> This is true in a lot of Western magic, including astrologically. Yuui, (arguably) a Gemini (CLAMP has established his birthday as June 21, which can fall into Gemini or Cancer depending on the year, what time, and where he was born), would be an air sign.

affinities had something to do with how the cards became active, a possibility he wasn't ready to dismiss outright. "And you think I should be able to use them to scry?"<sup>38</sup>

"Yes," Tomoyo confirmed, gathering up the cards of the remaining elements and setting them aside. "We don't have enough cards for detailed readings, but between your affinity and these four cards, simple yes-or-no questions and directions should work. First, you must clear your mind of all other thoughts."

Fai took a deep breath through his nose, held it a few beats, then released it through his mouth slowly, emptying his mind in a way he had practiced many times before. Tomoyo talked him through placing the cards: Windy at the top, Float to the right, Fly to the left, and Jump at the bottom, all facing outwards from the center.

"Now, hold your key above the center, and ask your question," Tomoyo directed.

Fai hadn't really thought of what to ask, more interested in the knowledge of how to perform the divination than to actually seek out any knowledge, but it was almost as if one came to him completely unbidden, and Fai let it loose: "Are the disappearances the work of a card?"

Nothing happened, but Tomoyo was not discouraged. "It helps to be very specific."

Fai tried again: "Are the disappearances in this city the work of a Clow Card?"

The cord grew taut within his hands as if the cards were pulling on it and the key glowed softly a few moments before growing dim again. Tomoyo clapped her hands together silently with excitement. "That indicates a yes!"

Fai had not expected that. He hadn't even felt the presence of one; the key itself hadn't grown hot. "Is it within my current ability to capture?" Again it glowed and dimmed — another yes. It wasn't encouraging. Between the key and his own senses, he'd been able to detect the work of active cards fairly reliably until now. Having one he couldn't sense was troubling at best. "Which direction is it in?" At that, the key pulled sharply, and Fai mentally reviewed how the room was positioned within the castle to determine it was indicating toward the northwest. "Is it inside the castle?" At that, the key drew downwards again, but stayed dim.

"It must be outside," Tomoyo indicated, confirming Fai's interpretation.

"Do you know what card it is?" Fai asked her, and Tomoyo considered the question a moment.

"There are a few possibilities," she hedged. "Move, Loop, Maze, Through, or Return could be hiding people in spaces that aren't easily accessed, but if people are really disappearing, then the only one that could do that would be Erase."

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<sup>38</sup> Later in CCS, Kero also instructs Sakura on how to do readings with the cards, leading to the capture of Mirror.

Fai did not like the sound of that, and he made to stand without further delay. "Let's go."

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Fai had taken them almost a mile away from the castle using Fly before he was able to pick up on the card's trail, and when he saw where it ended, he almost wished he hadn't. He touched down just outside the cemetery, hopping off the staff first to help Tomoyo down. It made him a bit anxious knowing the card was somewhere in the graveyard — an association with disappearances possibly using death to power itself wasn't exactly a good omen.

"How are your defensive spells?" Fai asked her.

Tomoyo cast her eyes into the graveyard, calculating. "I think it would be best if I waited outside," she decided, much to Fai's relief. He could scarcely believe how quickly he was becoming attached to her. "If it is Erase, you should be able to seal it if you can force it to reveal its real body."

"And if it's not?"

"Move and Through are tricky; you'd have to immobilize them first. And you would have to escape Loop, Maze, or Return before you could seal them."

"Alright," Fai said, nodding as he turned his gaze toward the entrance, trying to get a better read on the situation, but nothing seemed to pop out. "Don't follow me unless you have to."

"Understood," Tomoyo agreed readily, and Fai had to wonder if she knew more about what was happening than she let on.

It would be a question for another time, though, and Fai did not intend to delay any longer and allow more people to fall prey to the card. With that in mind, he took a breath and stepped into the cemetery.

Fai hated places like this. He wasn't sure if it was his magic or the dead, but they seemed to cling to each other any time he visited, making his powers slow to react and overwhelming his senses, and tonight was no different. He felt vaguely sticky, as if he were working his way through the mire. Though he couldn't sense the individual spirits themselves, their sheer numbers nearly drowned out the presence of the card entirely, vying for his attention — though for what purpose, he couldn't be sure. It had been that way as long as he could remember.<sup>39</sup>

The tattoo on his back itched.<sup>40</sup>

Since he couldn't feel out where the card was directly, Fai began to search methodically, walking up and down each row in turn, waiting for the moment when the presence of the card would

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<sup>39</sup> In CCS, Sakura is sensitive to spirits, though she can't see them. Her older brother Touya can actually see them.

<sup>40</sup> Fai is accumulating power himself for what he has to do later in the chapter.

overwhelm the dragging sensation of death all around him. With a great degree of self control, he did not hurry. If he was hasty, he could possibly overlook something vital, and he had no intention of staying here any longer than strictly necessary.

After what felt like hours, Fai came upon a grave under a willow tree, and the presence of the card finally emerged as the most urgent over everything else that lingered among the corpses. Fai closed his eyes, holding the card he had selected close to his chest and feeling out the movement of energy around him, trying to pick up on any catch or drag that could indicate an anomaly.

When he found it, Fai didn't hesitate, turning on his heel and activating the attack: "Thunder!" It worked, and the presence separated itself from the gravestone it had been occupying, and Fai swiftly sealed it away.

He caught the card easily, though he was feeling taxed both physically and emotionally, and it was with a bit of trepidation that he opened his eyes. To his relief, the marker was undamaged, and without a thought, Fai let his eyes rove over the name.

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"Fai!" Tomoyo called, rushing forward. She had entered the grounds once she had sensed the card separate from the host body it had hidden itself within, feeling uneasy, and she had rounded the corner just in time to see Fai collapse to his hands and knees. "Prince, are you alright?" she asked, hands finding each of Fai's shoulders as her eyes checked for damage.

Fai shook his head roughly, as if confused on just how he had gotten into such a position in the first place, but his smile was soon back, obscuring his thoughts from his face. "I'm fine, Tomoyo. I must have blacked out when I caught the card."

Tomoyo could feel her eyebrows gathering together. That wasn't right. Fai had caught the card and there had been a delay of several seconds before he had dropped like he had been struck. Just then, Tomoyo's eyes flicked to the gravestone that had been host to the card, and a sense of dread washed over her.

"I promise I'm fine," Fai assured her, likely misreading her expression, though his words called Tomoyo back to the present all the same. "I'm sorry to have worried you."

Tomoyo helped him stand wordlessly, clamping down on her concern. This was *Fai* in front of her, alive and a little worn out, and with a newly sealed card in hand. The present had to come first.

Fai was walking with his own strength by the time they exited the cemetery, and he seemed to perk up immediately as soon as they were beyond the gate. "They're back," he murmured with a bit of awe.

“The missing people?” Tomoyo asked.

Fai nodded. “I can feel them. They’re really back.” His gaze dropped to linger almost fondly on the card in his hands: Erase. “They’re all okay.”

Tomoyo ushered him on. “They’re okay, but you need some rest.” Fai, thankfully, did not protest that, and as they were flying back to the palace, Tomoyo could not keep her thoughts away from just what she had seen on that marker.<sup>41</sup>

Fai Fluorite

1989 - 2000

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<sup>41</sup> Yuui’s memories are closely tied to both his name and Kurogane. If he knew that whoever originally had his name had died long ago, Fai feared that Yuui would remember prematurely and put Kurogane in danger doing so. To prevent this, he removes the memory of the marker. See Chapter 29: The Hope

## The Glow



And you're sure that's what it said? – KS

It's still there if you want to check it yourself – TD

That doesn't make sense. The idiot is clearly still alive – KS

Then who is buried there? – TD

I don't know – KS

Stick close to him – KS

Of course – TD

Tomoyo wasn't sure what to make of it. The magic that lingered on Fai's gravestone when she returned to check it the next day wasn't of the Clow, which could only mean someone else had enchanted it. It explained why Fai had been affected by it — why he hadn't seemed troubled after finding what appeared to be his own grave — he didn't remember seeing it.

Erase being drawn to that marker in particular suddenly made a lot more sense.

Even worse, there was definitely a body down there — one that seemed of the appropriate age. It destroyed the theory that Fai had been near death and the grave had been prepared in advance, only to not be needed. Someone had died and had been buried as Fai, or Fai had died and the prince was not Fai.

Tomoyo wasn't sure which possibility was worse.

Her dreams revealed nothing, though, so all she could do was report back as necessary and continue under the guidance sent back to her, and hope that the answers would reveal themselves in time.

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"Will you be joining us at the festival?" Fai asked sweetly over lunch, mood much improved now that the disappearances had been solved.

"Festival?" Tomoyo asked, tilting her head lightly to the side.

"To celebrate everyone coming back," Fai provided before his smile morphed into something a little more sly. "Have you ever been to a real, Ceresian party, Tomoyo?"

Tomoyo hid her giggle behind a hand. "I'm afraid I haven't had the opportunity."

"You're in for a treat," Fai assured her, grin wide and wistful. "No one in the world parties like we do. I can't wait to see what they've thrown together this time."

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Fai's invitation gave Tomoyo enough time to design and throw together an outfit for the occasion. It was with no small amount of cheeky glee that she selected a fabric with moons stitched into it. It had turned into a private game — seeing how long she could project her obvious affinity with the moon before Fai commented on it. Not that she thought the man was dense by any means, he simply had a lot on his mind of late. Once she was found out, though, it would be interesting to see how long it would take before Kurogane's affiliation with the sun was discovered as well.<sup>42</sup>

Tomoyo was a firm believer in finding joy where one could, besides. The world was terrible and terrifying enough as it was. No one could begrudge her a little harmless fun now and again.

The next few days seemed to fly by, even without any new cards to add to the excitement. All around town, the energy seemed to grow in time with the decorations. What had been a time of quiet joy and relief at the return of those who had been lost was ramping up to anticipation of a party the likes of which the capital had never seen.

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<sup>42</sup> Between Tomoyo, Kurogane, and Fai's star power, we have the 3 powers in CCS accounted for.

It started with baubles in windows, little figures made of grasses woven together and decorated in clothes frequently in shades of blue — a color that seemed to be a running theme later on. Doorways and window frames were soon painted the color as well, chimes of silver hanging over each and tingling softly in the breeze. As the day of the festival came nearer, streamers of silver and blue were strung above the walkways and the streets began to fill with the scent of cloves and cardamom.

“Blue represents the thaw,” Fai had explained once she had thought to ask, “It’s the color of the water once the ice has melted away, signalling warmer days ahead. And silver is the color of the glimmering horizon just before the sun rises over the sea. A lot of people believe the colors bring good luck and prosperity.”<sup>43</sup>

It was very different from what Tomoyo had grown up around, but delightful all the same.

The day the festival was planned to begin, a pregnant hush fell over the city. Streets that were typically busy were practically deserted, and Tomoyo had found even the prince had slept in later than usual — an attempt to get some extra rest before the fun began in earnest.

As the sun approached the western horizon, the town slowly began to come alive. First came those who specialized in goods to consume, bakers preparing spiced pastries, chefs cooking up their richest meals, brewers selecting the best of their wines, beers, and meads for the night ahead. Then came those with stalls for games in their storefronts, so that the skilled could win what wares they made. Finally, as the sun vanished and people began to take to the streets — some in masks and some with open faces, but all in the best blues and greens and silvers they could find — the air began to fill with the sounds of flutes and strings and drums, and the festival began.

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Tomoyo had thought Fai was being a bit silly at first when she spotted him. He had opted for a blue robe shot through with silver thread of a material so light it seemed to float on the autumn breeze. He’d braided small plaits in the top layers of his hair that held little silver stars woven in, of a style that matched his ear pieces and other adornments. But the thing that had amused Tomoyo was the wooden fox mask that covered the top half of his face enchanted with a glamour that would keep a regular person from recognizing him on sight, but wasn’t so strong that someone of Tomoyo’s power couldn’t see right through it. “Keeping a low profile?” she asked as they grew closer to the festival grounds.

“It’s a lot more fun this way,” Fai returned in good humor, making a beeline already for the first stall he spotted with alcohol available. “Do you drink, Tomoyo?”

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<sup>43</sup> In many East Asian countries, the colors red and gold represent good luck and prosperity. As Kurogane is often shown in red and Fai with blue, I thought it would be fitting that their cultures would mirror them with a gold/silver theme as well.

"I'm still a bit young," she said with a laugh in her voice, "But you have fun."

"Oh, I will," he assured her, and drank deep.

Fai made good on that promise. With his artificial anonymity, he easily mingled in with everyone else, and not an hour in, he was arm and arm with other revelers, dancing to whatever jaunty tune the musicians had blessed them with at the time. Tomoyo didn't think she'd ever seen the prince look so genuinely happy as he did just being a regular person in the crowd, though she was content to watch from the sidelines watching both the dancing and the street performers who had come out as well.

With a mischievous grin, Fai broke from the line and approached Tomoyo, taking both her hands in his own and coaxing her away from the wall. "Come on, it's a party!" Tomoyo couldn't say no as Fai led her in a looping, spinning dance full of laughter as they barely dodged the people around them. The song was quick and their steps were light as they twirled and swooped among everyone else celebrating the return of loved ones thought to be dead but only hidden.

Tomoyo had glanced away just a moment, a cute girl catching her eye, and she missed whose arm had raised just at the wrong time, sending Fai's mask sailing off his face and clattering to the ground.<sup>44</sup> Fai startled and stopped their dance abruptly, unease showing on his face over his tipsy flush briefly before a paper grin covered it up, and someone to the left gasped. "Oh look! It's the prince!"

"The prince?"

"Prince Fai's here!"

All at once, it seemed that the crowd rushed forward, shouting questions and comments in an overlapping cacophony even as Fai tried to step back to maintain some space. For a moment, Tomoyo thought they'd be crushed in the clamoring commotion, but Fai kicked his mask back into one hand and took one of Tomoyo's wrists in another, and he darted away, dragging her behind him even after they broke free of the crowd. He pulled her through streets and alleys, holding the mask firmly to his face and expertly dodging around partygoers who had no idea why someone would be running such a way in the first place until, finally, they came upon an isolated tree in a grassy area, and Fai collapsed beneath it in a fit of laughter, clutching one arm against his aching ribs as he did so.

"We made it!" he cried, rocking onto his back and letting the giggles subside.

"Yes, we did," Tomoyo agreed a bit breathlessly, sitting beside him with the same humor. "I can see why you brought that mask."

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<sup>44</sup> This is where Tomoyo first sees Sakura.

Fai pulled it away from his face with a grin, not needing it in the small amount of privacy they'd found. "I told you, I can have more fun with it."

"That you can," Tomoyo agreed, looking back in the direction from which they had come, where the festivities were still lively. "They really love you, don't they?"

Fai sat up, robe sliding off his shoulder a bit from the motion, but Fai neglected to put it back just then. "They think so, anyway," he replied obliquely, turning the mask over in his hand.<sup>45</sup>

Tomoyo spied some ink peeking over Fai's shoulder, and it resonated with her magic as her eyes fell upon it. Feeling curious, she pointed it out. "What's that?"

Fai glanced down, following the line of her finger to his tattoo, regarding it with a smile. "It's a limiter," he said, touching the edge of the ink lightly, fondly.<sup>46</sup> He seemed lost in his thoughts for just a moment before he continued: "When people found me as a child, my magic was completely out of my control, destroying everything it touched. They thought they were going to have to kill me to stop it. Ashura managed to pull it back, and he gave this to me so that I never have to worry about it again.

"Of course, it doesn't stop it completely," he added with a laugh in his voice. "I obviously still have my magic. But it keeps me and everyone around me safe from — well — me," he finished with a little quiet self-deprecation.

"How did he pull it back?" Tomoyo asked, curiosity open on her face. Usually, when someone's magic ran amok, it would either tear them apart, or continue the cascade reaction until their power had been burned up so completely it would never regenerate again. She'd never heard of a successful recovery like Fai's before.

"I don't know," Fai admitted, not sounding sad or uncertain at all, his trust in Ashura open and complete. "I can't remember anything before waking up in the castle, but Ashura's cared for me ever since." Fai hugged his knees to himself, smiling gently Tomoyo's way. "I don't know what I'd do without him."

Tomoyo opened her mouth to say something, but it was lost in surprise as lights began to twinkle overhead, soft and faint, but growing in number within the tree. Slowly, they descended, floating down like snow all around them, and Fai reached forward to catch one with his hand. "It's warm," he remarked, drawing it closer to his face without fear, a flash of recognition making its way across his features.

"They're beautiful," Tomoyo murmured, looking around and only seeing them falling beneath the tree they had found. "Is this..?"

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<sup>45</sup> Yuui has the internalized belief that he's a monster and it's hard for him to believe anyone but Ashura would love him.

<sup>46</sup> In TRC, Ashura gifts Fai with a limiting tattoo so that he could make use of suppressing the growth of Fai's powers for his own ends.

“A card,” Fai declared, pulling out the key he wore around his neck even now, and the surety behind the statement interested her. Fai must have been getting stronger despite his limiter to be able to detect a card when she could not, and Tomoyo had to wonder at what would happen the day Fai would overpower it completely.<sup>47</sup> “Key that hides the forces of darkness, show me your true form! By the covenant, I, Yuui, command you. Release!”

Tomoyo kept the surprise off her face at hearing Fai summon the staff for the first time and the name he used to do so. She watched as Fai sealed the card away from where he was sitting in the grass, tucking it away and dismissing the staff almost effortlessly, despite the obvious incongruity. “Yuui?”

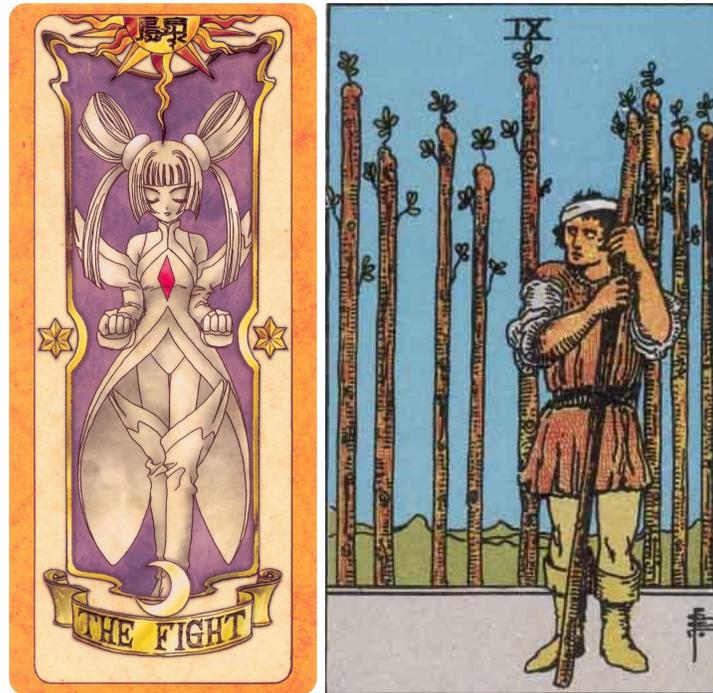
“Yeah, it only responds to Yuui,” Fai replied, still relaxed and visibly happy, having long accepted that this was another mystery that could only be revealed with time. “The first time I sealed a card, that’s the name the key used when it possessed me. Isn’t that strange? What do you think it means?”

Tomoyo wasn’t sure, but she was afraid they would have to find out eventually.

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<sup>47</sup> Eventually Fai does, though not in the way Tomoyo is thinking. See Chapter 29: The Hope.

## The Fight



Fai read over the report a few times, still not believing his eyes. He had sealed the card. They should have come back. “And you’re certain that none of them returned?”

“I’m afraid not, your majesty,” the guard reported. “It seems only the people in the capital have been restored.”

There was nothing the guard could do about it, so Fai dismissed him so he could think in private. The people who had gone missing in the capital had returned on their own when he had captured Erase, so why had none of the people gone from the outlying villages returned? Had they been missing for too long? Was it the work of another card? Or maybe it wasn’t a card at all, but something else that had been snatching them up. The basic divination he’d had with Tomoyo and the air-based cards had not indicated anything but the capital, after all.

Fai didn’t have very much time to ruminate over it as Ashura swept into the conference room before too long. “Is something troubling you, Fai?”

Fai didn’t bother throwing on a smile, though he did consciously relax his face just a bit for Ashura’s sake. “It seems only the people who disappeared from the capital were restored. We haven’t seen a trace of the people who have gone missing from the outer towns.”

“I see,” Ashura said, concern washing over him as he placed a hand on Fai’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Fai. I know how troubling it is when things do not work out as you planned.”

It wasn't as comforting as Ashura had probably intended it to be, but Fai was grateful all the same. It was nice to have Ashura's support, even if the man wasn't aware of exactly what was going on. Mind made up, Fai rose from his chair, gathering his notes. "I think I should go investigate."

"Is that wise?" Ashura asked, not giving away his thoughts on the matter. Fai was used to it by now — Ashura was only trying to encourage him to think things through the way he would have to once Fai became king himself.

"Galat is only a day's drive from here," Fai explained, "And the disappearance event there is at most only a week old. If I hurry, I may be able to read the traces before they vanish completely."

"Our mages weren't able to read anything when they arrived," Ashura reminded him.

"And I'm not them," Fai returned with a smile. "I'm much more capable. You should know, my king; you trained me."

Ashura regarded him warmly for just a moment before wrapping his arms loosely about Fai's shoulders in a rare embrace. "Be safe," he urged, the words a spell of their own.

"Of course," Fai said as he returned the hug. He'd figure this out. He'd find out what happened to those people and bring them and everyone else back — somehow.<sup>48</sup>

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Tomoyo managed to catch Fai at street level where he was installing the bed cover so that he could load up some supplies. The trip wouldn't take more than two days, so he didn't need much: a bed roll in the back, a couple changes of clothes, some food, first aid supplies, and plenty of water in case autumn storms came, which could leave him trapped on the side of a road until waters receded. It wasn't an unfamiliar drive, but one leg of it stretched through a wide wash that, when flooded, appeared deceptively shallow, but swept away vehicles every year when their drivers ignored the posted warnings and misjudged the depths.

"I should go with you," Tomoyo offered, worry evident in her expression, but Fai shook his head at that.

"I need someone here in case a card starts acting up," Fai explained without halting his packing. "Someone capable, someone I can trust." And he did, despite what misgivings he'd had in the beginning. In the worst-case scenario, Tomoyo could throw up a barrier and maintain it until Fai returned, or even involve Ashura if it was that dire, but he needed someone who understood the situation to remain in the hotspot the city had become.

That didn't erase the unease from Tomoyo's face, though. "You shouldn't go alone."

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<sup>48</sup> He's not wrong.

Fai smiled wide for her sake. "I'm afraid I don't see another way. Even if I did find someone we could tell, nobody else here has enough power to make a difference. But I promise I'll be careful."

"If I recommend someone," Tomoyo bargained, "Would you take them?"

It felt like a trap, but Fai was having a hard time fathoming saying no. He had already begun thinking about Tomoyo like a little sister, and he wouldn't know what he'd do if he refused and she started to cry (real tears or no, Fai didn't think he could stand them).<sup>49</sup> Besides, if she was being this insistent, there was a good chance she'd had a premonition, and Fai had no reason to doubt those yet. "I guess that would be fair."

"You promise?"

Fai was certain this was a trap, but he'd already said that he would. "I promise."

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"I can't believe you let Tomoyo talk you into this," Kurogane griped, sitting as far away from Fai as the passenger seat would allow.

"Oh?" Fai crowed, not entirely pleased about the situation himself, but absolutely living for how much Kurogane was hating it, and so he maintained his excessively positive exterior just to piss him off further. "And what about you, tough guy? You couldn't say no to that face, either."

Kurogane did not dignify that with a response, instead fixing his glare out the window. "What the hell are we doing out here anyway?"

"You must not follow the news very closely," Fai commented wryly.

"Doesn't concern me unless it's a card," Kurogane confirmed.

Fai hadn't really expected anything else. "You'd be surprised. The entire town was deserted about a week ago. Nobody knows where the people went. It's like they just vanished."

"Sounds like Erase," Kurogane muttered.

"I caught that one," Fai countered.

"I know."

Fai had suspected as much. As much as he and Tomoyo liked and respected each other, she was still under orders, and as such would be obliged to report back. It wasn't the most ideal of situations, but Fai couldn't begrudge her for doing her duty any more than she could him doing his. "Then you know if it really was Erase, they should have come back by now." Tomoyo had

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<sup>49</sup> CCS Tomoyo was not above using tears to manipulate when necessary either.

even reached out to her contacts in her homeland to confirm it — Erase should not have had the ability to disappear people permanently. “So the question is: what happened?”

Kurogane continued muttering under his breath (something like *I can't believe I've been sent off on this Scooby Doo shit*), and Fai found that he really didn't mind. As they left town, grassland gave way to forest as they went up through the mountain pass, and once on the leeward side hours later, the trees vanished in favor of the desert scrubland that surrounded Galat.

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The rest of the drive was quiet and without incident. Once or twice they stopped for a break — to eat and relieve themselves — and Fai had adamantly refused to allow Kurogane to ride in the back, for both safety reasons and the fact that he wasn't sure there was enough space for the man to actually fit back there, giving him the ultimatum of sitting in the seat as he had been doing, or being left on the side of the road.

Kurogane had seen sense, in the end.

They arrived in Galat after dark, and the sight of it was eerier than Fai had anticipated. Here and there, he could spot dropped bags in the street, or see a vehicle that had seemed to have continued on its own momentum until it hit something strong enough to stop it. Some buildings had fire damage and a few others water damage, cookfires and running taps having gone out of control without someone to monitor them. It was as if everyone had just been spirited away in the blink of an eye, leaving everything as it was to continue without human interference.

“Spooky,” Fai commented as they slowly made their way further into town. Vaguely, he wondered what had become of the animals — if they had vanished too, or had been left to their own devices.

Kurogane huffed out a breath through his nose. “I'm not sensing a card, are you?”

“I'm not sure,” Fai admitted with honesty. There was something here — something he felt he should recognize — but it was faint. He could barely sense it, much less identify it, the sensation not so different to hearing people chatting quietly but indistinctly in another room. As they pulled up to what was roughly the center of town, Fai parked and turned off the engine. “We should take a look around, just in case.”

“You're not the boss of me,” Kurogane grumbled as he opened his door anyway.

“Actually, in this country, I am,” Fai replied easily, checking his phone for messages as he switched on the flashlight function. “We should probably exchange numbers, unless you'd prefer screaming my name,” he added with a dirty grin.

Kurogane surrendered his number (or at least a number) without further comment, and they split up, Kurogane heading East while Fai took West, planning to work clockwise and meet back at the truck when they were done. The full moon left the deserted roads bright, even though the

street lamps had not turned on, likely having experienced a failure after the people who had maintained them were gone. Between that and his senses, Fai was fairly certain he would be fine enough on his own, despite whatever premonitions Tomoyo may have had.

He wasn't certain how far Kurogane's abilities went, but Fai could feel the remnants of just how saturated with power the town must have been when everyone vanished. It lingered like a stale scent over every inch of this place, brushing cloyingly against Fai's skin wherever it reached, like it was beckoning to him — calling out to him. He knew better than to follow such urges.

It seemed spread evenly, as though it had just manifested with no apparent source, blanketing the entire town as if it had descended from above and settled where it landed, neither spreading further, nor accumulating somewhere in the end. That alone was odd. Usually, for a spell to be complete, the magic had to be dispelled or rounded back up, depending on the effects.<sup>50</sup> Instead it had just stayed here, an echo of disaster as real and tangible as if the entire town had been coated in a layer of ash.

Still, Fai searched methodically, opening doors just in case the animals had been spared so they would at least be no longer trapped, even though he had yet to spot any. If he could just find some clue — any scrap of evidence that could explain what had happened here and at the other border towns — then maybe they could fight it, or at least find some closure. One by one, he checked each building fruitlessly, working his way diligently in the planned half circle, until suddenly, there was a spike of energy that had Fai dashing off before he was even aware of doing so.

Kurogane had been wrong — there was a card here.

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Kurogane was getting really sick of getting demolished by these cards. He wasn't a bad fighter in the least, nor was he inexperienced or weak by any case. If anything, it was that damn Clow's fault for having been so ridiculously overpowered that he had died the world's most powerful magician even after splitting his power into 52 cards and sealing them away.<sup>51</sup> No one had any business being that strong, and especially not someone who would pour their strength into attack cards this recklessly.

And Fight was definitely an attack card, there was no doubt about that. Kurogane had held his own for several minutes, dodging expertly even though the card had nearly ambushed him, and getting a few hits in that should have done enough damage in theory but Kurogane found quickly that even if he knocked it flat on the ground he still couldn't seal the thing.<sup>52</sup> It was when

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<sup>50</sup> This is because completion would not be achieved until Nothing either emerged victorious or was sealed away.

<sup>51</sup> In CCS, Clow does the same thing and also divides his soul in two in an attempt not to be that strong in the next life.

<sup>52</sup> Kurogane looks more into why he can't seal cards in Chapter 12: The Song.

his foot caught on an abandoned purse and he lost his footing that Fight had bodily tossed him into the side of a building, and in the next moment, Kurogane expected pain — <sup>53</sup>

Instead, there was the sound of a vehicle accelerating and Kurogane could only observe the surreal sight of Fai's truck smashing into Fight and launching it away as if it were nothing more than a crash test dummy. Fai hadn't even bothered turning on the headlights, and he exited the truck quickly, staff in hand and shouting the sealing spell. It didn't work, and Fai grimaced at that. "Are you alright?" he called, only briefly glancing Kurogane's way.

"You hit it with the truck!?" Kurogane shouted, flabbergasted at what he'd just witnessed.

"Yeah," Fai admitted, a bit too cheerfully, "Didn't work, though."

"You *hit it* with the truck!"

"Well, you weren't exactly doing anything!" Fai shot back, eyes still on Fight, which was picking itself up from where it had fallen.

"You can't just hit it with a truck," Kurogane returned, still disbelieving that Fai had had the gall to even attempt such a thing, "You have to beat it in a fight!"

"It clearly lost the fight with the truck!"

"You know what I mean!"<sup>54</sup> Kurogane replied as he stalked around to where Fai was eyeing Fight, which was checking itself for damage in a much-too-human way.

"You're right, I do," Fai admitted, drawing a card that Kurogane recognized immediately.

"Use it on me," he ordered in the interest of saving both their skins. There was no way the flimsy-looking wizard before him was useful in actual combat.

Fai only shook his head as if he had caught Kurogane being sneaky. "You're not tricking me twice."

Kurogane scoffed at that. This pampered prince was going to get them both killed at this rate.

"Like you know how to fight."

"I seem to recall beating you in a fight just a couple weeks ago," Fai countered easily.

"You activated Illusion," Kurogane argued back, "While I held Sword back long enough for you to disarm it. That's worlds away from beating Fight."

Fai's eyes then were sly. "Watch me," he said before activating the card in front of him. "Give me the strength I need to best my opponent, Power!" With that, Fai rushed forward, and Kurogane

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<sup>53</sup> This recalls the fight in Outo, except it was Fai getting thrown through a wall and Kurogane coming to the rescue.

<sup>54</sup> This is peak humor. I'll never get any funnier than this.

folded his arms, just waiting to see Fai launched in much the same manner he himself had been a couple minutes ago so he could rub it in the proud man's face.

But when Fight swung, Fai ducked, and when Fight kicked, Fai pulled up a small barrier to mitigate the damage. Where Kurogane tended to fight close and hard, frequently only needing one hit to knock his opponent flat, Fai danced in and out of range, taking any opening he could get and otherwise giving himself room to dodge and wait for an opportunity or for a weakness to present itself. In this, the fight had turned into a stalemate with Fight not landing any blows through Fai's mixed magic, and Fai not dealing hits directly enough to matter as Fight's greater level of skill allowed it to deflect the brunt of it on instinct alone. The internal countdown Kurogane maintained in his head to see whether Fai outlasted him reached 0 and Kurogane couldn't even manage to scowl at that — not when Fai was genuinely holding his own.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, Fight swung wide and Fai leapt over its head, pivoting before he even touched the ground to bring the staff down hard against its skull. Fight dropped like a sack of bricks.<sup>56</sup> This time, when Fai uttered the sealing spell, Fight returned to its card form, and Fai held it up with a triumphant grin. "I told you not to underestimate me," he reminded Kurogane as he sauntered his way back.

Kurogane would never do so again.

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They were sitting on the tailgate, beers pilfered from an abandoned bar and made cold by Fai's magic in hand, looking out over the abandoned town when Fai finally said it: "Fight didn't do all this."

"No," Kurogane agreed, "It didn't."

"What does it mean?" Fai asked.

Kurogane didn't think it meant anything. Something was happening — something that might have involved the cards or not — but that didn't necessarily mean that it held meaning. Sometimes things just happened — good things, terrible things, things that were neutral at worst — and all for no reason whatsoever. He didn't say this, though, because he had a feeling that Fai knew, and that it wasn't what he needed to hear.

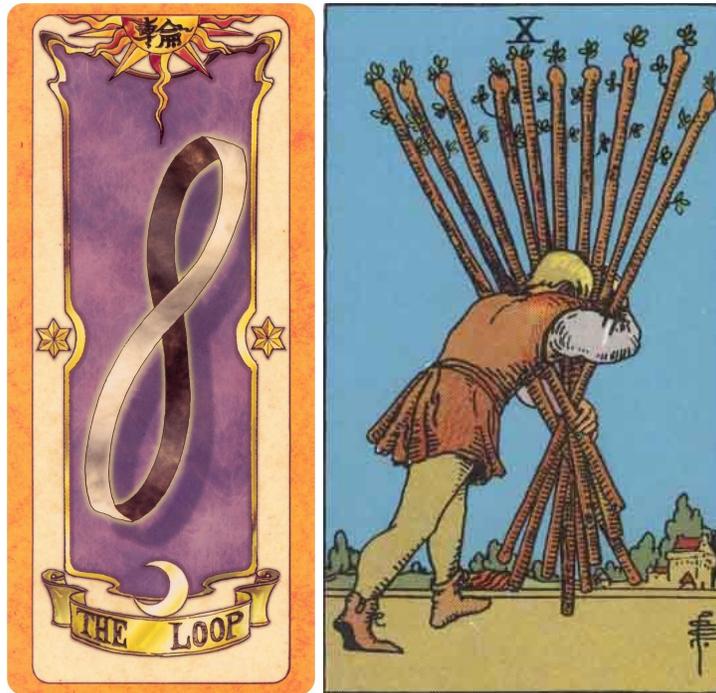
"I don't know," Kurogane said instead, and Fai finished his beer, crawled into his bedroll, and while Kurogane took first watch, Fai slept. Sometime in the night, Fai moved fretfully, but Kurogane decided to let him dream.

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<sup>55</sup> Yuui: \*kicking ass and taking names\* Kurogane: \*attraction level over 9000\*

<sup>56</sup> Sakura did the same thing in CCS, though almost entirely through sheer luck instead of skill.

## The Loop



*This time he could see himself, safe behind Shield as Fight beat upon its edges. He should have been safe; Shield should have kept him safe, but it eventually buckled under the sheer force Fight presented, and Fai, stunned, went down in a shower of blows.*

*His perspective shifted, like he was running towards himself when he had only been watching before, but that didn't make sense. Was he seeing this from someone else's point of view? Was this a memory that belonged to another? Through blurry eyes, he saw Fight go down, uncertain of how that even happened.*

*"I'm sorry! I'm sorry. I can't heal you. I'm sorry."*

*Fai reached up at him, hurt, but not too badly, and somehow still smiling. "It's okay, Yuui."*

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*"It's okay."*

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*"What's okay?" Kurogane asked as Fai returned to the world of the waking, and Fai wiped at his damp eyes.*

"I — " he began, then realised just who was in the bed of the truck with him, and Fai changed his mind about sharing something so personal. "Just a dream."

"Some dream," Kurogane muttered, unimpressed even as he shuffled back towards where Fai was laying. "Your turn."

"What?" Fai asked, still a bit distracted and fighting away the last vestiges of sleep.

"The watch," Kurogane reminded him without any heat.

"Right," Fai replied, surrendering the blanket and crawling out towards the tailgate, thoughts consumed with Yuui, and if he snuck off to grab a few more beers after Kurogane had fallen asleep, no one else was there to scold him.

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Yuui was in the draem - FF

Well he wasnt in it - FF

I think iam seeing the dreams htru yUuis eyes - FF

And i was theer - FF

Yuui cuoldnt haelmme - FF

And i frogace hin - FF

Fai, are you drunk? - TD

No - FF

Myabe - FF

Go to sleep - TD

Cnant - FF

Im on wacth - FF

Drink some water at least - TD

Ok - FF

Thnak you - FF

No problem - TD

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Do not let Fai drive – TD

Kurogane didn't need Tomoyo to tell him that. The damn prince was smashed by the time the sun peeked over the horizon straight onto Kurogane's eyes. Kurogane considered it a minor miracle that Fai hadn't woken him up at all, but maybe the prince was more of a broody drunk on his own.

Either way, Fai was not a broody drunk with company, and shortly after awakening, Kurogane had to physically extract himself from the circle of Fai's arms, wondering if the man had been an octopus in a past life. He certainly had the grip of one. Between the clinginess and the excessive nicknames, Kurogane struggled to see just how Fai had managed to navigate royal circles his whole life without causing a diplomatic incident.<sup>57</sup>

After Kurogane completed his morning exercises and it was time to hit the road, it was only after Kurogane commented on how interesting it would be to see what happened when the crown prince got charged with a DUI that Fai relented the driver's seat and sulked over to the passenger side. Then following the most disgusting siphon job of his life, Kurogane had the tank filled, and as he climbed back into the truck, he chucked the blanket at Fai with as much force as physics would allow and ordered him to sleep.

Fai complied almost a little too easily and Kurogane began the blessedly silent drive back to the capital.

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Kurogane hated driving in the desert.

It was hot, there were no convenient places to pull over if he needed to, and the distances were always so deceiving. It didn't help that the scenery was always the same — a dry bush here, a hardy flower there, rocks, pebbles, and nutrition-sapped dirt for as far as the eye could see. Occasionally, he could spot a bird of prey circling in the sky to break up the tedium.

The worst of it was after he entered the wash. It had no business being as wide as it was, and he could only imagine what great floods or climate of the past necessitated such a wide river, though the road did travel along the near middle of it for at least a couple miles. He could have sworn the mountain never moved any closer after he entered it, that it hadn't been this wide on the way out, that he had made too many turns to the right and he should have been rightfully heading back the way he'd come by now.

Cursing himself for not noticing sooner, Kurogane shook Fai roughly as he coasted down to a slower speed. "Wake up, idiot."

Fai groaned like he was dying, squinting around in the too-bright afternoon. "What's going on?"

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<sup>57</sup> It's mostly an act right now. Yuui does not want Kurogane to start prying into how and why he'd gotten so morosely drunk.

"I think Loop got us," Kurogane told him, eyes scanning for any hint at where the boundary would be. "Help me spot where it intersects."

"It intersects?" Fai parroted, rubbing at his temple. Kurogane thought it would only serve Fai right if he had gotten himself a hangover after getting that drunk while standing watch of all things.

"Yes," Kurogane ground out with as much patience as he could, "We'll have to cut where it circles back around or we'll never get out of here."

Fai looked around briefly. "It all looks the same," he moaned.

"No shit!" Kurogane barked back. "This thing could go on for miles, so peel your eyes and look! I don't want to run out of gas out here."

"We can't run out of gas," Fai assured him, finally sounding a little more lucid, "We've only gone as far as the —" Fai's face fell as he spotted the gas gauge, and he finished weakly "— wash." Kurogane's fingers tightened on the wheel, already having an idea of what was going to happen next. "I thought you filled it up before we left!"

"I did!"

"Just how long have we been stuck here?"

"Does it really matter?"

"Of course it does!" Fai shot back, pulling out his phone. "We're never going to make it back with a quarter of a tank."

Kurogane glanced his way with some suspicion. "What are you doing?"

"Arranging for someone to meet us with some gas," Fai answered a little haughtily, shooting Kurogane a look himself, "Or a tow."

"Oh yeah?" Kurogane challenged, sick of Fai's holier-than-thou attitude. "And just where do you plan for them to meet us at, when we're stuck in a pocket dimension?"

"Is it though?" Fai asked, eyes glued to the screen of his phone.

Kurogane rolled his eyes. "What else would it be? And keep your eyes on the scenery."

"Work smart not hard, Kuro-grump," Fai declared, before tilting his phone at an angle Kurogane could see. "We need to see where it connects, right?" He'd pulled up his map application and the GPS had somehow locked on, moving slowly with the car as Kurogane continued to drive them in the same direction they'd been heading for hours. He kept one eye on the road and one on the screen, convinced that it couldn't possibly be that easy, but eventually the dot skipped, jumping back by a couple miles and Kurogane slammed on the brakes.

“Wait here,” Kurogane muttered, not at all expecting Fai to obey as he hopped out of the truck and slammed the door behind him, working his way to the back to fetch his sword and catch the damn card, but Fai was deceptively quick even when hungover, and Kurogane was left wanting to smash his head into the body of the truck when Fai returned triumphant with the Loop in hand.

Fai didn't gloat and Kurogane wasn't going to ask why as he climbed back in and sent them continuing on their way. It wasn't much longer after that when they met with a service vehicle, and Kurogane could imagine what snide comments Fai would make on the situation.

But when the service worker asked how they'd run so low, Fai had only answered that the gas pumps in Galat had been inoperable, and so they were forced to return with what little gas they had at the time, which had not been enough for the return trip. Their saviour didn't question it, and when they were moving again with enough fuel to make it to the next gas station, Kurogane begrudgingly spoke up. “Thanks.”

Fai, for his part, looked vaguely startled at that, as if he could have never imagined Kurogane forcing the word past his lips. “For what?”

“For not saying it was my fault we ran out of gas,” he clarified through gritted teeth.

“Oh that,” Fai commented as if it were nothing at all. “I didn't think she'd believe we were stuck driving the wash for hours, that's all.” Fai reached down to lean his chair back as far as it would go and Kurogane had to wonder why he hadn't done so before. “You know, I think I could get used to you driving me around like this. How would you like to be my chauffeur?”

“Over my dead body,” Kurogane grumbled

Fai laughed at that and something about it just felt right.

---

“Did you learn anything?” Tomoyo asked when Fai arrived in the tea room, dark circles under his eyes speaking for his lack of sleep and looming hangover.

“Nothing,” he admitted, taking up the two pills that had been left by his cup with hardly a glance at them and swallowing them with a mouthful of tea. “Caught two cards, though. I'm sure he's pissed about that.”

Tomoyo nodded. She'd seen Kurogane's text storm after they had made it to the gas station. Pissed was the mild term for what Kurogane was feeling. “How about the dream?”

Fai leaned back into his chair. “It was strange. We were fighting Fight, and I managed to get hurt. Yuui came right over and started apologizing that he couldn't heal me, and I just forgave him for it.”

“Did you see him at all?” Tomoyo asked.

“No, I was looking through his eyes,” Fai murmured as he pulled out his key. “Do you think maybe this is sending me those dreams?”

Tomoyo reached out a hand and Fai deposited the key neatly in her palm. When she wrapped her fingers around it, she could send her magic through it, reading its properties and trying to make sense of them. “It doesn’t seem likely,” she concluded, and Fai accepted the key back with a sigh.

“It’s like the more cards we catch, the more confusing the situation becomes,” he admitted before taking another sip of his tea. “There’s something else, Tomoyo.”

“What is it?” she prompted, tilting her head to the side just so.

“I was *young*,” he confided. “Right around the age Ashura found me, and I’m starting to think —” he cut himself off, but Tomoyo wasn’t having any of that.

“Starting to think what?”

Fai grimaced as if he wasn’t sure he should admit the truth to her. “If those dreams are really memories, then maybe these cards are how I lost control of my magic in the first place. You said they were last active at the turn of the century, right?” Tomoyo nodded wordlessly at that. “That would have been just before I was found. The timing, the key, these dreams — they can’t all be a coincidence.” Fai brought a knee to his chest, looping one arm around it loosely before he continued: “We need to find out who Yuui was and what happened to him. Maybe he can make sense of all this.”

Tomoyo couldn’t promise anything — she doubted anyone could — but there was no denying that the elusive Yuui was likely the loadstone that held the entire mystery together. Fai’s grave came to the forefront of her thoughts, but she set it aside for now. It was still much too early to alarm the prince. “I’ll learn what I can.”

Fai’s smile then was so gentle and so sweet that Tomoyo regretted she couldn’t be more open with him just yet. “Thanks, Tomoyo.”

All she could do was give him her smile. “No problem.”

## The Song



Page of Cups: Fai Flourite

Kurogane was about as ready for the video chat as he was ever going to be, and so he opened his laptop and settled into the chair at the appointed time. Right on schedule, the call came through and a woman's face filled the screen. Kurogane searched her features quietly, relieved that she appeared healthy and without pain, as far as he could tell. She smiled for him. "Hello, Kurogane."

"Hello, mother," he greeted in return. "Have you been well?"

"I'm doing well," she assured him. "We've gotten my viral load much lower since we started the new treatment. How about you? Have you been doing alright?"<sup>58</sup>

Kurogane let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "I'm fine, Mother."

"No injuries?" she continued, checking him over from her vantage point on the other side of the world. "Have you been sleeping?"

"I am in perfect health," he promised gently, and he could see her shoulders relax on the screen. "Did you receive the card?"

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<sup>58</sup> For those wondering, Kurogane's mother is HIV positive in this story.

She cheerfully held up the Storm for him to see. "Right here."

"Have you had the chance to examine it?"

"I have." At that, her expression became more serious. "It appears the issue lies with the cards and not with you."

The relief Kurogane felt at that had been hollow. He'd hoped his mother would be able to tell him why he hadn't been able to seal them with the powers he had. If he had simply been performing the spell wrong, it would have been disappointing and a bit embarrassing, but fixable. Hearing that the cards themselves were the problem wasn't very encouraging. "What's the issue?"

"I can't be certain if this will be the same for all the cards," she prefaced, "But you can't seal what's already been sealed. You said that the spell Fai was using dictated that they return to card form, correct?"

"That's correct," he confirmed.

"That's why it has been effective. He hasn't been sealing them, just reverting them to a dormant form," she explained. "I will send you details on an equivalent spell that should be within your ability to master. That should balance things out for you."

Kurogane nodded an acknowledgement. "You said it was already sealed?"

"That's right."

"Do you know by who?" he followed up with. If someone had already mastered the cards and was releasing them, discovering them would help establish the true extent of the threat.

"By you."

Kurogane froze, taken aback at this information. "Mother, I wasn't able to seal it. The prince had to."

"Yes, Fai reverted it to card form," she agreed, "This time."

Kurogane peered her way, trying to read what she was saying in what wasn't being said. It then dawned on him what exactly it was he was missing, and he met her eye for eye. "Tell me everything you know."

---

When you're free, we need to talk - KS

Understood - TD

---

Kurogane tossed his phone on the bed before plopping down heavily into his chair. He'd known that 17 years ago he'd been sent off to seal the cards, and that there had been an incident. He'd known that while he hadn't been completely successful, he had neutralized the threat at the time, even if he hadn't known the specifics.

What he hadn't known was that the cards had been sealed — or at least some of them anyway. According to his mother, he had sealed the card in the past, and there must have been some other force that was activating them again now. That seriously complicated matters. Whether it was Fai doing so for some reason, or a completely separate party that had so far gone undetected was unclear, but either way, the nature of the threat had changed. It was no longer cards that existed outside of human ethical codes that were the problem, but some human being manipulating them into action.

Humans had agendas; cards did not. Kurogane couldn't fathom a situation where someone would be pulling the strings for a purely humanitarian cause. Surely if there was a positive motivation, whoever it was would have brought them up to speed by now. Why would someone acting out of the goodness of their heart go to such lengths to conceal themselves? An evil of some kind must have been afoot.

His phone rang with Tomoyo's number on the caller ID, and Kurogane updated her on everything he'd learned.

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"Is everything alright, Tomoyo?" Fai asked as Tomoyo returned from whatever call she had needed to make.

Tomoyo smiled as she took her seat again. "Perfectly fine, my Prince," she assured him with her brightest of smiles, fully convinced there was no way Fai had been orchestrating this grand event, no matter what suspicions Kurogane had.

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Fai placed his wind affiliated cards in front of him with purpose. He'd had four before, and the addition of the Move and Song made six. Tomoyo had not been inaccurate about how those cards seemed to appear with more frequency than the others, and if her information was correct, there would now only be two left to be found. No other category even came close.

Still, when he'd placed the cards and wrapped the cord that held his key around his hand, he didn't expect the information to come as readily as it did: "Show me what happened to Yuui."

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*When he woke up, there was a man sitting on the side of his bed, smiling down at him. "Do you recognize my face?" The boy shook his head at that. "What do you remember?"*

*He shrugged. "Nothing, I guess."*

*"That's okay," the man assured him. "You went through something traumatic. It's only natural your mind would try to suppress it, so you shouldn't worry about it." The boy nodded, but didn't say anything else. "My name is Ashura, and you are called Fai."*

*"Fai?"*

*"That's right," Ashura smiled, as if pleased with him. "You have a lot of magic, Fai, but you're still very young so you were having a hard time controlling it. I helped restrain it a bit for you. You may notice some markings on your arms and your back," Ashura continued and Fai glanced down automatically. Indeed, there were some black lines poking up from beneath his shirt. "Those are going to help you keep your power under control, so it's very important that you leave them alone, both for your safety and that of everyone around you."*

*Fai reached up to touch one tendril that went high up on his shoulder, but it felt just the same as the rest of his skin. "Will I ever be able to take it off?"*

*"Probably not," Ashura admitted, still visibly cheerful. "But it won't keep you from getting stronger ever. It will just help you keep your power at a level you can manage comfortably so we can keep everyone safe. Is that alright?"*

*"I don't want to hurt people," Fai hedged.*

*Ashura smiled brightly. "I knew you were a good kid, Fai. You would have never killed those people on purpose."*

*Fai's eyes went wide and he finally faced Ashura again. "Killed?"*

*Ashura's eyes then were a little sad. "It wasn't your fault, Fai. Your magic was just too strong for you to control. You couldn't help what happened, so try not to let that upset you, alright?" He placed a sympathetic hand on Fai's shoulder as he rose. "You look exhausted. Try to get some rest."*

*Fai nodded as Ashura stepped out of the room, but there was no rest for him to be had — not when the thoughts of being a killer were swimming about in his head.*

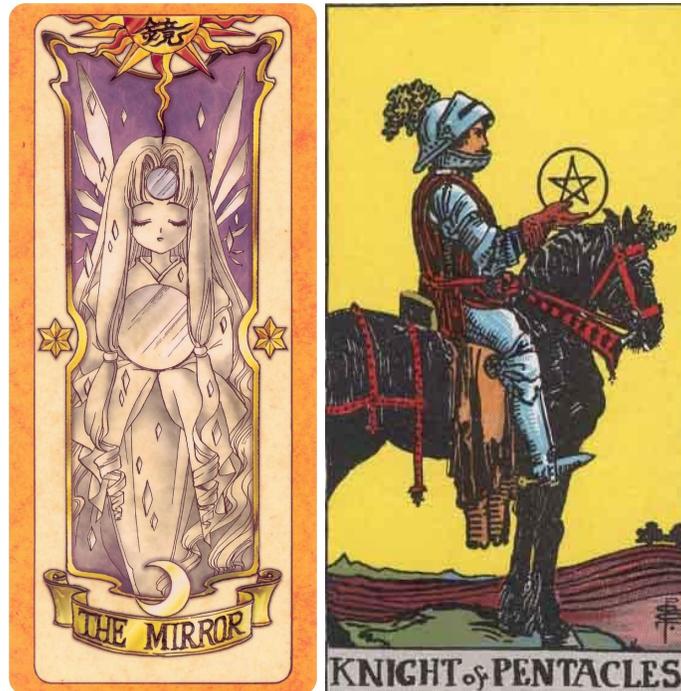
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Tomoyo did not so much wake slowly as she kept her eyes closed even when consciousness reached her so that she could review the information in her dream. It had played like a memory, and though she couldn't see Fai, as she had seen the scene from his eyes, she recognized the marks that had been visible and knew that the boy had to have been the Prince.

It left her with more answers than questions. Who had Fai killed? What did the King know? Could the information he gave be trusted? Why this memory? Why now?

None of the answers presented themselves to her, and Tomoyo wasn't sure how much time they would have to find them.

## The Mirror



Knight of Pentacles: Daidouji Tomoyo

Tomoyo liked to think that she knew Fai pretty well by now. The prince seemed kind, if a little starved for genuine affection, reasonable, resourceful, and quick to form superficial ties but wary of getting too close to others. He didn't seem like a killer to her, no matter what the dream had implied, and knowing the nature of magic — knowing that it more often than not obeyed intent more than words so long as the intent was clear — she couldn't see even Fai's magic lashing out to take lives except in the most extreme of circumstances.

But then again, Tomoyo had only seen Fai working within the bounds of his limiter. If there was a curse involved, that would change matters significantly, depending on the exact nature of the curse.<sup>59</sup>

Tomoyo liked to think that she knew Fai pretty well by now, so when she spotted him in a wing of the castle he did not frequent, it gave her a moment of pause. But then she saw that smile — genuine but mischievous without any of the sadness that seemed to linger in the Fai she knew — and knew this was not her Prince. Tomoyo smiled for the image anyway as she approached

<sup>59</sup> In TRC, Fai is indeed afflicted by 2 curses. The first takes his autonomy away to destroy the first person he meets with magic greater than his own. The second uses his magic to destroy the world he is in if someone other than himself kills Ashura.

it. It wouldn't do to cause a scene when they were still somehow managing to keep the cards under wraps. "Good afternoon, 'Fai'."

The image did not seem disturbed by her and it allowed Tomoyo to relax just a little. It appeared the card was not interested in being hostile, at least not where they could be observed. "You are Tomoyo."

"That's right."

"Take me to Him?" the card requested, and his stance just felt wrong. For how much he looked like the Prince, and for how often the Prince cocked a hip to one side, the Prince favored resting the back of his hand on his hip, while this image favored his fist. The Prince tended to pitch his voice high, while this image didn't bother. The Prince had the air of a chronic flirt — someone who would trick one into believing they had come up with an idea themselves instead of negotiating directly. The image was prepared to use the perceived authority to his advantage.

Tomoyo, however, was not so easily cowed. "You have business?"

"A message."

"Who from?"

"The other one."

Tomoyo wasn't certain who exactly the image had meant, but she didn't doubt that any message delivered would be of some significance to Fai, and so she did not allow herself to become deterred as she pulled out her phone. "Allow me to arrange a meeting."

The image met her smile for smile, apparently not lacking in manners. "Of course."

Prince, there is a card in the castle — TD

It's assumed your form — TD

Fai's response was a couple minutes coming, and Tomoyo could only assume he had been busy when the messages were received. Do you know which one? — FF

Tomoyo mulled over the cards that had been captured and which remained. It could be Create or Mirror, or maybe Twin — TD

Are you in danger? — FF

Tomoyo peeked back to the card just for a moment. I don't believe so — TD

What is it doing? — FF

Nothing just yet. It wants to meet with you — TD

Do you have any reason to suspect it might try to do you harm? – FF

Tomoyo could only smile at that. None at this time – TD

Fai's next message was a long time coming. Wait for me in the tea room. Try to keep it out of sight until I can get there – FF

Understood – TD

Tomoyo smiled the image's way. "He is unavailable at the moment, but if you would come with me, he will join us in the tea room when he is able."

"This is acceptable," the image replied, and it followed Tomoyo to the arranged room without complaint.

---

Tomoyo had told him that the card had assumed his form, but that still didn't quite prepare Fai for seeing himself at the table with Tomoyo, drinking tea as if it were something it did every day. It smiled his way, and the shape of it wasn't an expression he was used to seeing on his own face, and something about it made his chest throb. But Fai was no amateur and so he schooled himself into a relaxed stance as he sauntered over to the table as well. "Thank you for your patience," he commented in as friendly a tone as he could manage, despite his unease. The resemblance really was uncanny. If the card had decided to cause trouble instead of coming in for a chat, Fai wasn't sure how he would have been able to explain it away.

"They certainly keep you busy, don't they?" the image asked, returning smile for smile, but Fai had the distinct impression it was laughing at him.

"I do have my responsibilities," he allowed, thanking Tomoyo as she poured him a cup. The image glanced her way subtly, and Fai took the hint. "Anything you have to say to me can be said in front of her."

Fai had expected some push back about it, but instead the image looked vaguely relieved as it rested its chin on a hand. "I have been sent to give you a message."

"From who?" Fai asked with a bit of suspicion.

The image was not perturbed. "The other one."

"You mean Yuui," Fai deduced.

"The other half of Fai is Yuui, afterall," the image admitted brightly, as if this was something Fai should have already known. Fai took in the man in front of him. If it was supposed to be a copy, then it was precise in form but poorly managed in action, either having trouble copying his mannerisms, or deliberately choosing not to. These cards were powerful; if it had wanted, it

should have been able to replicate him perfectly. There had to be a reason if it had opted to do otherwise, a message in the imperfect copy. The image grinned his way. "Do you understand?"

"No," Fai admitted, "But I think I'm beginning to."

"That is satisfactory," the image decided, now leaning forward so both its hands supported its face. "He wants to assure you that he still believes everything will be alright in the end.<sup>60</sup> He still believes in the perfect team."

"Where is he?" Fai asked, just barely clinging on to his cheerful facade.

"With you, always," the image assured him, "Though you may not reach him yet."

"And so he sent you?"

"All the cards did," the image relayed, and the surprise finally broke through on Fai's face. "We are happy to see you get this second chance, and we want to help you win."

"Win?" Fai repeated in disbelief. "Against what?"

The image cast its eyes aside, sadness taking over its smile in its most Fai-like impression yet. "I'm afraid that is not something I am at liberty to reveal, but we are on your side."

*Just like Tomoyo*, Fai thought, weaving his fingers together in front of his face to hide a bit of his expression. "Was there anything else?"

"Just that," the card said, smiling his way once again. "I believe you know what to do next."

"Yes," Fai said, grasping at his key, "I do."

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"Your other half?" Tomoyo asked not long after the Mirror had settled on the table.

"It appears we must have been close," Fai reasoned, not even wanting to touch the card just now. The unbalanced sensation of being so easily duplicated was still troubling him. "There are few circumstances that would allow me to stand in for Yuui in a magical contract, and Mirror's copy of me wasn't perfect. There aren't many possibilities, but I don't want to hazard a guess just yet."

"I wonder what happened to him," Tomoyo mused before taking a sip of her tea.

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<sup>60</sup> "Everything will definitely be alright" is one translation of Sakura's "magic phrase" that is a recurring theme in CCS.

“I think I may have killed him.” Tomoyo shot him a look at that, so Fai continued. “Ashura did say that my magic had killed people before he got it back under control. If we were as close as I think we were, Yuui probably would have been in the line of fire.”

Tomoyo closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. “I don’t think that’s the case,” she declared as she set her cup down deliberately. “We shouldn’t make assumptions without having all the facts. If there were a record or more witnesses, that would be one thing, but from what I understand, it sounds as though Ashura arrived after the fact. Any number of things could have happened, but I don’t believe you’re the kind of person who would just kill people like that.”

Fai couldn’t help but flinch at that. “I didn’t say I did it deliberately.”

“Even so,” Tomoyo continued, “We’ve known each other for months now, and if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that you’re very deliberate and precise with your magic — ”

“Because I’ve had to learn to be,” Fai cut in sourly.

“ — and I don’t believe you’re capable of seriously harming anyone unjustly, even by accident,” she continued as if Fai hadn’t spoken. “Magic is Will transformed into action. Even if you had more than you could handle, your first instinct seems to be to protect and mitigate damage. I can’t imagine a situation where your power would lash out to hurt someone unless it was in self defense, and you’re not going to convince me otherwise.”

Fai sagged against his chair in defeat. There was clearly no changing Tomoyo’s mind anymore than she would be able to change his. “You really think that?”

“I do,” Tomoyo asserted, reaching out to pat one of Fai’s hands. “And the sooner you yourself realize that, the better.”

## The Maze



Queen of Wands: Suwano Kurogane

The hike had been a pleasant one. Fai and Tomoyo had taken a car to the edge of the woods shortly before noon, and they followed a deer trail through the forest, operating mostly on Fai's intuition. Tomoyo didn't mind. She believed Fai when he said he had something he thought Tomoyo would like to see, and that it would be worth the journey, which he had assured her was best made on foot.

The day was warm, but not unbearably so, and their packs weren't too heavy. It was nice to be away from the town for a while and surrounded by nature. The colors on the trees were turning, littering the forest floor in reds, yellows, and oranges that crunched sharply underfoot at times. Through the breaks in the trees, one could sometimes spy animals that had not taken to hiding at the sounds of their footsteps, and along the path ran a stream of clean water —

No, not just clean, Tomoyo had realized — pure. There was a cleansing aspect to this forest, nearly untouched by human hands, and the hands that had reached it — hands like Fai's, who had murmured something to the woods before they entered — had only done so gently and with respect for so long that whatever ills may have befallen this place hundreds of years ago had all been washed away.

When Fai reoriented himself from time to time, Tomoyo could feel his magic reaching out as he placed a hand against the trunk of a tree. Tomoyo found the exercise refreshing. “Asking it directions?” she asked quietly.

“They want you to see, too,” Fai answered, voice heavy with reverence.

“The trees?”

“Yes,” Fai confirmed, “And some that are not trees.”

It was in this near-silent manner they spoke when they desired to, but there wasn't too much to say. They broke for lunch at some point, and by then, Tomoyo was feeling revitalized. Though she could manage, she still wasn't used to life at the castle completely. She was not accustomed to being around people with varying, often hidden agendas that reached for her as secrets dying to be uncovered. If it weren't for the fact that the situation with the cards could have potentially become dire at any moment, Tomoyo would have protected her senses by dampening her power some. But that simply wasn't possible, no matter how taxing having her perceptions tested constantly was.

But this place simply was. It asked nothing of her, demanded nothing of her. All she needed to do was be and enjoy her time here. If she listened — truly listened — she could hear the voices of the forest in whispers. They did not strain for her attention, but they offered information if she was willing to take it. They spoke of what plants were good for healing, what turns to take to find trees of a bark with certain uses. They offered to share stories, histories, rumors, tales — all available, if she would reach out and take it.

She would not today, but maybe another time. All these things would still be there then. Today, she was here for something else.

Eventually, they reached a wide clearing of grasses so tall they came about Tomoyo's waist, and in the center of it all was a hill, upon which sat the tallest tree Tomoyo had seen since coming to Ceres. The energy as they stepped out from the stand of trees was stiller here, and Fai spoke up after what may have been hours of companionable silence. “I hear in Japan they have sacred trees.”

“That's right,” Tomoyo confirmed, pleased that Fai had done his research on the subject.

“We don't have those in Ceres — not exactly — ” he continued, “But we do have fairy trees. The Old Ones guard them, and if you're on good terms, they will let you near. It's not quite the same, but it's close. I thought after being here so long, you might be feeling a bit homesick, so..”

Tomoyo touched a hand to Fai's arm with a genuine smile. “This is very sweet of you, thank you.” Fai was right, she had been missing her home. Everything here had been so different from what she had been used to, even the magic flowing in unfamiliar patterns. Seeing something that was at least a parallel concept was nice. “Is there anything we should do for the fairies?”

Fai grinned, pulling a liquor bottle out of his backpack, and Tomoyo had to giggle at that. Of course they would be fond of alcohol — what spirits weren't? Tomoyo trailed along Fai as they carefully made the trek towards the hill, and they slowed as they reached where the earth began to rise up. Fai pointed down at the mushrooms pushing up through the dirt like sentries at their posts. "This is a fairy ring. It circles this entire hill and marks the boundary between their territory and ours. A lot of people are scared to cross over, because some people never come back."

"Disrespectful people," Tomoyo concluded.

"That's right," Fai agreed, "But I think we can manage some good manners. They did tell me how to find this place, after all." With that, Fai set the bottle down gently just beyond the border, and Tomoyo could feel the flow of energy change just so, beckoning them inwards. Fai stepped over first, turning back to offer his hand. "Shall we pay our respects?"

Tomoyo placed her hand in Fai's and stepped over as well, and in that instant, her world changed, just a bit. When what before her had been a great hawthorn tree moments ago, now stood a *sakura* tree just as majestic as any she had seen back home, and the sight of it took her breath away. She was certain they had not been transported, as everywhere outside the ring had stayed as it was before, even the leaves that had fallen from the hawthorn tree had not been altered — it was just this one tree, the fairy tree, that had been changed.

"It seems they like you," Fai commented, gently tugging her closer to the tree.

When she was scarcely a breath away, Tomoyo's hand slipped free so she could touch the changed tree before her with both hands. It felt real to her fingers, and feeling moved, she touched her forehead to the bark. "Thank you," she murmured, for this really was the most wonderful of gifts.

It was when Fai stepped forward to pay his respects as well that the earth shot up around them, and Fai instead clutched Tomoyo's hand as they were boxed in and separated from the fairy tree.

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Fai regained control of his breath as the world settled around them in a configuration the card seemed to be happy with. It had taken more power than he had anticipated to force the wall that had threatened to spring up between himself and Tomoyo to stay firmly below ground, but it was worth it to not have them separated in this mess. He quickly thought through what cards were remaining and came to a conclusion. "This is Maze, right?"

"That's right," Tomoyo said, a little startled from the suddenness of the change, but otherwise unhurt.

"So, we just have to get out, and we can catch it?"

“You make it sound so easy,” Tomoyo returned, and Fai could only shake his head at that. Of course it wouldn’t be, but there wasn’t really much other choice.

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Hours later, Fai felt like there still hadn’t been any progress. He’d tried flying them out, cutting through with Sword, punching through with Power, removing it altogether with Erase, and even tricking it with Illusion, Shadow, and Loop. All it had accomplished was wearing him out.<sup>61</sup> The only positive result so far was that he had managed to keep himself and Tomoyo from becoming separated. At least he could protect her, if nothing else. But the full moon was rising high in the sky, and Fai was beginning to wonder if they were ever going to get out.

“Would a divination work?” Fai asked, scraping at the bottom of the barrel for answers.

Tomoyo shook her head. “The paths would simply change again.”

Fai had figured as much. “What happens if we can’t get out?”

“We would remain trapped here,” Tomoyo provided. It wasn’t encouraging.

“If you had all the cards,” Fai began, flopping down to sit on the ground, “What would you try?”

Tomoyo placed a finger to her mouth in thought. “Through would probably work. Or maybe stopping Maze with Time or Freeze.”

“Nothing that we have though?” Fai asked with little hope. Tomoyo shook her head. “Figures.”

“We shouldn’t give up,” Tomoyo countered, but Fai didn’t think she sounded so confident herself. Fai would have laughed in any other situation, but he didn’t want to hurt her that way.

“Maybe Kuro-grump will sense it,” Fai offered instead. “He’s got Time; he’ll rescue you.”

“But not you?” Tomoyo asked with a bit of sadness in her voice.

“I’ll come along for the ride,” Fai assured her with a grin, “But it’s you he’ll come for.”

Tomoyo’s eyebrows pinched together. “Fai — ”

“*Tenma Kuryuusen!*” That was all the warning they had before an energy wave like a great dragon cut straight through the labyrinth, and Fai grabbed Tomoyo’s hand with barely a thought, dragging her behind him as he followed the path that had opened up before it closed back up on them again. When they broke through the final wall, Kurogane waved his sword again: “*Shoutai Konrei!*”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> In CCS, it took an outside force to free them from Maze.

<sup>62</sup> In CCS, Syaoran’s attacks are all 4-character phrases, so I borrowed from that to create this one that translates to “true form now return”.

The Maze was forced back into its card form, and Fai wasn't even upset for having to concede this one, but instead of going to Kurogane, it floated down to where Fai was waiting just in front of the hawthorn tree. He took it warily, confusion open on his face. It didn't spring back open to imprison him, though, and Fai studied the card in disbelief. "That can't be right."

Kurogane didn't seem surprised in the least, and that did nothing to calm Fai's rising unease. "The words you're looking for are Thank You."

Fai shook his head roughly, trying to make sense of it. Up until now, the pattern had been consistent: beat the card, get the card. What would make this one so different? "It should have gone to you. You're the one who beat it; you're the one who sealed it! You said the card goes to whoever did the most to defeat it, right?"

"If you don't want it, then hand it over," Kurogane growled as he sheathed his sword.

"That's not it, and you know it," Fai shot back, not caring that Tomoyo had to be a witness to their argument. He was tired of feeling manipulated into action and left in the dark every step of the way. "There's something wrong here. It should have gone to you!" And Kurogane should have been more wound up about this than Fai was, and the thought of that had Fai narrowing his eyes Kurogane's way. "What aren't you telling me? Just what the hell is going on?"

Kurogane opened his mouth to answer, but Fai wouldn't get to hear it as just then, Fai felt the sensation of being tugged back as a light shone behind him in the direction of the tree, and the last thing he saw before he was swallowed up was the full moon sat high in the sky.

## The Return



King of Swords: Yuui Fluorite

*Year 1999*

They were sitting together in the library, Fai with a large book open and spread across his lap. The key and its cord rested where the pages met, resembling a bookmark in the way it laid.

“You should do it,” Fai said before Yuui had a chance to speak.

“Why me?” Yuui asked.

“You’re better at offense, and I’m better at defense,” Fai explained cheerfully, as he turned the book around so it was facing Yuui instead. This promised to be their greatest adventure yet.

“You can focus on catching them, and I’ll focus on protecting us. We’ll be the perfect team.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Yuui acknowledged before reaching forward to sign his name on the line in the book, completing the contract.

Yuui fell from the sky when the card released him, but not for too long, as Fai created a wind of his own to cushion the fall. “Thanks, Fai!” Yuui called back before going back into the fray. His magic worked with Fai’s and soon they had the card boxed in between the two of them.

“Return to the form which you were meant to be, Clow Card!”

Windy was forced back into its card form and it flew into Yuui’s waiting hand, and Yuui beamed from ear to ear as he bound up to his brother. “We did it! We caught one!”

“Alright!” Fai cheered, giving his brother a high five. They really were the perfect team.

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*Year 2000*

“I can’t believe he got one,” Yuui muttered sorely as they began the walk home.

“Don’t worry,” Fai assured him, “We’ll get it back.”

“How?” Yuui asked.

Fai’s grin was sly. “When we catch the rest of them, we’ll challenge him to a duel, and when we beat him, all the cards will be ours.”

Yuui wasn’t so certain. “What if he catches more than us?”

Fai scoffed at that. “Are you kidding? It’s 2 against 1! We’ll beat him, no problem. We’re a perfect team, remember?”

Yuui grinned wide. “You’re right. There’s no way we could lose!”

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“Do you think this is what they meant?” Yuui asked, looking over the devastation. People had died this time, and he couldn’t help feeling that it was his fault. If only he had been faster or stronger, maybe he could have saved them. Yuui wanted to tear the Power in two.

“About what?” Fai asked.

“When they called us the unlucky princes,” Yuui supplied.<sup>63</sup> Fai didn’t say anything, instead slipping his hand into Yuui’s and giving it a squeeze. Of the two of them, Yuui had always been the one with the heart more easily broken.<sup>64</sup>

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Yuui was saved when a rock hit Fight right at the temple, distracting it long enough for Yuui to scramble out from underneath it.

“Hey ugly!” Fai shouted defiantly. “Bet you can’t defeat me!”

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<sup>63</sup> See Chapter 16: The Dash and Chapter 4: Thunder

<sup>64</sup> In the beginning of TRC, Ashura tells Fai that it is his kind heart that will always hurt him the most.

“Fai!” Yuui shouted as Fight ran towards his brother instead. This wasn’t the plan. Fai wasn’t a good fighter. Yuui would fight, and Fai would defend. That’s what they’d agreed on. Fai was never supposed to put himself in harm’s way like this.

Fai threw up a barrier at the last second while Yuui finally managed to push himself to his feet, one side of his face sticky with blood and his left leg protesting having to hold his weight. For a moment, Yuui watched, stunned and more than a little dazed, but he could see the barrier starting to buckle, so he pulled out a card. “Shield!” The card rushed forward, supplementing Fai’s original spell, and Yuui used the time it bought him to think. There had to be a way to beat this card. He couldn’t let it hurt anymore people. He had to win against it, somehow.

Then Shield gave out and Yuui didn’t have any more time to think.

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Fai was hurt. Fai was hurt and it was all Yuui’s fault. If he had just thought to use Power earlier, if he had just been a little faster, a little stronger, a little smarter, he could have protected Fai like he was supposed to. Fai was hurt — he never wanted to see Fai hurt. “I’m sorry!” Yuui sobbed, taking up one of Fai’s hands in both his own. Fai was the one of them who could heal, but who healed the healer? “I’m sorry,” he offered again. “I can’t heal you. I’m sorry.”

Fai reached up, holding Yuui’s cheek and catching some tears there. He was smiling. “It’s okay, Yuui,” he assured him, gently. “It’s okay. I’ll be alright. You did your best.”

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Yuui swung Sword down, severing the loop at the seam, and it only took a moment to seal the card away. It felt wrong. Without Fai at his side, sealing away the cards felt wrong. Yuui clutched the card to his chest in a prayer. “Get better soon, Fai.”

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Yuui was grinning from ear to ear as he looked down at the freshly caught card, and Fai peeked over at it as well. “We can use this,” Fai murmured conspiratorially.

“What do you mean?” Yuui asked.

“When we go out to catch a card, we can send this one out somewhere else,” Fai explained, plucking the Mirror from Yuui’s grasp. “He won’t know which set of us to follow. It’s perfect!”

“That’s a lot of magic,” Yuui remarked, not dismissing the idea entirely.

“I know, but you can do it, Yuui,” Fai assured him. “You’ve become super strong since we started catching these cards. If it’s you, you can definitely do it. I believe in you.”

Yuui smiled at that. "You're right," he admitted. "But I still couldn't have done it without you. Perfect team?" he raised his hand, and Fai met him for the high five.

"Perfect team."

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Nobody else could tell, but they could. Even though they were identical, Fai and Yuui could tell they weren't in the right bodies. It only lasted a day, but one day was long enough. "When did your shoulder start hurting like that?" Yuui asked after they had switched back.

Fai shrugged, not meeting his eyes. "Fight hurt it. I don't think it healed right."

Yuui frowned, guilt washing over him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I knew you'd look at me like that," Fai answered, shaking his head fondly. "I told you, it wasn't your fault."

Yuui wasn't ready to believe that. "But if I hadn't — "

Fai shushed him, drawing him into a hug before the tears could start. "I made the choice to egg it on, and I made the choice to make a barrier instead of running. None of that was your fault, and I will never, ever regret saving you from that card. One bad shoulder is a small price to pay for your life. So please stop beating yourself up over it. For me?"

Yuui nodded against Fai's good shoulder. "I'll try."

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They had most of the cards now. All Yuui had to do was catch this last one and they could challenge their rival for the rest of the cards. Just one card left and it would all be over. Yuui tried several cards, and though some of the pillars of earth were chipped away, the main body of the card did not emerge. Trying another strategy, Yuui drew out another card. "Thunder!"

Lightning struck and the main body of the card did not emerge, but a large section of earth was cut away, tumbling toward the ground and striking a hastily erected barrier that crumpled instantly beneath its sheer mass.

Yuui screamed and did not stop for a long time.

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This land was gone. Its people were gone, the animals were gone, the buildings were gone, the landmarks were gone. When the news reached other kingdoms, Yuui was sure they'd report it was an accident — an explosion or something like it — something so massive and devastating that it could take out all of the tiny country, leaving not a single living thing behind except for the three of them.

Yuui knew the truth, and it was with a sense of resignation that he turned to his uncle, key grasped within his still too small hands. "Will they come back?" he asked.

Ashura smiled the same gentle smile he always gave him. "If you win."

Yuui didn't take any comfort in that. His perfect team was no more, even with the new warmth that had rested within his chest. Still, it wasn't as though he had a choice. "I won't lose. I can't."

Ashura, even as he raised one arm, seemed unnaturally still. "Then let's begin."

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*Year 2017*

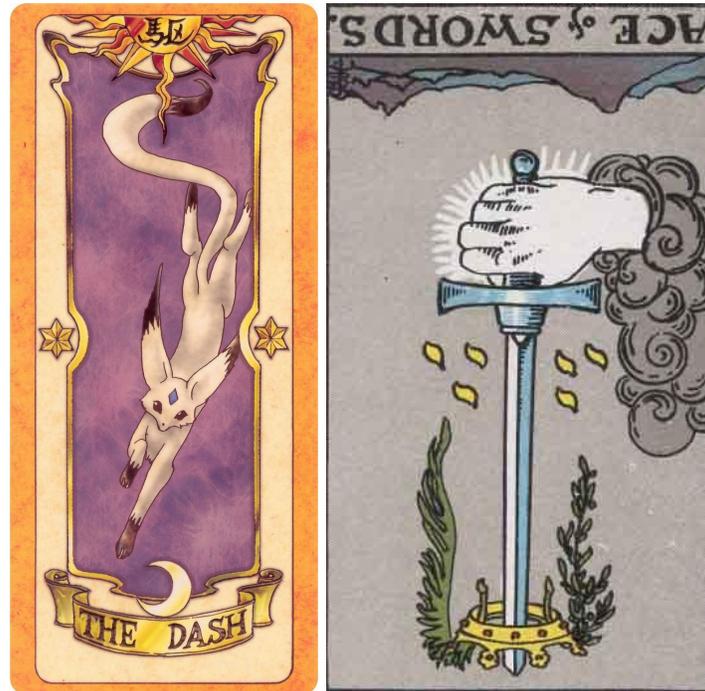
Fai stumbled forward into the grass as if falling from a great height, and he didn't have long to take in the sight of Kurogane kneeling with his sword pointed down, or of Tomoyo fretting at his side before Tomoyo shouted out: "Seal it!"

Fai turned, only just noticing he had the staff already in his hand, facing the light emanating from the hawthorn tree. "Return to the form which you were meant to be, Clow Card!" This time, the card did shoot straight for Kurogane, who only barely caught it before he collapsed onto the ground. Fai staggered to his feet, not feeling much better than Kurogane looked. "Is he alright?"

Tomoyo nodded, though she didn't seem too convinced. "Time is a very difficult card to use, but he should recover with rest."

Fai nodded, feeling strangely relieved. "Let's take him back," he said, meeting Tomoyo eye to eye, "I think we all need to have a talk about today." She nodded, and they began the long, slow process of trudging back to town.

## The Dash



“So that’s why I could never find this place,” Fai remarked as he examined the wards Kurogane had placed around the room, “Clever.” He had attempted to scry for Kurogane’s location in the past, and the wards certainly explained why that had been unsuccessful. He had considered having Kurogane followed, or doing the following himself, but Fai had a hunch Kurogane would be able to sense him, and sending anyone else would have invited questions Fai would rather have not answered.

“Is that why you wanted to come here?” Tomoyo asked from her self-appointed watch at Kurogane’s side.

“I didn’t think it would be wise to have this conversation at the castle. You never know who might be listening. But these,” Fai tapped his finger to the ward gently and it shocked him in retaliation, leaving a scorch mark on the pad of his finger. Fai found he didn’t mind. “Should be sufficient for our purposes.”

“And what purposes would those be?” came Kurogane’s gruff voice at Tomoyo’s side.

“I’ll get to that in a moment,” Fai promised, “But first I want to establish that nothing we say here leaves this room.”

“And you expect me to believe that?” Kurogane asked as he pulled himself up to a sitting position.

“It is because I don’t want anyone at the castle to know that I decided to do this here,” Fai argued as if Kurogane was being deliberately obtuse. “I don’t have anyone I’d like to leak this information to. But you have contacts in your homeland, don’t you.” Kurogane didn’t counter that so Fai continued. “I want you to swear to me that what we learn here is something that we keep to the three of us, and just the three of us.”

Kurogane scoffed at that. “Are you sure you should be taking my word?”

“Tomoyo trusts you,” Fai pointed out, looking to Tomoyo briefly, who nodded her agreement. “That’s enough for me.”<sup>65</sup>

Kurogane frowned like he thought Fai was luring him into a trap, but couldn’t quite figure out what it was, and for a moment, Fai thought he would refuse, but Kurogane never ceased to surprise. “Fine, you have my word. Now why are you here?”

“You used Time to bring me back, so the card that trapped me must have been Return, correct?” Fai again looked to Tomoyo who nodded. “And that means everything I saw actually happened in the past?”

“That’s right,” Tomoyo said.

Fai had thought as much, and he finally pulled up a chair and settled into it. “Here’s what I saw — ”

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“So it would seem you and Yuui are brothers,” Tomoyo concluded.

“I’m willing to bet twins,” Fai elaborated. It was a sensible conclusion, and it would explain why he had been so readily accepted to take Yuui’s place in the contract.

“That would make sense,” Kurogane agreed. “It’s also in line with the theory that the cards were already sealed and that something is making them active again.”

“Or someone,” Fai continued. “But it still leaves us with a lot of unanswered questions.” He kept the thought of who to himself. He’d relayed what had happened in the Return up until the final glimpse of the past — whatever Ashura had to do with this, Fai intended to find out for himself. “You can see why I wanted to have this conversation here,” Fai added.

Kurogane couldn’t argue that. “So where does that leave us?”

The resulting silence didn’t stretch long before Tomoyo spoke up: “We continue as before. Making any changes now would only rouse suspicion, and we may lose whatever opportunity we have to resolve this. Until we have the advantage of having gathered all the cards, we

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<sup>65</sup> This is a small nod to the Tokyo Arc of TRC. Kurogane does not trust Yuuko but Mokona does and he trusts Mokona, and by extension, Yuuko with Fai’s life.

should go on with the assumption that we are out-matched and make every effort to minimize loss.”

“I suppose you’re going to expect me to give him all the cards?” Kurogane asked, clearly not pleased at the prospect.

“If it comes down to it,” Tomoyo said. “Hopefully, we will have a better understanding later on so we will know whether we need to make that call or not.”

“I don’t like it,” Kurogane grouched. “There’s still too much that we don’t know.”

“I agree,” Fai said. “But what can we do? Scrying has been unsuccessful, and Return takes too much power. We’re bound to be noticed if we keep using it.”

Tomoyo nodded. “My dream walking has also been unrevealing. We may be able to supplement it once we have the Dream, but it is possible,” she added, “That I haven’t seen anything because there is a force blocking me.”

Fai crossed his arms at that. He hadn’t been aware that Tomoyo had been having that particular difficulty. “In which case, the force needs to be counteracted if we want results.”

“Or overpowered,” Kurogane added, looking to Fai meaningfully. Of the three of them, it was clear that Fai had the most raw power.

Fai huffed a short breath out his nose, catching Kurogane’s meaning. He also knew that being that unsubtle would mean revealing himself to whoever was opposing them, and the fact that they were aware of such a thing.<sup>66</sup> “It’s risky,” he hedged. They couldn’t account for the strength and abilities of a force they knew nearly nothing about.

“The whole damn thing is risky,” Kurogane argued, “But we can’t let a threat like that go unchecked.”

“How do you know we’re not the threat?” Fai countered without any heat. “Our knowledge of these cards is limited. For all we know, we’re upsetting the natural balance of things and creating the danger. Whoever this is may be trying to protect everyone from us.”

“We can’t completely discard that possibility,” Tomoyo agreed morosely, “Or that they at least believe that is the case.”

“Clow Reed wouldn’t know natural balance if it bit him on the ass,” Kurogane countered.<sup>67</sup> “The damn things weren’t supposed to exist in the first place, but he made them anyway, and now they’re the ones causing trouble, or did you forget what happened with Erase and Power?”

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<sup>66</sup> This very thing happens to Yuuko in xxxHolic.

<sup>67</sup> This references Clow’s unbalanced Sun/Moon scale again.

“But if you didn’t know that,” Fai postulated. “If you didn’t know anything about any of this, what would you think was going on? What seems more likely: that we’re trying to rein in a long-dead magician’s magic, or that we’re out causing havoc with no regard to the consequences?”

Kurogane’s scowl only deepened at that, and Fai considered the argument won. “As far as we are aware, there are two distinct obstacles which may or may not exist in fact: the first is whatever is causing the cards to become active again, which for all we know is the cards themselves, and the other is whatever is concealing the truth from us.”

“There is the chance that they could be one and the same,” Tomoyo added. “Or that there are additional actors who we have yet to notice.”<sup>68</sup>

“Which is why I agree with Tomoyo,” Fai concluded, now facing Kurogane directly. “We play it by ear and err on the side of caution until we have more concrete information.”

Kurogane sighed at that. He didn’t like it. He would have much preferred that they take whatever it was head on and get it over with, but that wasn’t a strategy that would work if two out of the three of them doubted it was the correct thing to do. “Fine. Lay low, gather the cards, keep an open ear, and try to minimize casualties.”

With everyone in agreement, a short silence fell with none of them having any more to discuss. It was Fai who finally spoke up again, addressing Tomoyo as the first lights of dawn began to show beyond the window: “It’s late. We should head back before our absence causes alarm.”

“You go ahead,” Tomoyo offered with a smile. “I’d like to catch up with my cousin for a while.”

Fai didn’t have any reason to decline and so left shortly after, and when Tomoyo looked Kurogane’s way expectantly, Kurogane huffed out a short sigh. “Am I that obvious?”

“Only because I know you,” Tomoyo said, aiming to pacify, “What’s on your mind?”

“When I called him the Unlucky Prince, I didn’t think he’d turn out to actually *be* one of them,” Kurogane admitted with just a little bit of awkwardness. “Thought he was just unfortunate enough to share a name.”

“There was such a thing?” Tomoyo asked, and Kurogane was a little surprised at that.

“You didn’t know?”

“The Prince doesn’t seem to remember anything before a certain time,” Tomoyo told him after only a little hesitation. She could trust Kurogane to be discreet.

Kurogane’s frown deepened. “So it’s like that, huh?” It explained why Fai seemed even more lost than he was regarding the cards. Still, for Fai to have absolutely no knowledge of the notorious unlucky princes put Kurogane ill at ease, and Tomoyo must have sensed that because

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<sup>68</sup> Tomoyo’s got it exactly. See Chapter 29: The Hope.

she was peering at him with kind eyes. “Are you aware of what occurred the last time the cards were active?”

“I was told that if the information was required, that my dreams would deliver them,” Tomoyo informed him.

That was just like Kendappa to pull that kind of shit, Kurogane thought, but he didn’t understand why his mother would agree to such a tactic.<sup>69</sup> Kurogane was above playing such games. “They originally surfaced in a country that was known as Valeria at the time. You may have learned about it as the AUZ.”

“The Autonomous Uninhabitable Zone?” Tomoyo clarified. It had shown up in her studies, but world history wasn’t a hobby of Tomoyo’s so she didn’t research any further into it than was required to pass the class.

Kurogane nodded. “I lost my memory of my time there as well, so I can’t be certain of what really happened, but the official story is that there had been some form of industrial accident. It wiped out the entire nation and everyone in it and then some, leaving it a desert wasteland. That was 17 years ago.”

“And that was when you came home,” Tomoyo recalled. “You think it had something to do with the cards.”

“Nothing grows there,” Kurogane asserted. “Even research teams can’t last very long before they’re forced to retreat. It’s as if something had sucked even the potential for life from that space permanently. It’s not natural.” After the incident, Kurogane had kept updated on the AUZ almost obsessively. There had to be some clue about why or how the cards had contributed to such a disaster, and how he could prevent such a cataclysm again. “Before that, though, Valeria had shut down.

“Early in the 1990s, they began to minimize relations with other countries except for their direct neighbors. By 1998 they had completely closed their borders and issued a media blackout. You couldn’t get any verifiable information about what was happening there outside the country. There were rumors about disappearances — people just vanishing without a trace. Some people thought the ruling party had become tyrannical and the citizens were fleeing. Some people thought they were being put into camps. Some people thought that the rumors were baseless and everything was fine — that they had just entered into an isolationist period due to internal politics.

“At that time, the royal family consisted of the King and Queen, a Crown Prince, and two younger Princes — twins born in 1989 by the name of Fai and Yuui. The period of increasing

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<sup>69</sup> This is because Kurogane’s mother is aware of an enchantment on Kurogane that conceals his presence. Her dreams revealed that it was important to save his life, and so in case Tomoyo had her mind read, she didn’t want Tomoyo with any knowledge about Valeria — particularly that Kurogane was there when it was destroyed.

isolationism and the birth of the twins was close enough that the more superstitious started calling them the Unlucky Princes. Apparently, there was some support for the name astrologically as well, which only gave those people more reason to think that somehow the twins were at fault.

“So with the timing of the disaster, the location, the cards, and now knowing there were a Fai and Yuui involved,” Kurogane trailed off.

Tomoyo understood instantly. “It’s too much to be a coincidence,” she concluded sadly. “Oh, Fai.”

“There’s something else,” Kurogane added. “The Queen of Valeria at the time was Ashura’s sister.”

“Which explains why Fai may have fallen to his care,” Tomoyo reasoned.

“What it doesn’t explain,” Kurogane continued, “Is why Fai never learned about any of this. As next in line for the throne, he should know his own history, and the history of what had been his land’s neighbor. Hell, Galat was right at the edge of it and that’s why it’s a desert today.”

“Which means either the Prince is hiding how much he knows,” Tomoyo concluded, “Or the King has deliberately kept him in the dark.”

“Exactly.”

Tomoyo weighed that information for a time. She was a discerning person by nature, and she wanted to believe that Fai was as genuine with her as she had felt he was, but the chance that she was being fooled could not be ignored. She had not had the opportunity to meet Ashura and so she could not make an assessment of him, but Fai seemed to love and trust him. The thought that he was being manipulated to some end by possibly the only family he had left left a pain in Tomoyo’s heart. “I would like to try to get a better idea of how much of this he is aware of.”

“Can you handle it?” Kurogane asked neutrally. Was she tactical enough to not give herself away? Would her heart even permit such a thing?

“I must,” Tomoyo decided. “If the disappearances here in Ceres are any indication, we are heading towards the same disaster once again. We cannot allow such a thing to happen.”

Kurogane sighed at that. “So those rumors are true as well.”

“They are,” Tomoyo confirmed. “You saw the result of that in Galat.”

Kurogane recalled the clothes and accessories in the road, the vehicles that had continued under their own power, the exhausted fires and water damage from unattended appliances. It was as if every living thing had vanished in the blink of an eye. With effort, he kept some emotional distance from the reality of the event — that all the people that lived there were most

likely now dead. “There couldn’t be a mundane explanation for what happened there.” If that was what had happened in Valeria, then maybe the shutdown had not been for self defense, but in a vain effort to keep such a thing from spreading to other lands — a disaster blamed on a single pair of children, no older than Kurogane himself had been at the time.

“There is another thing I don’t understand,” Tomoyo murmured. “If you had been present and had indeed caught those cards, why haven’t you appeared in any dreams or visions of the past?”

Kurogane blinked owlshly. “He said I turned up in Return.”

“No,” Tomoyo recalled, “They talked about an unnamed male who had managed to catch a card instead of them. Fai didn’t see you or even mention a name.”

Kurogane thought back on that part of the conversation and found Tomoyo was right. “Do you think someone’s blocking that, too?”

“If so, that implies that whoever it is can either manipulate the cards or can overpower them,” Tomoyo reasoned. “And that they have reason to conceal your involvement.”

“Could it be the cards themselves?” Kurogane asked. What he had heard of the incident with Mirror implied that the cards had some degree of free will.

“Possibly, but I can’t understand why they might do such a thing,” Tomoyo admitted.

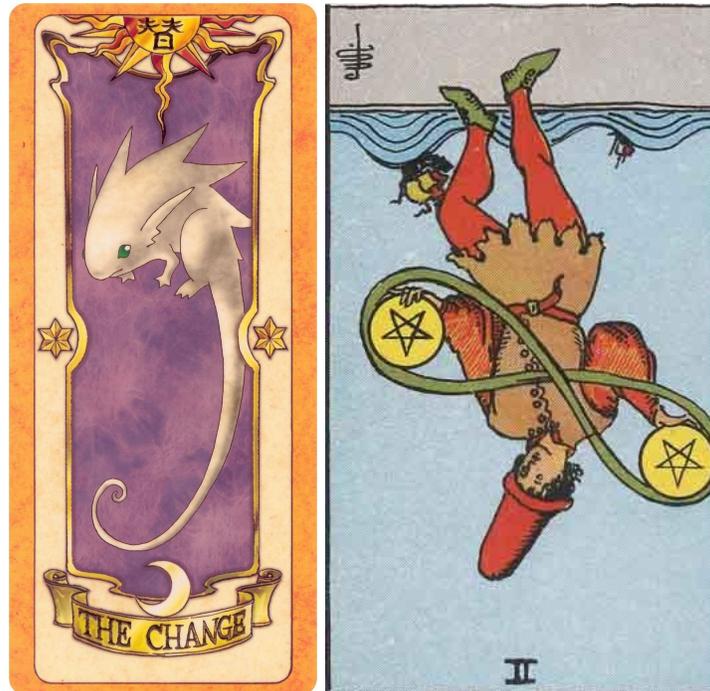
Kurogane thought on that, glancing out the window to spot a familiar form on the rooftop across the road. “The Dash,” he remarked.

Tomoyo smiled, rising from her seat. “You go get it. I should be heading back anyway.”

Kurogane got up as well. It wasn’t as if he had anything else to discuss. “You be careful.”

“You, too.”

## The Change



Fai didn't know why he had expected anything different when he had set out on this trip in the first place. He'd taken his truck out alone, only informing Tomoyo of exactly where he was headed, and the trip up itself was incident-free. However, when he'd turned onto the final road into Mithral to see no tire tracks in the road, his stomach had sunk with premonition, and when he'd come over the final rise to find the town completely vacant, his suspicions were confirmed.

<sup>70</sup>

Whatever that had been disappearing people had rendered all the border towns lifeless, and had started to take hold in some smaller villages further in. Of course the mountain valley where he had caught the Fly would have been hit by now. Nearly no one braved the pass if they didn't need to, so word simply hadn't reached them at the capital yet, but by the undisturbed snow on the ground, Fai guessed it must have been empty for at least a week.

Not wanting to waste the trip, he ventured into the town proper anyway. This was the first time he had been the first to stumble upon a decimated town, so perhaps he could find some clue that would have been hidden or destroyed had someone else found it before him. Maybe this was the moment that would turn things around so he could set them right. It was with this hope that he trudged through the streets, trying to pick up on any sign that would give away just what had happened or who might have caused it.

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<sup>70</sup> Recall that Mithral was where Windy was caught.

There was nothing there, however. It wasn't just the absence of a trace that he had noticed in Galat — there was no hint that life had ever been here. By now, animal scavengers must have gone through some of the buildings to make use of the abandoned food. There should have been birds on the roofs. There should have been flies around the rotting fruit. Even if there was some force keeping them away, living energy left traces that could be picked up upon years later in a settlement like this. But there was nothing, as if nothing had ever been alive in this valley before at all.

A shiver that wasn't from the cold shot down Fai's spine as he realized he couldn't even pick up on his own trail. Dreading the implications of not being able to so much as detect himself and feeling vaguely like he was about to be devoured, he hurriedly retraced his steps out of the town until it was as though he crossed a threshold and he could feel the life of the mountain again beyond the town's limits. A little out of breath from climbing back up the hill so quickly, he stood right at the edge of the event and tried to read the town again. Maybe he had just stumbled on a dampening field down there — something clamping down on his power would prevent him from using it within the area, and that was a slightly more comfortable theory than that something could have been actively feeding on him down there, and that it could have taken him out the same way it had everyone else.

When he extended his magic, it flowed freely about him as it should, but his senses went dead right where the border of the residual effect was. If it were a dampening field, there should have been some sort of resonance, but again, Fai was only met with nothing.

Fai nearly jumped out of his skin when his phone began ringing in his pocket, and he waited for his heartbeat to slow a bit before answering after seeing the name on the Caller ID. "Yes, my King?"

Ashura's voice on the other end sounded concerned: "*Fai, I was told you had left town suddenly. Is everything alright?*"

Fai frowned at that. It wasn't as if he hadn't expected Ashura to learn about the trip at all; he simply wished he'd had more time to come up with what he wanted to say. "I'm alright," he reported, "But it seems Mithral has been hit."

*"Are you up there now?"*

"Yes. It's completely empty, just like the others."

*"I hope I have not interrupted your investigation."*

"No," Fai told him, and it wasn't a lie — there was nothing else left that he could do here. His instincts, however, pressed him to lie in his next breath, "I've just arrived, and was about to get started."

*"Be careful,"* Ashura pressed, *"I do not wish to see you hurt."*

“Understood.” Fai recognized a dismissal from Ashura when he heard one and cut the call, and then waited. For long minutes, he just stood right where he was and breathed, focusing his mind and getting the flow of his magic under strict control so he wouldn’t be caught off guard again.

When the wind shifted, Fai stepped forward across the invisible border and towards the town, and this time his energy continued to move naturally instead of being consumed by some invisible force. With caution, Fai created another breeze himself, just to see that his magic was working properly within that space, and the spell performed perfectly.

The tattoo on his back itched as he made his way back to the truck for the pouch that held his cards.<sup>71</sup> The decision on what to do next would have been easy if he’d gained control of the Return — he’d just turn back time far enough to watch the catastrophe play out in search of clues — but that card had fallen to Kurogane, and Fai doubted they were quite on sharing terms just yet. He’d have to get creative instead.

He selected Illusion along with all the wind cards in his possession: Windy, Fly, Float, Jump, Song, and Move. The plan was a long shot, but Fai had some hope that his natural affinity would be able to supplement the informational powers of the cards. He laid the 6 wind cards in formation on the ground before summoning forth his staff and preparing Illusion.

*“Cards before me in the snow  
Help me learn and help me know  
Before my eyes do please appear  
The events that unfolded here.”*

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It took a few minutes for Fai to regain his faculties, but he had expected that would be the case once the spell had gone beyond what he was prepared to control. Mixing magic, especially when one form was still unfamiliar, was a dangerous task with often unpredictable results.<sup>72</sup> Instead, he laid in the snow where he had fallen once his strength had given out and reviewed what had just happened while he waited for himself to recover just a little more.

In the end, it seemed the cataclysm had been quick — it was likely that the people of the town hadn’t even had the opportunity to be surprised before they were gone. One moment, they were there, having a normal day, and the next, the town was enveloped in a dark sphere that dissipated in a matter of seconds, leaving no living thing behind. That the people probably hadn’t suffered was a cold, cold comfort.

His phone buzzed inside his pocket and Fai pulled it out at length, certain that he didn’t really have the energy to be dealing with anything else right now. For a moment, he simply stared blearily in the phone’s general direction, not really processing what he was seeing, with the

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<sup>71</sup> Yet again Fai’s magic and Ashura’s magic are butting up against each other.

<sup>72</sup> Yuui made up that spell right then and there, and the magical system behind it and why it failed can be reviewed in Appendix A.

vague thought that it would be so much easier to just give up and lay in the snow for a thousand years than to continue dealing with everything that had been going on.

His official duties alone had been a lot to handle before everything else had come into play. The Clow Cards could have been a fun distraction — a game even, with Kurogane as an opponent — but everything he'd learned about them just added to the load: that the cards were dangerous, that this was not his first attempt at capturing them, that Ashura was somehow involved, though whether he had intended to help or to harm was impossible to determine just from what he'd seen. And now there was there was the mounting evidence of some kind of genocide being carried out against his people — Fai couldn't see just how things could get any worse.

The fact that all of these new developments likely tied into a past that he knew nothing about was something he had been avoiding thinking about, but it was looking like finding the truth would be inevitable, no matter how much he would have rather kept it buried. He'd rather keep his ignorance than discover that all of this was somehow his fault — that he really was the out of control monster Ashura had found on the beach.

Yes, it would really be much easier to just stay there in the snow.

The phone buzzed again and Fai forced his eyes to open and focus.

Is everything alright? — TD

I could feel your power from here — TD

Fai huffed out a fond sigh as he typed up his response. I'm fine. About to head back now. — FF

Are you okay to drive? — TD

Of course! :) — FF

Alright. Take care. I'll see you when you get back — TD

Drive safe — TD

Will do — FF

And because he already said he would, Fai finally picked himself up off the ground, gathered his things, and packed back up into the truck. Allowing himself to be overwhelmed was not acceptable, as far as he was concerned. He had responsibilities to protect his people, and he had to do it, no matter what.

“See?” Tomoyo said, showing Kurogane her phone before starting to pack up her lunch. “I told you he was ok.”

Kurogane scoffed at that, but accepted the evidence all the same. “Still wouldn’t put it beyond the idiot to get himself killed interviewing people.”

“He’s been really good at not dying so far,” Tomoyo remarked.

Kurogane nearly rolled his eyes. “First time for everything.”

Tomoyo hummed an affirmative at that. “And maybe next time you’re concerned, you can text him yourself for the first time. I’m sure he’d be over the Moon over it.”

Kurogane did not dignify that statement with a response, but was under the impression that people who spent so long with their heads in the clouds really ought not be sent to space next. “Did he tell you what happened?”

“No,” Tomoyo said after a quick glance confirmed no new messages, “Just that he was starting home soon.”

“Find out,” Kurogane told her, considering that to be the end of the conversation, but Tomoyo was having none of that.

“If you’re worried, you should ask him.”

“I’m not worried,” Kurogane bristled, “He went there to ask about a previous card-related incident, right? Whatever happened is probably relevant to the cards.”

“Stop being so shy — ”

“I’m not shy!”

“ — And I’m not your go-between, Kurogane,” Tomoyo asserted while keeping her tone sweet as she picked up her bag and turning to leave. “He gave you his number. Use it!”

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The sun had set by the time Fai made it back to town, and so it was strange that when he pulled up to the garage that he would find the same attendant there as when he’d left this morning. “Sorata?” Fai asked as he exited the truck. “Where’s Yuzuriha?”

“She didn’t show up for her shift today, Your Highness,” Sorata reported with nothing less than his usual cheer. “Most of her family lives in the western provinces, though. She probably evacuated with them.”

“I see,” Fai commented as he put on a smile, though this was the first he’d heard of any evacuation. “Any word on how that is proceeding?” At Sorata’s questioning look, Fai elaborated. “I haven’t had reception most of the day so I haven’t received any updates yet.”

That seemed to make sense to Sorata. “His Majesty announced this afternoon that they finished clearing every town with less than 50,000 people, and will be working on the outer cities next. Lower magic, higher risk, you know?”

“Right,” Fai agreed, maintaining his mask as the wheels turned in his head. “Sorata, why don’t you head home. I can lock up here.”

Sorata’s grin widened as he gave a mock-salute, eager to get home to the wife he chatted so much about. “Yes, sir! Thanks!”

Closing up the garage himself gave Fai a little more time to think. It was entirely logical to claim an evacuation under these circumstances. Letting the public know entire towns were disappearing without known cause would only inspire a panic. The safer route was to call it an evacuation — one that was apparently made in the wake of some sort of illness that targeted areas with lower concentrations of magic. It was all about keeping the peace and not letting the situation get even further out of hand.

Fai wanted to believe that Ashura was only acting out of duty and had their peoples’ best interests at heart. Nothing Ashura had done in the 18 years Fai had known him demonstrated a capacity for cruelty that would be required to wipe out entire cities. Ashura, who had raised him and taught him everything he knew about magic. Ashura, who had only ever cared for him and loved him like a son. Ashura, who had helped him keep his immense magical potential under control — who had blessed him with the Phoenix on his back so that he wouldn’t have to kill Fai to protect everyone else.

Fai caught his reflection in the mirror and wasn’t pleased with what he saw. His carefully practiced smile was slipping and there were bags forming under his eyes. While his hair had been neatly half up when he’d left town this morning, almost all of it had fallen out of its tie now, giving him a bedraggled appearance. His clothes were ruffled, dirty, and still slightly damp in spots from when he’d lain on the ground too long. He looked like a wreck — no wonder Sorata had looked a bit concerned in the garage.

With a sigh, Fai shook one hand through his hair, and what he saw — or rather didn’t see — gave him pause. He kept his hair the length it was not just because he liked it, but because a couple tendrils of his mark sneaked up low on his neck and he liked to hide it without having to wear scarves and turtlenecks. Looking closer, Fai pushed his hair back again then pulled his collar down a bit further when he couldn’t catch sight of his mark, and there, barely even reaching his shoulder, was a faded line nearly invisible even against his pale skin.

Alarmed, Fai tried not to visibly rush back to his rooms, and as soon as he’d latched the door shut behind him, he chucked off his shirt like it was an offensive thing and stood with his back to

the mirror, peeking over one shoulder to get a better look. It wasn't just the higher lines that were fading, but every edge had started withering away in shades of gray with only the very center of his back remaining a crisp black.

His first instinct was to hurry and tell Ashura, but this had been Ashura's mark. The King would have been the first person to realize there was something wrong with it. He must not have wanted to scare Fai, and had been doing research on how to correct the issue, so that he could approach him with a solution. Binders like these were complicated things, after all — and with Fai's level of raw magic, there had to be additional complications to consider.

Additional complications, such as the gradual release of a power that had lashed out and killed people before, Fai realized with ice in his chest. "It's me," he whispered shakily to himself. "I'm the threat."

It made sense. The mark had been designed to hold back his innate powers as he grew at a predictable rate. It was not intended to also account for any unnatural boosts to his power, such as what he'd been experiencing through the Clow Cards. And since Ashura hadn't known about the cards, he couldn't properly compensate for them. Fai had noticed his power responding more readily and with more flexibility than it had before, but he'd thought that had been the influence of the cards alone, not a symptom of his own powers overcoming his limiter after so many years.<sup>73</sup>

Fai's first thought was to call Tomoyo. She was familiar with the cards; she could possibly tell him how to keep the cards' powers from bolstering his own. But he didn't want to give her a reason to be afraid of him, not until he was certain, and he didn't want to face the possibility that she would realize he was a danger and would break the little alliance they'd made. Even though they were likely at fault, Fai still felt an attachment to the cards, and he didn't want to consider the consequences of forcibly breaking whatever contract he had with the key.

He could go to Ashura, Fai knew, and he *should* go to Ashura, but then Fai would only be facing a similar problem. If Ashura ultimately deemed the cards to be a threat, Fai had no doubt the King would destroy them. He didn't want that, either.

Paralyzed with the lack of acceptable choices, Fai sat on his bed and buried his face in his arms, trying not to think — trying not to feel as scared and alone as he did right then. Those feelings wouldn't solve anything. He had to move forward and fix this, somehow. Everyone was counting on him.

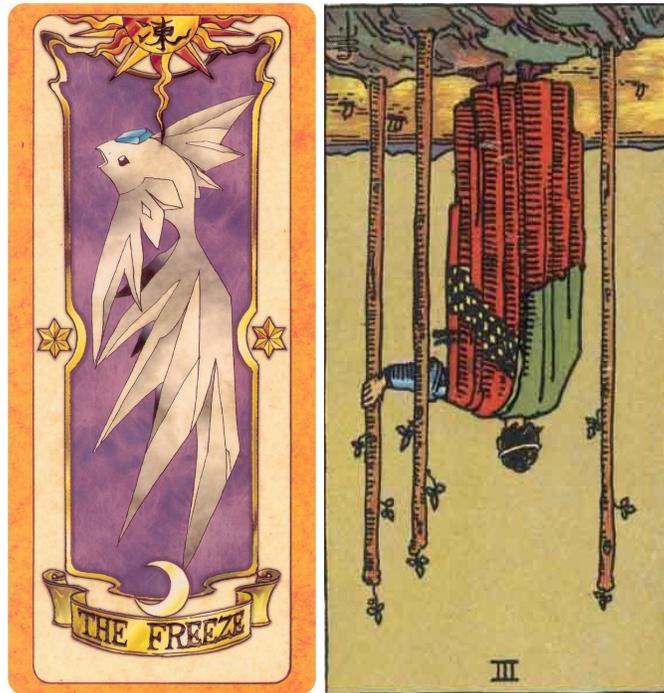
"What do I do?" he asked the empty room.

No one answered.

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<sup>73</sup> The purpose of the mark is gone into more detail in Chapters 28 and 29: The Nothing and The Hope.

## The Freeze



~~Did you learn anything useful at Mithral? KS (unsent, deleted)~~

~~That was way too much magic for just an investigation. What actually happened up there? KS (unsent, deleted)~~

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The first thing Fai did when he got out of bed was to text Tomoyo to stay home for the day with a claim of feeling under the weather. It would make sense to her, the climate whiplash from the temperate capitol city to high mountain Mithral and back could make anybody a little ill.

Fai didn't really like lying to her, but he had a lot of research to do and he didn't think she'd quite approve of the subject.

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~~We should meet up and compare notes KS (unsent, deleted)~~

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It was the second day of pouring over books that Ashura nearly startled Fai. "Have you been feeling alright, young Fai?"

Fai had barely realized Ashura had swept into the study before the man had spoken. He'd been too distracted if even Ashura could sneak up on him, and Fai inwardly chastised himself for that. Still, he gave Ashura a reassuring grin. "I'm well, my King. Just looking for information related to the disappearances." It wasn't a total lie. There had been little information recorded about the circumstances surrounding Fai's appearance in Ceres — something Fai had chalked up to not wanting to alarm citizens of the dangers their future king presented — and so Fai had switched tracks to attempting to identify the exact nature of the magic that had been clearing the towns.

Ashura nodded, drawing closer to the table, but not peaking down at the books scattered about the desk. "Have you been successful?"

Fai couldn't help deflate a bit at that. "No," he admitted after a soft sigh. "I'm worried about what will happen if we can't stop it. I was thinking maybe we really should set up a quarantine after all —"<sup>74</sup>

Ashura laid a hand on Fai's shoulder and Fai stopped speaking of his own accord. Ashura never did have to speak over anyone else. "Have faith, young Fai. All will be well." That simple reassurance and small comfort nearly made Fai's throat swell shut, and so he only nodded and reached up to squeeze Ashura's hand. Ashura seemed to understand that Fai needed a moment and so it was some time before he spoke again: "Should I expect you for dinner?"

"No, I —" Fai glanced at the books and notes before him " — I still have a lot of work to do."

"Do not forget to rest," Ashura chided gently. "Your health is also important, even in a crisis."

"Thank you," Fai replied, already feeling a bit lighter with the reminder that Ashura cared. Still, there was something on his mind and Ashura had turned to leave before Fai could bring himself to ask. "Do you really believe we can stop this?"

"I do," Ashura said, sounding like he meant it, before he left Fai alone with his research.

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~~I'm worried about Fai — KS (deleted, unsent)~~

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It didn't feel right, going out and capturing a card without Fai so much as showing his face, but Kurogane knew someone had to do it, and if the supposed Cardcaptor couldn't be bothered to, then the duty fell to him.

Even as he thought that, Kurogane knew he wasn't being fair to Fai. If the news was accurate, people were being evacuated from the countryside to other countries, and that meant Fai was probably up to his eyeballs in administrative work. And if it wasn't accurate, then the rate at which people were vanishing was increasing and there was a massive coverup around it, in

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<sup>74</sup> Like mother, like son.

which case Fai would have even less time and energy to devote to the cards, especially with Kurogane ready and willing to pick up the slack.

Kurogane doubted there was any proper evacuation happening, though it was likely people were becoming suspicious and fleeing of their own accord by now. He hoped that percentage of the population was high, but his sense told him better. The people here seemed to love and respect their leaders, and were probably willing to accept any explanation within reason. They'd probably sit around and wait for the end of the world if they were simply asked to.

It wouldn't be until much, much later that Kurogane would realise how accurate his assessment would be.

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I'm worried about Fai — TD

Kurogane? — TD

I know — KS

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It was nearly a week before Fai found the spell he was looking for.

It wasn't that their archives were short on spells designed to bind, limit, or cut off a source of power — it wasn't that long ago that magical beasts were still a major threat — but that he needed something compatible, something that could self-maintain.

Something that he could cast on himself with a reasonable amount of certainty that it would not kill him. He still had responsibilities here, after all, and if he was alive, maybe they still had the chance of reversing some of the damage his magic had caused.

Because it had to be his magic. It was the only thing that made sense. Even when the Clow Cards were disappearing people, he was still able to sense the card once he'd approached where it had been active. And if it was the work of another wizard, there should have been some trail. It would have been understandable that the trail had gone cold in Galat, but with the effect still active when he'd arrived in Mithral, there would still have needed to be an active feed to whoever was causing it.

Instead, he had been met with absolutely nothing.

But if Fai himself was the source, that would explain why he wouldn't have been able to track it, especially right on the edge of the event where the distance the magic had to travel was minimal.

In the end, Fai had opted for something simple. All he needed was to supplement Ashura's mark until a long-term solution could be found, and the sooner he could enact it, the better. With care,

Fai drew the small amount of magic the spell itself required to his fingers and drew out the unlocking mechanism on his arm. It wouldn't be visible to anyone without a decent amount of magical ability, and he needed it to be readily accessible, because once this spell was cast, Fai would not be able to undo it on his own.

Fai didn't realize he was holding his breath until the spell settled and he could only feel his magic as if it were held away at a great distance. Before, Ashura had only limited how much he could access at one time; Fai had just cut himself off completely. He hadn't been prepared for just how small he would feel — just how vulnerable and naked he felt with his magic taken away, even by his own hand.

But it had to be done, Fai knew, and he'd do whatever he had to to protect the people he had left.

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If Kurogane had been predisposed to bouts of panic, feeling Fai's magic turn out like a light would have inspired one. As a level-headed person, he instead used his own powers to investigate further. The spotlight among tea candles that Fai's magic typically was had disappeared, but his life force was still present. There weren't any major signs of distress or a struggle that would have indicated a battle of some kind. In fact, Fai's life force seemed to be no different than any other time Kurogane had deliberately felt it out.

Kurogane could only conclude that it was a situation Fai had entered willingly, and the thought of that made him grimace. With a bit of temper, Kurogane snatched up his phone intending to finally put an end to this farce, but before he could send the message, he reconsidered that plan.

It wasn't as if he and Fai were on close terms — at least, not in this decade. Whatever influence that had been blocking Kurogane's memory had begun to fade, and he could now recall working with Fai and Yuui before, though a lot of the specifics eluded him still.<sup>75</sup> He had flashes with a few sentences at most without any context, but it was enough to give him the general idea of the situation. With the few details he had, he could tell he'd been closer to Yuui than Fai, even back then.

He could also recall that Yuui had been the fighter at the time, and that Fai had specialized in barriers and healing magic. The trouble with healing magic though, which was mostly concealed from the general population, was that it went both ways. One could heal others to a degree that it might be considered a miracle, or one could disrupt the body's processes and destroy lives at an unprecedented scale. As a healer, cutting off his own power like that was liable to cause his ability to control it to atrophy, which could spell catastrophe if the magic was ever restored.

Fai, with all his knowledge and training, should have known that just as well as Kurogane did. There had to be some extreme circumstances if Fai had even considered locking his magic

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<sup>75</sup> This has less to do with Fai's mark as how close they are to having all the cards.

away, and nothing Kurogane was aware of justified taking such a risk. Either Fai knew something very important that Kurogane and Tomoyo didn't, or he had strong enough suspicions to drive him into taking drastic measures.

And Kurogane could ask him, but he and Fai had only just recently stopped being openly adversarial to each other. Voicing doubts now would probably only restart the war between them.

With a sigh, Kurogane deleted the message he'd typed and set his phone out of his immediate reach, just in case. "You better know what you're doing," he told his empty room.

No one answered.

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~~Just what are you hiding? KS (unsent, deleted)~~

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*"Key that hides the forces of darkness, show me your true form! By the covenant, I, Yuui, command you. Release!"*

The key expanded to the staff in his hands and Fai breathed a sigh of relief. He had gambled that Tomoyo's information on the power of the cards running off Clow's magic and not his own being correct, and it seemed she was right. It helped to know that if something came up, he wasn't completely defenseless.

Fai heard hurried footsteps and he dismissed the key quickly, and not a moment too soon, because Ashura entered the library swiftly, and Fai didn't think he'd ever seen the king so scared in all his life, but when Ashura's eyes met Fai's own, Ashura visibly calmed.<sup>76</sup> "I couldn't sense you, suddenly," Ashura started, and in his tone, Fai could hear the concern, but also the order to explain why.

Fai tried to smile, but it felt thin. "Your mark was fading," Fai began with a little half-shrug. Ashura must have already known that much. "With my history and what's been happening, I thought it would be wise to take precautions."

Ashura's eyes were understanding, even if his words were not, "This seems to be a pretty extreme precaution."

"Is it?" Fai asked him quietly, and for a moment, nothing happened. The reality that Fai's magic was not worth all these deaths sat between them like a great chasm. Then Ashura was stepping forward and wrapping his arms loosely about Fai's shoulders, drawing him close.

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<sup>76</sup> Imagine you work for nearly 30 years to save someone to the point you make it your life's purpose and they seem to get themselves killed before you could succeed. That's Ashura's fear right then.

“Oh Fai,” Ashura breathed. “I will not be around forever. When I am gone, my mark will fade, and you will have to deal with your magic then. Would it not be better to learn while I am still here to help?”

“Not now,” Fai asserted. “I can’t risk our people like that. What kind of leader would I be if I just let myself kill them all?”

If Ashura had an answer for that, he didn’t share it.<sup>77</sup> Instead, he simply held Fai for a length of time Fai had not experienced since he was a child, and though he was cut off completely from his own magic, Fai felt just a little more safe.

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~~I have some information that might be useful in finding out what happened to Yuui — KS (unsent, deleted)<sup>78</sup>~~

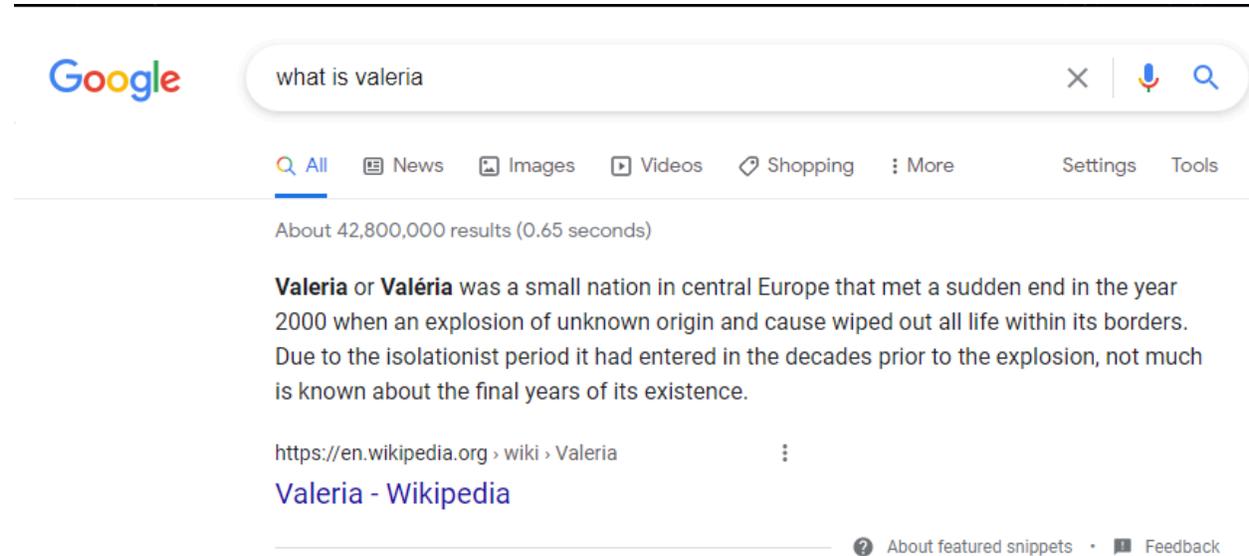
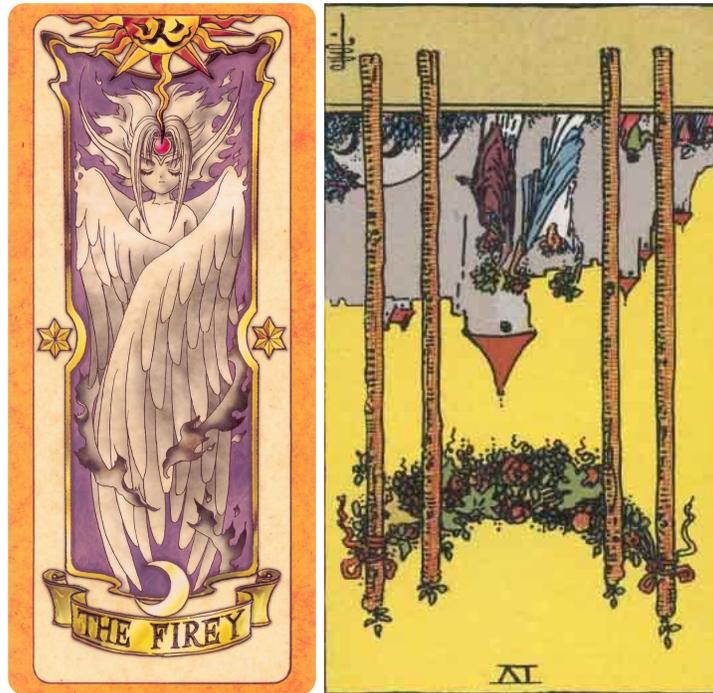
What do you know about Valeria? — KS

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<sup>77</sup> Ashura knows exactly what kind of ruler that would take.

<sup>78</sup> Yuui: \*does something drastic and worrying\* Kurogane: \*fumbles over what to say like a teenager\*

## The Fiery



That there were absolutely no references to Valeria in the palace's library should have clued Fai in to the fact that there was something very, very wrong, but denial was a powerful thing. After all, most of the nonfiction books curated there were relevant to Fai's magical studies and the history of Ceres; it wasn't exactly a broad-spectrum affair. There weren't extensive records there of any other country, either — just mentions in textbooks and maps, and those maps were usually the most updated versions. A quick Google search revealed that what had been Valeria

was entirely contained by the current AUZ, so it made sense that he wouldn't have seen it on the maps or learned about it in his studies. The political history between Ceres and a nation that no longer existed wasn't relevant when there was so much more to know.

That revelation alone was nearly enough to satisfy Fai, but Kurogane would not have asked without good reason, and so Fai set aside time later the next afternoon to delve deep into the Wikipedia entries when he could work uninterrupted, and after a good night's sleep.

For the first part of the day, however, he had official duties to attend to. Ashura had excused himself for the day, citing a necessity to look into some matters personally, and so Fai was left with the remainder of the work. It was not an unfamiliar arrangement, though Fai could not recall a time when Ashura had abdicated during a crisis before. Perhaps he was simply trying to help Fai become adjusted to the realities of what being a leader would be. Fai would eventually have to manage such things on his own, and it was better to learn now when Ashura was still around to step in, than to enter such a situation without any experience in the future.

The news that there had been no new disappearances reported overnight gave Fai a measure of relief. After the acceleration they had experienced, Fai hadn't been entirely certain his magic could be wholly constrained at this point, but it seemed that his plan had worked perfectly, and that the sacrifice had not been in vain.

It was the confidence boost Fai had sorely needed. All he had to do was examine the situation as it changed, adapt his methods, and make the best decisions he could. Perhaps he could become a competent king someday after all. Even delegating the capture of a card to Kurogane a few days prior seemed to have gone over well, and so when Fai detected the presence of another card, he opted to leave Kurogane to it again. The man clearly had the skills he needed to handle the situation. Kurogane could tackle the cards; Fai could handle any other crises that emerged — between the two of them, they could keep the magical situation under control.

Or so Fai thought, until he spotted smoke outside the window and realized Kurogane's fight had gone on for far too long.

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"Where the hell have you been!" Kurogane shouted to be heard over the sound of burning forest as Fai made his entrance on his Fly-transformed staff, as usual. He wasn't sure how long he'd been working on just trying to keep the card contained, forget attempting to actually capture the damn thing. Fai's appearance was long overdue.

"I thought you had it handled," Fai replied with a weak smile, and Kurogane hoped it was just his imagination that Fai already looked more fatigued than usual, "Is it Fiery?"

"Yeah," Kurogane confirmed, unable to completely keep the sneer off his face as he swung out another another mixed attack with his *Chi Ryu Jin En Bu* and Freeze, "And since you took your

sweet-ass time getting here, it's got its hands on a lot of fuel, so I hope you're ready for a struggle 'cuz you've got one."

"I'll apologize properly later — " Kurogane sincerely doubted that, but now was not the time to bicker about it " — what have you tried?"

The flames threatened to jump across his makeshift fire break and so Kurogane swung again in that direction, letting his magic be answer enough. "It's all I can do to keep it away from town."

Fai at least had the decency to look surprised at that as he pulled out his own cards. "I thought you could force them back into card form now?"

"Just the ones I can overpower," Kurogane admitted, "Not the high-powered cards, and definitely not an elemental with a fuel source. So like I said — " he swung again, this time the opposite direction. The card seemed to be advancing more quickly than before; Kurogane figured it must have been spreading deeper into the forest and becoming more powerful in the process. " — It's going to be rough. We're going to need everything you've got."

If Fai wasn't already practically as white as a ghost, Kurogane would have sworn he saw him become paler then. Still, Fai's response was gamely as he faced the blaze more directly: "I'll do what I can. Recommendations?"

"You're a wind-user, right?" Kurogane prompted.

"Yes, but — "

He had no patience for Fai's excuses. The longer they waited, the stronger the card would become. "Then put as much of Clow's power behind Watery as you can and supplement it with your air magic. I'll back you up with Freeze. That *might* be enough."

With a level of incredulity, Kurogane watched Fai shake his head a little frantically. "There's got to be a better way than that."

"Maybe if *someone* hadn't been late — "

The half-shrug Fai gave then seemed to use up that entire side of his body as he drew out two cards from his pocket and shifted into an offensive stance in one motion. "Let's try it, then. Extinguish the flames that consume these woods," Fai began, and Kurogane was about to remind the prince that relying on the magic of the Clow entirely was *not* what he'd said, but Fai was bringing his staff forward before Kurogane could get out more than a shout, "Windy, Watery!"

"Idiot!" Kurogane called as he charged forward to attack all the same, "That wasn't the plan!"

If Fai heard him, he didn't respond, instead focussing on directing the cards to the fire before them, but run after run, the two elements combined could only push the fire back by inches, not overpower it completely. With the flames spreading on other fronts, their combined efforts were

barely making a dent in it. Kurogane had once credited Fai with being clever, but he was beginning to second-guess that assessment as the man continued in the same vein anyway.

After several minutes of this, Kurogane got sick of it. “Just use your own magic, mage!”

“I can’t!” Fai shouted back, not even pausing in his efforts, and Kurogane was of half a mind to beat Fai into the ground for his bull-headedness.

“The hell you can’t! I’ve seen you use your power and Clow’s together before!”

“I’m telling you, I can’t!” Fai asserted, taking one final sweep at the growing inferno before seeming to accept that the tactic was hopeless. As Fai rested his hands on his knees, panting from exertion and staring at the fire as if it was something he could beat if he could just outsmart it, as if strength could not be a factor at all, Kurogane realized that Fai’s vanishing magic the night before was more than just a simple temporary block. “There’s got to be another way.”

Kurogane sighed, shucking his free hand through his hair to buy him a moment to think. “Maybe there was before, but it’s too large now,” he concluded without the anger that had gripped him before. Letting his rage cloud his judgement would not do them any favors, and he was not too proud to admit when something was beyond his abilities. What they needed was more power than the two of them had just then. It was time to call for backup. “Bring in some — ”

“It’s just too large,” Fai repeated at length, and Kurogane could practically see the wheels turning in his head as whatever train of thought Fai had gathered steam. “It’s too large *now*, but what if it wasn’t?”

Kurogane cottoned on almost immediately, and he had to admit it wasn’t a terrible idea, but, “Little’s a low-power card. There’s no way it could bring Fiery down itself.”

“It doesn’t have to,” Fai bargained, “It just has to bring it down enough.”

The longer they argued about the merits of the plan, the larger the blaze would become, and lacking a better idea, Kurogane faced the flames again. “Let’s try it.”

“Alright,” Fai agreed, only to transform his staff with Fly again, confusing Kurogane only a moment before he realized Fai meant to gain a better vantage point, despite the obvious issue.

“You know you’re going to need your staff to use the cards,” Kurogane warned, just in case Fai needed the reminder.

Fai barely paused as he began to gain altitude. “I’ll manage,” he assured hurriedly. “As soon as you notice the fire get smaller, give it everything you’ve got. We’re not likely to get another shot.”

Kurogane did not like how quickly Fai dismissed his concern. If he timed the spells wrong or in any way became incapacitated, there was no innate magic available now to kick in and save his

life in the event of a fall. If Fai screwed up, there was a good chance that it would be the last time he ever would. “If you die, I’m dragging your ass back to kill you again myself.”

This time, Fai’s smile seemed genuine, even if it was lacking in cheer. “Noted. Good luck, Kuro-grump.” With that, Fai sailed up into the air as he had many times before, and all there was left for Kurogane to do was wait.

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Little was able to make a more sizable dent than Kurogane had thought it would, and with the flames reduced, Kurogane could see the speck in the air that was Fai become larger and larger as he plummeted towards the ground and Fiery became smaller and smaller. When it seemed the blaze would shrink no further, Fai switched out his cards again, attempting Windy and Watery again without missing a beat.

It was working better than the last time, but Kurogane could not help but be distracted at the sight of Fai rapidly getting closer and closer to a very painful meeting with the ground. “C’mon, mage,” he growled out, waiting for the moment Fai would break off the attack.

He didn’t. Right as Kurogane realized that Fai was past the point when he would be able to effectively swap out the cards, the direction of the wind shifted only long enough to slow Fai’s descent to a survivable speed, before Fai turned it back against Fiery again.<sup>79</sup> The maneuver was reckless and stupid, and Kurogane was definitely going to chew Fai out for it later, but with the knowledge that the stunt had not been a suicide run, Kurogane was able to focus fully on the task at hand.

Forcing Fiery to submit felt like nothing less than a miracle, and Kurogane was torn between conceding that Fai’s plan had worked and cussing him out for complicating the task in the first place (and certainly not for the heart attack Kurogane had when he was certain Fai was going to fall to his death). He didn’t get the chance to do either, because the moment after the card was completely sealed, Fai perked up, glancing over his shoulder like a startled deer and Kurogane knew they weren’t out of the woods just yet.

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It was only when the all-consuming signature of Fiery’s magic was contained, that Fai could again feel life around him other than the card. The first thing that was apparent was that he had grown much closer to town than he had thought — and there was not a small amount of horror at the realization at how close they had been to Fiery taking human lives.

The second thing that rose to his attention was that Ashura was nearby, and Fai immediately honed in on his presence. At this range, Ashura must have seen everything — must have witnessed Fai using a secondary power with his primary source locked away inside him. After all

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<sup>79</sup> This is similar to Syaoran using *Fuuka Shourai* to catch people, and to Fai doing something similar for Yuui as seen in Chapter 15: The Return.

the months of keeping the secret of the Clow for himself, Fai wasn't certain how Ashura would take this new information, especially with the timing of its apparent arrival and the disappearances. Maybe Ashura would have some insight that could help them. Maybe he would be grateful that Fai had not left himself entirely defenseless. Maybe he would be wary of this new power and forbid it altogether. Maybe he would want a hand at researching it himself. Maybe he would chastise Fai for taking such huge risks, or for keeping this facet of his life hidden from his King. No matter how the King would react, Fai did not see a benefit in delaying the inevitable. Perhaps if he showed initiative and went to Ashura first, that would help to smooth things over.

Because while Fai hesitated and considered his options, Ashura had neither come closer nor moved further away. He must have been waiting to see what Fai would do, and then would make more judgements from there.

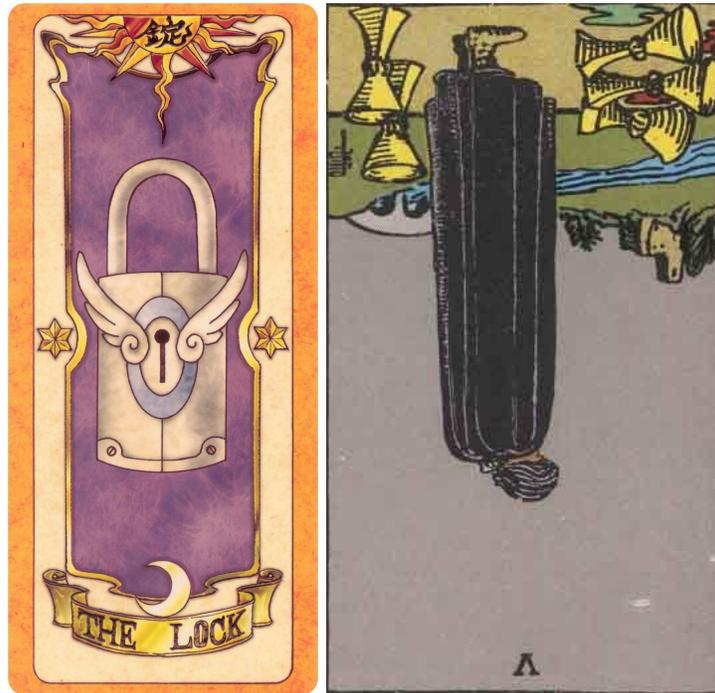
Fai would rather not have those judgements to be ill, and so forgetting Kurogane in the moment, Fai dashed off in Ashura's direction. He reminded himself that there was nothing here for him to run from. There was no reason that he should feel the need to hide. Ashura loved him. Ashura would understand, and even if he didn't, he would listen and ask questions until he did, and there was no reason for this growing unease in his chest — no reason at all for all the anxiety that Fai had built up around keeping Ashura separate from the Clow.

Fai burst through a break in the trees, only tangentially aware of Kurogane a few paces behind, and then stopped entirely when his eyes met Ashura's from where his King was standing a dozen or so meters away in the field. In that moment, Fai didn't move — didn't know what he should do or what he wanted to say — and Ashura responded to Fai's sudden presence with a gentle smile.

And then, Fai suddenly could feel *nothing* and he'd only ever felt that once before and so as the darkness rapidly approached, he didn't have any time to think — only to draw out the one card he thought would save them and hoped that it would be enough.

“Shield!”

## The Lock



Fai came into consciousness and then immediately wished he hadn't when agony shot straight through his skull. "Fuck!" he hissed as he reflexively brought a hand to his head and screwed his eyes shut.

"Welcome back," a voice muttered at his side, and Fai immediately recognized it.

"Kurogane?" he asked, not daring to move and inspire any more aches and pains to make themselves known. Kurogane grunted an affirmative and Fai chanced squinting one eye open to find himself in a room lit only by a small flame Kurogane had been maintaining. That wasn't too painful, and so Fai gingerly began to pick himself up into a sitting position. "What happened?"

It was difficult to tell in the shifting light, but Kurogane's frown seemed more pronounced than usual. "What do you remember?"

Fai really wished Kurogane hadn't asked that. Thinking hurt more than anything else he had tried so far, and his thoughts were still sluggish and muddled. He tried to power through it. "We were fighting a card. Put the fire out," Fai began, struggling to sift through the events, as if they were trying to pull away from him whenever he reached out. "I was running. Why was I running?"

Kurogane's frown was definitely more pronounced than usual. "You sensed someone," he prompted.

“That’s right,” Fai decided, getting a little more confident in the recollection. “We were almost back to town, and then — ” Something had to be wrong. It shouldn’t have been so difficult for him to bring up such recent memories.<sup>80</sup> Fai wondered if he had hit his head at some point. Perhaps he was concussed. Suddenly, it occurred to him exactly what was missing, and he cast his eyes about the empty room, hoping to spot — “Ashura! Did the King survive? Is he — ”

“Did he *survive*?” Kurogane cut in incredulously. “*He* attacked *us*!”

“What?” Fai shot back in disbelief, hoping it was a sick joke, but it was obvious that Kurogane wasn’t laughing. “No, that’s — he wouldn’t — ” he started before he thought to just shut his eyes a moment and breathe. It was possible they were both right. Maybe the person they saw looked like Ashura, but wasn’t. He’d seen his own doppelganger before; it wouldn’t be impossible that someone was now impersonating the King. (But even then, they should not have been able to copy Ashura’s signature, not with any magic Fai was aware of, but he must have been mistaken. It was the only thing that made sense.) “What happened after I cast Shield?”

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The dark blast dissipated almost as quickly as it had come, and the barrier that had formed around Fai and Kurogane fizzled back into nonexistence as Fai pitched forward, barely catching himself on his hands and knees before he could faceplant on the ground, exhausted from strain and grief. He hadn’t been swift enough and he had not been able to extend the shield to Ashura in time. If this was the same event as the others, then Ashura had to have been —

A shuffling in front of him had Fai snapping his gaze up to find a familiar hand before him, and looking up further, Fai found Ashura: alive, unhurt, and offering to help him stand. Ashura’s smile did not falter, “You’ve done well, young Fai.”

Fai accepted Ashura’s hand as if in a trance as was pulled unsteadily upright. This was impossible. Were they both dead? “But that was — ”

“Yes,” Ashura answered before Fai could get the whole question out.

“I don’t understand,” Fai admitted, feeling his breathing start to get away from him as panic began to edge in. That was the same blast he had seen take out everyone and everything in Mithral, leaving the same ghost town as the others that had been attacked. And yet, at the epicenter of it, Ashura had survived unscathed. There were conclusions there that Fai’s mind refused to make, but maybe it showed on his face, because Ashura began to frown softly. Dimly, Fai could hear a pounding just behind him, as if someone were struggling to smash through a wall, but he couldn’t look away. He didn’t *want* to. He wanted to understand. He wanted this to be okay.

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<sup>80</sup> Ashura’s spell should not have been so devastating, but it’s butting up against Fai’s magic and not mixing well.

"I am sorry, Fai," Ashura offered, pressing his lips lightly to Fai's forehead. Had the King's lips always been so cold? "You were not meant to see this so soon. I'll make this better for you. Just relax."

Every instinct was screaming at Fai to run — to run and run and never come back here — but this was *Ashura*. Ashura would never hurt him. And as Fai felt reality slipping away from him when Ashura finally stepped back, walls sprang up from the dirt to surround him and leave him in the dark.

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"And I was unconscious from then on?" Fai clarified, to which Kurogane nodded. "How long?"

"Couple hours," Kurogane admitted.

"Not feeling up to carrying me, huh?" Fai asked, rubbing at his temple to try to soothe away the lingering, though lessening pain.

"Wouldn't matter," Kurogane admitted with some irritation. "Can't even get a signal out, much less a person."

Fai cast his eyes about again in the dim light, and it indeed was nothing more than a box — no doors or windows in sight. "So we're trapped," Fai concluded quietly.

"We're trapped," Kurogane confirmed, and a silence passed between them as Fai thought over everything that had happened, not quite recovered enough to search for a fault in the room they were trapped in just yet. There had to be a way out. Ashura wouldn't just leave them here to die... would he? Doubt had taken hold and Fai wasn't sure he knew what was real anymore. He'd nearly forgotten Kurogane was still there when the man spoke again: "You really don't remember any of that, do you?"

"None of it. Everything since we started fighting Fiery is fuzzy as it is." And threatening to slip away as well. Fai felt as though the memories were nothing more than water in the poorly cupped hands of his mind.

Kurogane's next question was hesitant, as if he wasn't sure if he was crossing a line, though he covered it well by standing and starting to circle the room again, feeling the walls for any defect as if he hadn't done so several times already. "Has anything like that ever happened to you before?"

"No," Fai replied swiftly before he realized that maybe "Ashura"'s behavior wasn't the question. "I mean, I didn't have any memories at all from before I was found until recently, but those were totally different circumstances."

"Were they?" Kurogane asked, doubt evident in his tone that Fai distinctly did not like and he replied with a bit of a snit in his own.

“They were.”

“Who found you?” Kurogane pressed.

Fai hesitated. “The King did. But that — ”

“And you don’t find that at all suspicious? That he’s messed with your memory twice now that we know of.”

“We *don’t* know that!” Fai shot back, though his tone did not match his failing confidence in his own words. “You don’t know him. The King would never do anything like that.” *Not without a good reason*, Fai wanted to say, but thought better of it. *Not to me*.

Kurogane’s stare then was long and discerning, but then he turned back to the wall with a dismissive tone: “I can’t help the willfully ignorant.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” Fai asked after some delay as all the fight that had been within him before deserted him and Kurogane peeked back curiously. Arguing right then wasn’t doing anything but possibly using up their usable air supply. Bickering each other to death wasn’t exactly the ideal way to go. “Helping me?”

“I haven’t been fighting you, have I.”

The irritation in Kurogane’s voice put a small smile on Fai’s face. “No,” he agreed, “You haven’t.” Not for a while, at least. They hadn’t been in competition since the Loop was caught, and hadn’t fought directly since Kurogane acquired Storm. Did that make them allies now, Fai wondered. “Why help me?”

Kurogane looked away, and Fai wondered if talking about such things directly embarrassed him. “The important thing is to keep people safe. We can fight about who keeps the cards after they’re no longer a threat.”

Of course, Fai mused to himself. It would have been silly to consider themselves friends in all this. The cooperation was a cease-fire on moral grounds, nothing more. Even Tomoyo had told him that she and Kurogane had been sent to contain the cards, nothing more. “So if I wasn’t willfully ignorant, how would you help me?”

Fai thought for a moment maybe he had crossed a line himself when that question was met with silence, but then Kurogane huffed out a breath as he finally looped around to where Fai was sitting and plopped down beside him. “Convince you that Ashura isn’t who you think he is so that we can figure out what to do from there.”

Fai chuckled low under his breath. “What does that have to do with the cards?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Try me,” Fai dared, though his tone was still light.

Then Kurogane presented Fai with the question he had texted him just the night before: “What do you know about Valeria?”

“Almost nothing,” Fai admitted a little sheepishly. “I meant to research it today, but, well...”

If Kurogane was surprised, there was not a hint of it on his face or in his tone. “Ok, so this is the official story — ”

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Kurogane was a little surprised that Fai let him get through the retelling without interruption, though omitting the twins’ names and Ashura’s role as he hadn’t for Tomoyo may have contributed to that. The last thing he wanted was to spook Fai with his own past and cause the man to dismiss it all as a fairytale — not when the stakes were this high. Fai, for his part, seemed to absorb the new information like a sponge. “And there was absolutely no life at all?” Fai clarified.

“There still isn’t,” Kurogane replied, and he could once again see the wheels turning as Fai drew the obvious parallel between the fate of Valeria and what had been happening on a smaller scale in Ceres. “Valeria was also the last place the cards were active.”

“Until now,” Fai amended absently, “Which means that when Yuui was sealing the cards, that’s where he was.” Kurogane only nodded to that, both their eyes now long adjusted to the dimness of their prison. “And since I was with Yuui, that’s where I was, too.”

“Makes sense,” Kurogane agreed. Instead of taking the new information to the obvious conclusion that the disappearances and the cards themselves were linked, Fai exhaled a shaky breath, burying his face in the knees he’d been hugging to his chest. This had not been the reaction Kurogane had been looking for, and so he pressed on: “What’s wrong?”

For a second, it seemed Fai was going to pretend he hadn’t heard the question at all, but with another deep breath he seemed to gather himself back up just a little. “Ashura told me when they’d found me, my magic had been out of control and killed people, but I had no idea that — ”

Kurogane had *had* it. There were limits to how big an idiot one person could be and Kurogane’s patience fell before the strength of his failing temper in one blow. “You can’t seriously think you managed to kill off an entire country by yourself!”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense!” Fai argued back with just as much conviction.

“Did Ashura tell you that?”

“No! Of course, not!”

“Then how do you know?”

“Look, I’ve investigated the disappearances here myself, and — ”

“Oh, so because *you* figured it out, it *must* be true!”

“No one else could’ve — ”

They weren’t getting anywhere with this and so Kurogane switched tracks. “Where’s your magic now?”

“It’s sealed, ok?” Fai admitted through a sneer. “It was dangerous and out of control and so I sealed it. Happy?”

“Then what the hell happened outside?” Kurogane knew he had him then, because he had only felt the emptiness of life in the few seconds between when Fai’s shield dropped and Ashura trapped them once before when they had visited Galat.

By the stricken look on Fai’s face, he knew it, too, though he tried to deny it. “I — That’s — ”

“If you really did cause all of that and it really is all your fault, then how the hell did you pull it off with no magic at all?” Kurogane tried again, most of his aggression falling away, though the heat in his voice remained.

Fai’s eyes jumped back and forth almost as if he was reading something instead of simply thinking. The grief at what he’d thought he’d done and his anger at Kurogane was gradually replaced by horror as he thought through all the possibilities and came to the only reasonable conclusion. “I couldn’t have,” he breathed, as if trying out the words on his tongue before continuing with more confidence, “It couldn’t have been me.”

Kurogane didn’t think he needed to say it, but he had to make sure Fai took that train of thought to its logical end for his own good. “And if it wasn’t you, who else could it be?” For everyone’s sake, he needed to hear Fai say it. “Who else was there both times?”

And even though it hurt — even though the realization called into question everything Fai thought he knew — Fai came to the exact conclusion Kurogane knew he would: “Ashura.”

For a while they just sat there while Fai took in all this new information. A hopeful part of him still wanted to believe that Ashura was innocent in all this. Maybe there still was an unknown person that had so far gone undetected. Maybe they were exerting an influence on Ashura that even the King couldn’t resist. Someone that powerful might have been able to come up with spells that could fool even Fai. It wasn’t completely impossible.

Even as he considered that possibility, though, Fai knew it was often the simplest explanation that was the truth. He’d been fooled, not by some hypothetical wizard, but by Ashura. He’d been Ashura’s fool for nearly 2 decades — the people of this land even longer — and now people

were paying for that mistake with their lives, again. It was that thought that had Fai about to roll up his sleeve to have Kurogane undo his magical block, but then he hesitated.

Ashura had tried to obscure his memories. If Fai removed the block now, Ashura would be able to feel it and know the spell hadn't worked. It could goad him into trying again, when there wouldn't be anyone to help bring him back. And though Ashura's mark was faint, it was still there. There was a chance that Ashura could influence it remotely, though to what end, Fai could not be sure. If he wanted to save anyone who was still left, Fai needed to play his hand very, very carefully. He could ask Kurogane to remove the block at any time; it was Fai's job to make sure it was the right one.

For now, the Clow would have to be enough, Fai decided as he pushed himself to his feet and offered Kurogane a hand. "What do you say we get out of here?"

Kurogane's smirk as he accepted the help up then would have been answer enough. "Bout damn time."

"I'll work on being a little quicker," Fai quipped, but even as he tried to lighten the mood, there was something else that needed to be said. "But thank you. For everything," he added with a self-deprecating smile. "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have any allies right now." *Probably head straight back home to Ashura*, Fai added in his head, *never the wiser*.

Fai couldn't read Kurogane's stare and for a moment, he thought maybe he had offended the man, but then Kurogane reached forward and twisted his fingers through Fai's hair, rumpling it roughly and mussing it up. If it hadn't been so dark, Fai would have sworn he saw a blush on those cheeks. "You'd do fine."

"High praise," Fai replied cheekily, not bothering to fix his hair, "Coming from you."

"I thought we were getting out of here," Kurogane growled, but maybe Fai was getting better at reading him, because even that hadn't seemed tetchy at all.

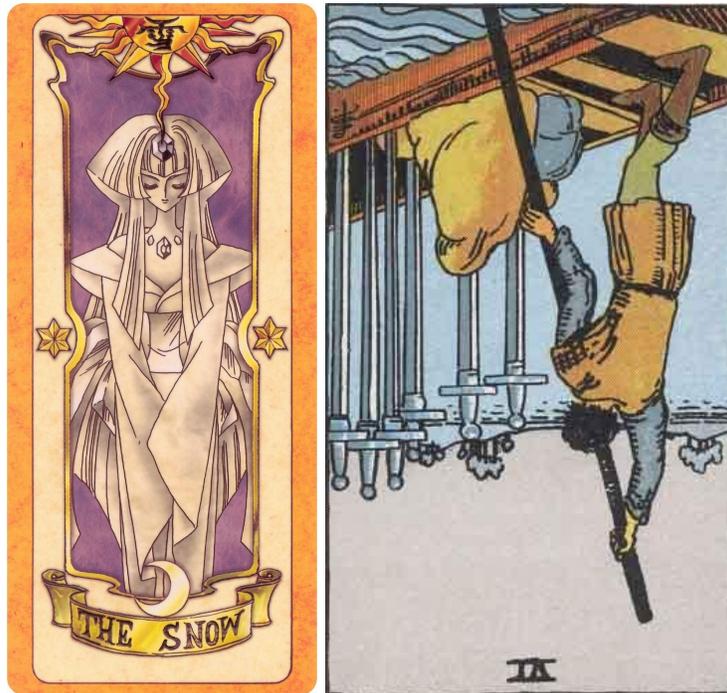
"Right, right," Fai placated as he moved to read as much from the walls as he could. Now that they were both up and about, they could blast their way out safely — probably — but Fai still had a hard time believing Ashura would go to the trouble of removing his memories only to leave him to die. If nothing else, it was overkill and wildly inefficient when Ashura could have just killed them and been done with it, something Fai had learned from Ashura himself long ago. There had to be another way out.

Fai followed the invisible lines with his senses, letting the trails of residual magic lead him in winding paths along the wall until he was met with a tiny hole, something his eyes would have passed right over, but his fingers confirmed as a deliberate structure and not a clod that had fallen out. Against his chest, the key began to grow warm, and so Fai fished it out, considering it. It couldn't really be that easy — could it? Feeling a little silly, Fai glanced back at Kurogane and warned him: "Be prepared for anything."

At Kurogane's nod, Fai inserted the key in the hole, and the dirt walls around them simply fell away, leaving them in the forest at the edge of town once more. Sealing the card away just then was a simple affair, over in seconds, and Fai regarded the card critically as Kurogane looked around to confirm they really were alone. "What is it?" Kurogane asked when he realized Fai hadn't so much as moved.

Fai turned to face Kurogane fully, holding the card up in one hand as he dismissed the staff with the other. "How did Ashura use this without the staff?"

## The Snow



“That is a very good question,” Tomoyo said as she examined the card in the motel room. “The records show that Clow deliberately designed the cards so that they could only be used by any other person through a conduit of his design. That way, the pool of people who could use them could be more easily managed. To our knowledge, the only two conduits in existence are the staff, which was hidden with the book, and the sword, which was passed down the family line. Theoretically, it should have been impossible for Ashura to use it at all.”

Fai sighed and leaned back in his chair, his suspicions confirmed. They had returned immediately to the room to evacuate to a new location, as the motel and any other area within city limits were no longer considered safe. It was only a matter of time before the news broke that the construction team that had been building the new suburb had gone missing, and it was sure to incite a panic beyond what Fai could mitigate, especially considering he was going into hiding himself until he had a better idea of what exactly they were facing. Kurogane did not pause in packing as he and Fai conferred with Tomoyo. Fai tried another angle, “Are there any other circumstances where he might not have direct control?”

“Well, there’s always the possibility that Lock elected to work with Ashura for some reason,” she provided, “Or that a higher-powered card had chosen to and was controlling Lock itself, though I can’t imagine why.” Tomoyo considered the issue a moment longer before continuing. “Lock falls under Earthy, and so also under the Sun, but I can’t imagine her doing such a thing. She’s so kind; she’d never approve of the destruction of life.”

Fai had thought the same of Ashura not more than a couple hours ago. “We didn’t have either of those cards at the time,” he realized. “There should only be a few left. If we can get them, that might limit his influence. What do you think?”

“The compass can’t find them until they’re active,” Kurogane pointed out, glancing Fai’s way, “So unless we can force them to activate...”

Fai’s smile then was more than a little guilty. “Sorry, I can’t unless there’s a card that can.”

“What do you mean?” Tomoyo asked, looking between Kurogane and Fai in turn.

“Someone thought it would be a bright idea to seal his magic away for good,” Kurogane grouched.

“Not for good!” Fai placated. “I’m sure we can figure out how to unblock it eventually.”

“He nerfed his stamina along with it,” Kurogane added for Tomoyo’s benefit.<sup>81</sup>

“Just a side effect.”

“That’s very dangerous, Fai,” Tomoyo chided, though there wasn’t much to be done about it now — not that Tomoyo or Kurogane could know about yet. “And that seriously limits our options.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Fai assured her. “For now, we should get going before Ashura realizes I’m not going back. I wouldn’t want to have to evade my own search party.”

“Are you sure that cabin will be safe?” Kurogane asked for what had to be the tenth time, and Fai was certain that his concern was less about the two of them and more about Tomoyo’s safety. Fai knew it was justified as well. There was only one route in or out of the area. If they were discovered, there’d be nowhere else for them to run to.

“I’m sure,” Fai promised. “It has to do with the fluorite deposits in the rock — they make it almost impossible to detect any magical signatures there. If I had all my magic, I’d stand out like a sore thumb, but as it is, we should all be able to pass under the radar as long as we need to.”

Tomoyo seemed to accept the information readily and countered with a question of her own, “Could there be room for one more?”

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“I can’t believe we’re stealing a car,” Kurogane grumbled under his breath as he kept watch in the alley.

“I have the right to appropriate a vehicle in an emergency,” Fai assured him from under the dash, though Kurogane wondered why he didn’t just ask for the key if that was the case, “Don’t worry, I’ll compensate them for it later.” They’d agreed that they couldn’t use magic to leave —

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<sup>81</sup> The reason for this is explored in Chapters 24 and 29: The Dark and The Hope.

they'd be too easily detected — and they wouldn't make enough speed on foot to reach their destination without being caught, either. Their mutual understanding was broken when it came to exactly how to acquire a vehicle for such purposes. Fai was the primary candidate for camp Steal A Car, where Kurogane was firmly in camp It's Called A Rental Service. Fai and Tomoyo would be on Ashura's map by now, but Kurogane had never shown up in an official capacity (even the room had been under Kendappa's name) and could have rented one without drawing suspicion.

"And besides, it's not a car, it's a truck," Tomoyo, Fai's vice president of criminal enterprise, added right next to the King of Crime, before asking her red-headed friend — Sakura, a poor, sweet girl who had been roped into the affair with Tomoyo's encouragement — to pass her a screwdriver.<sup>82</sup>

When Kurogane had come to Ceres, it was to catch cards, not discover the wide spectrum of vehicular crimes his associates were comfortable with committing with even the slightest excuse. "Why do you even know how to do this?"

"I get bored." "A dream." Fai and Tomoyo said at the same time, prompting a conspiratorial giggle fit between the two of them.

"Besides," Fai continued, "You've got to know how these things work, or how else will you fix them when you get stranded somewhere?"

"I don't know, maybe your magic," Kurogane shot back. "And what does hotwiring have to do with fixing anything?"

"Well, that's just an emergency repair of its own, right? In case something breaks with the key," Sakura chimed in from where she was squatting by the door, and Kurogane couldn't tell if she was just too innocent, or if she could perhaps prove to be the most devious in the end.

"That's right!" Fai agreed, maybe a little too loudly for the stealth the operation required before murmuring to Tomoyo: "I can see why you like her."

"And I suppose popping the lock is just another 'emergency repair'," Kurogane added with no small amount of sarcasm.

"Bingo," Fai cheered, though if it was at Kurogane's comment or the engine firing to life, Kurogane wasn't sure. He and Tomoyo shuffled out from under the dash and the two of them plus Sakura began to situate themselves in the seats properly. "Well, come on Kuro-grump, we've got a city to flee."

"Bunch of criminals, the lot of you," Kurogane accused as he climbed into the truck all the same.

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<sup>82</sup> Tomoyo has not spent her entire time locked away in the castle. She starts making friends with Sakura shortly after the events of The Glow.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Fai quipped, and Kurogane would have smacked him for it if they didn’t need Fai to direct and drive them there. Besides, the man had had enough people messing with his head for one day.

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“You know what I don’t get?” Fai said after a time. They’d been on the road for hours and conversation had slowed to a halt until he’d spoken up again. “Why did he attack me but leave Kurogane alone?”

“That is weird,” Kurogane agreed, continuing the tacitly agreed upon pattern of speaking obliquely so that Sakura did not have to be implicated in anything more than necessary. “Obviously I would have told you what happened when you woke up. Missing me was just sloppy.”

“That’s not like him,” Fai murmured worriedly, keeping his eyes on the road as he tried to figure out just what there was to gain for Ashura in that situation.

“That would be my doing,” Tomoyo admitted from the back, and when Kurogane turned around to eye her, she continued. “Before you arrived, I had a dream about that encounter. It was vague; I didn’t know who else was in it at the time or when it might have occurred. But you died. After I reported the dream, Kendappa instructed me to put a protection on you so he wouldn’t be able to perceive you, but knowing you...” she trailed off, but Kurogane got the idea.

“She thought I wouldn’t accept it,” Kurogane concluded.

“Right,” Tomoyo agreed, “Or that you would behave differently knowing it was there and alter the future to a point that our previous predictions were meaningless. So I placed and maintained it while you were asleep. You can be mad at me if you want, but it saved your life today.”<sup>83</sup>

“Could Lock have been responding to that?” Fai asked. “You did say that it’s kind of protective. Maybe it wasn’t working with *him* at all.” It made more sense to Fai that Lock would have prevented Kurogane from interfering and then locked Ashura out entirely when he demonstrated a threat to Fai.

“I’m afraid not,” Tomoyo explained, “Lock needs an existing mechanism to bind to. So unless there was a room hidden in the soil, someone would have had to make one.”

Well, the room had been made out of dirt, Fai considered. “Could that have been Earthy?”

“We would have sensed that,” Kurogane said, shooting Fai’s theory straight to hell.

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<sup>83</sup> This is explored further in Chapter 27: The Earthy.

Fai cursed quietly; Kurogane was right. If it had been Shield, the idea would have been plausible. There was another problem rapidly approaching as well. “How are we doing on cash?”

“Don’t you have any?” Kurogane countered.

“Oh yeah, I totally stuff my pockets full of bills when I fly off to capture a magic fire,” Fai returned before continuing seriously: “Most places in town just bill the palace back. I only carry money when I know I’m leaving.”

“I told you you should have sent Mirror in to get things,” Kurogane argued as if they hadn’t been over this already.

“It could have been tracked to us — ” Fai repeated for what felt like the hundredth time.

“Then give it a drop-off point — ”

“That could be monitored — ”

“Not if you hid it with Illusion — ”

“Which, as a magical entity, could also be tracked — ”

“You’ve literally got dozens of cards you can use to kill a trail — ”

“That’s not how it works — ”

“ — or shake a pursuer — ”

“You really have no idea — ”

“But you’re just too damn lazy — ”

“Lazy?!”

“ — or chickenshit — ”

“How about appropriately cautious — ”

“You wouldn’t know ‘appropriate’ if it bit you on the — ”

In the back seat, Sakura leaned over to Tomoyo to whisper: “Are they friends or enemies?”

“I’m not sure they know,” Tomoyo whispered back, knowing damn well —

“I heard that!” both Fai and Kurogane said, effectively killing the argument they had entered when both girls started giggling in the back seat.

Kurogane, used to Tomoyo's antics, rolled his eyes and faced forward again. "To answer your question, we're not great. Probably got enough for a week's worth of provisions, unless you plan on stealing those, too," Kurogane finished with a warning tone that Fai completely ignored.

"How about gas?"

Kurogane considered the size of the truck and how far they'd already gone, and how far away the mountains still seemed. "4 days of provisions, and I am *not* siphoning again."

Fai's heart nearly melted when he saw Sakura raise her hand in the back as if she were at school. He'd known her less than a day, but she was just so dear. "I have an idea."

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The girls were still waving good-bye to the helpful motorist when Fai and Kurogane emerged from where they had been hiding to return to the truck, one immensely proud, and one embarrassed to know the three of them. Kurogane ran a hand down his face, "I can't believe I agreed to travel with a bunch of criminals."

"Aw, lighten up. It's not like they stole anything," Fai added with a laugh, as if they weren't travelling in a very-much-stolen vehicle.

"No, they just conned someone into buying them a full tank of gas," Kurogane shot back.

"Don't be jealous," Fai chided, "You could do it, too, if you stopped being so grumpy and started being cute."

Kurogane's hackles rose at that comment. There was not a single cute bone in his entire body and the prince knew it. "Don't tell me you've done it, too."

"Well, not gas," Fai supplied before dropping his voice low as if he were sharing a huge secret, "But I've definitely flirted my way to other things."

"You're the Crown Prince!" Kurogane raged, feeling his face grow hot.

"Not everywhere," Fai answered with a wink, and Kurogane was saved from having to respond to that by Fai waving at the girls. "Great job!"

"Piece of cake!" Sakura called back with a thumbs up, and Kurogane was now completely certain this trip was going to knock years off his life.

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The rest of the trip up was without incident. Fai had dropped them off at the cabin first, before venturing back down — against Kurogane's better judgement; people would be looking for Fai by now but Kurogane would have gone unnoticed — to the nearest town to pick up provisions. It was true what Fai had said about the fluorite deposits and Fai's signature disappeared

completely before he'd gone less than a mile, and so there was nothing for Kurogane to do but help the girls get the cabin cleaned up to usable levels and wait as dark clouds gathered, threatening to drop more snow overnight.

Fai returned a couple hours later with a wide smile on his face, one that was too tight, and so on a hunch, Kurogane called him over while Tomoyo and Sakura unloaded the supplies (including more liquor than Kurogane thought prudent) to allegedly get his opinion on whether the wood already chopped would be enough for the night. In reality, Kurogane had a feeling he knew what was wrong. "It was empty, wasn't it?"

Fai's facade fell off his face in pieces, but Kurogane thought it was better than the fake grin. "Not a soul," he admitted, crossing his arms in front of himself, and making a show of inspecting the wood pile with his back turned to the truck. "At least we don't have to worry about gas money for a while," he tried, though the joke fell flat.

"It's not your fault," Kurogane said, shooting straight for the heart of the matter.

"No," Fai replied with a dark chuckle, "I've just been fooled by my mass-murdering adopted father for years, and when I finally found out, you still had to convince me because I couldn't see it right in front of my face, and then instead of actually doing something about it, I ran away and left everyone else to die, that's all."

"You aren't any good to them dead," Kurogane reasoned. Fai had to see the sense in that; he was the only person in Ceres who could raise a candle to Ashura now. Getting himself killed going in unprepared was worse than what they were doing now. "A tactical retreat is very different from running away. And he tricked everyone, not just you. Don't start thinking you're so special that you should have seen something the whole world hasn't just because he's your dad."

Fai wasn't buying it, but he was too tired to argue all the same. Kurogane hadn't been wrong about his magic bolstering his stamina, though Fai hadn't known just how much it had until he had locked it away. How did regular people live like this? "*Can* we fight him?"

Kurogane didn't know. Most of his magical knowledge was regarding the Clow and how to manage them. Whatever Ashura was was well beyond his expertise. "You'd know better than me," he admitted.

Fai just kept staring at the wood pile as if it had all the answers, and Kurogane knew then that Fai did not have any at all. "I am going to get so smashed tonight."

Fai may not have had answers about that, but there was something he did, so Kurogane switched tracks to another matter, though he'd already resolved it himself. "There's only two beds."

“The girls can share the loft, you take the downstairs bed, I take the couch,” Fai replied without missing a beat.

Kurogane rolled his eyes at that. There had to be a limit on just how dumb one person could be. “I would love to see you try to get some rest on a loveseat.”

“Oh, like you’d fit,” Fai argued, missing the point completely.

Kurogane knew exactly where he intended to fit. “Yes, on the bed, with you also on the bed, because we’re both adults and can share a bed without being weird about it.”

Maybe it was the growing cold, but Fai’s cheeks were looking a little redder. “Oh,” he murmured before seeming to get his wits together and hid whatever he felt about the matter behind a grin. <sup>84</sup> “Well, I don’t mind if you don’t!”

“No funny business or you’re back to the couch,” Kurogane warned, because he didn’t really believe Fai was above childish antics just to get a rise out of him, but Fai only nodded, some genuine cheer making the grin real.

“Deal!”

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It was only after dinner when Tomoyo had gone to take the first bath and Fai had started making a dent in the liquor supply when Sakura came out to join him on the porch. “Prince Fai?”

Fai wasn’t exactly feeling very princely at the moment, and he had already asked Tomoyo and Kurogane to drop the title — there was no harm having Sakura do the same. “Just Fai is fine.”

“Alright, Fai,” Sakura said as if trying on the name in her mouth while she came to sit next to him. “Is it alright if I ask you something?”

“Anything at all,” Fai assured her, setting the bottle down beside him for a moment.

That seemed to do the trick because Sakura’s shyness seemed to melt away as she faced Fai more directly. “People aren’t really being evacuated, are they?”

Fai could only wonder how many people already knew, but he could still ask: “What makes you say that?”

Sakura gave a little shrug. “My brother was in one of the ‘evacuated’ towns. If he really was evacuated, he would have called by now to let us know where he was and that he was alright, but he hasn’t. And the only reason he wouldn’t is if there was some reason he physically couldn’t.” Fai didn’t know Sakura well enough to know what he should say in the face of the

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<sup>84</sup> Yuui literally cannot recall a single instance when he’d been invited to share a bed that was not for sexual reasons.

facts, and in the space of his hesitation, she seemed to understand well enough. “Will he come back?”

“I don’t know,” Fai admitted. “This isn’t like anything I’ve studied before.”

Sakura nodded a bit. “Is that why you left?”

Fai felt himself deflate a little at that question. “It’s safer that way,” he decided, accepting Kurogane’s earlier reasoning for now. If all he had left were Kurogane, Tomoyo, and Sakura, he didn’t want to start lying to Sakura now, at least not directly. “If the King and I are in the same place, that effect could get us both at the same time. We’ve got a better chance of fixing this apart.”

Sakura seemed to consider this, again nodding to herself for a moment before she spoke up again decisively, “We can fix this.”

It was sweet, Fai thought, how optimistic she could still be. “I hope so, too.”

“It’s not a hope,” Sakura said then, touching one hand to her heart as if she could sense something there, and for all Fai knew, she could. “I just know. Everything will be alright.”<sup>85</sup>

Fai wanted to believe that, too, so as Sakura was called in for her turn in the bath, Fai didn’t contradict her. Instead, he returned to his drink and the lovely vision of a forest kissed with snow, and chose, just for tonight, to forget about the kingdom and the Clow and Ashura and just be Fai.

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Fai was awake in an instant, though he did not know why. It was still dark, and he hadn’t woken feeling alarmed. On the contrary, he felt very safe with the warmth at his back and an arm over his side and — oh. Before, they had been laying back to back, but Kurogane must have shifted in his sleep to spoon up behind Fai instead.<sup>86</sup>

Fai knew he could wake him. He could wake him and tease Kurogane for being a cuddler just to watch the blush creep up his cheeks and take over his entire face, just for the joy of knowing that he could make the man blush. But it wasn’t as though Kurogane could control his movements in his sleep any more than anyone else could, and Fai really was comfortable and warm right where he was, and so he saw no reason to end the situation.

In the morning, Kurogane would wake first, realize what had happened, and disentangle himself with enough embarrassment as it was. For now, Fai could just let them be, warm and comfortable and safe in this cabin in the snow.

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<sup>85</sup> CCS Sakura’s catch-phrase again. It’ll pop up through the rest of the story.

<sup>86</sup> You can pry the idea that Kurogane is a cuddler from my cold, dead fingers. He might resist being one while awake, but he can’t stop it when asleep.

## The Dream



*“When did your shoulder start hurting like that?” Yuui asked and even in the dream, Tomoyo knew that this one was Yuui and the other was Fai. It had been so long since she had been able to walk in dreams that she nearly forgot to pay attention in her surprise, but discipline required otherwise. If she was seeing this, then there had to be something significant here — something that she needed to see.<sup>87</sup>*

*Fai shrugged, but it seemed off. Perhaps that was just the injured shoulder. “Fight hurt it. I don’t think it healed right.”*

*“Why didn’t you tell me?” Yuui asked with a frown.*

*“Because I knew you’d look at me like that,” Fai was shaking his head with a smile that almost seemed alien. “I told you, it wasn’t your fault.”*

*“But if I hadn’t — ”*

*“Shh,” Fai shushed him, and when he pulled Yuui into a hug, that was when Tomoyo saw the scar on his shoulder — one that she couldn’t recall seeing on the Fai she knew. “I made the choice to egg it on, and I made the choice to make a barrier instead of running. None of that*

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<sup>87</sup> This is a combination of factors. The Dream appears in this chapter, the snow on the ground is providing extra water (divination) energy, and the seal means Fai is no longer able to suppress Tomoyo’s dreams.

*was your fault, and I will never, ever regret saving you from that card. One bad shoulder is a small price to pay for your life. So please stop beating yourself up over it. For me?"*

*Yuui nodded with an expression that seemed familiar now that Tomoyo was really looking and she **knew**.*<sup>88</sup> "I'll try."

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It made sense, Tomoyo knew as she woke with more than a little relief that whatever had been blocking her dreams seemed to have no effect here. There were indeed extremely few situations where someone would be able to stand in for another in a magical contract, and the simplest solution was to have no substitutions at all. It also explained how Fai could already have a grave with a body that seemed to fit — especially when the living twin was not Fai at all.

What she didn't understand was why Ashura would give him his brother's name.<sup>89</sup>

There had to be some spellwork involved there, she decided. Names had power, and perhaps the prince knowing his true name would have allowed him to escape Ashura's influence. He obviously needed the prince for some purpose; there could be no other reason why Ashura would allow the twin to not only live, but to grow both in strength and skill. Though that growth was controlled, Fai — and she would have to continue to think of him as Fai for now, until they knew what would happen if he learned he was Yuui — was still more than a match for Ashura's strength right up until the deaths had accelerated, and his knowledge of theory was extraordinary, especially considering that memory loss forced him to begin those studies later than one typically would.

Ashura wasn't stupid. Fai had a purpose in all this, and since Ashura hadn't killed him when he had the chance, she could only assume that whatever plan he had was yet to be foiled or fulfilled.

Careful not to wake Sakura, Tomoyo unlocked her phone and began a message for Kendappa. This information would change things, she was sure. It was what would be changed that she did not know.

Ashura was not stupid, but Tomoyo wasn't either. She trusted her sister, but Kendappa neglecting to teach her about Valeria or why it was relevant to what was happening in Ceres before sending her here also had a purpose. She must have known Tomoyo would have eventually found out. Perhaps knowing too soon would have impacted her ability to relate to Fai, endangering their friendship and setting them up for failure when things grew serious, as they so rapidly had. That was the most optimistic option, she figured. She didn't want to dwell on the other possibilities.

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<sup>88</sup> Yup, Tomoyo knows for certain "Fai" is actually Yuui before anyone else on the team.

<sup>89</sup> This was Ashura's way of acknowledging that Fai really hadn't died, by making sure his name was heard every day.

She trusted her sister, but she would take whatever guidance she received with a grain of salt and place her faith squarely on the power of dreams.<sup>90</sup>

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Fai made it to the dining area last, feeling like he looked a little silly in Kurogane's spare clothes — it wasn't as if he'd had time to grab some of his own, but even though Fai was tall, Kurogane was *massive* — but it barely even registered over the fatigue that overshadowed that of the day before. He wondered if it was just the fluorite affecting him, or if life was just going to be like this until he unlocked his magic again, because despite his earlier proclamation, he had gone to bed only tipsy and though he was exhausted, his head was still clear. It was Kurogane who acknowledged him first with a bit of a smirk. "Hungover again?"

"A bit," Fai lied with a self-deprecating smile.

Sakura shot Fai a disappointed look from where she was making pancakes at the stove. "That's not it and you know it."

Fai hummed airily to cover his surprise while he poured himself a coffee, intending not to worry the others any more than he already was. "What makes you say that?"

Sakura fidgeted a little, as if debating on whether she should share. "I don't have a lot of magic, but I can tell if someone's lying," she admitted.

"That's quite a power you've got there," Fai deflected with a bit of admiration.

"It's not much," Sakura said with a small shrug, returning her attention to the pancakes. "I can only know if someone is knowingly lying; I can't catch if they're just mistaken — that's my brother. He knows when something's false."

"I think yours is better," Fai said as he took his place at the table. "Being able to tell if someone's trying to be honest with you is amazing. People can be wrong or right about anything, but it's whether they want to be truthful with you that tells you more about their character, not how much they know."

Sakura's glance then was knowing and a bit cheeky, and for the life of him, Fai could not figure out why.<sup>91</sup> "I guess you're right," she decided after a moment, "So why are you really tired?"

Fai made a mental note to be much more careful around Sakura, and flicked his eyes to Kurogane briefly, catching his gaze before coming up with a half-truth. "I woke up in the middle of the night last night, that might be it."

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<sup>90</sup> While Kurogane's mother is content to let Yuui gain the cards, Kendappa is not confident that they can trust him with them. There's a good chance (in her mind) that he'll be corrupted by the power or lose ownership of the cards to someone who would use them for ill. She would prefer the cards fall back to her family where they could maintain a system of checks and balances.

<sup>91</sup> Fai had tried not to directly lie to Sakura last night, and the irony was not lost on her.

Tomoyo seemed concerned despite Fai's best efforts, and so she missed the way Kurogane's fork hesitated in the air as Kurogane realized that Fai knew. "Was something bothering you?" The *aside from the obvious* went unspoken, but Fai still heard it loud and clear.

"Nope," Fai commented, delighted to see Kurogane's ears growing a little pink, "I wasn't bothered at all."

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It was when they had broken off into pairs again, this time for wood-gathering, that Kurogane breached the subject with all the grace of a stumbling foal. "I can sleep on the floor or whatever," he muttered, keeping his eyes far away from Fai — and trying not to think about how the black t-shirt on him sloped off one shoulder as if it were supposed to be a wide-neck and not just one of Kurogane's every day wears — as he tried to find any wood remotely dry.

"Why would you do that?" Fai asked breezily, as if he was in any way unsure of what Kurogane was referring to.

For a moment, Kurogane nearly let something else slip out in the force of his temper — that he knew damn well that Fai knew what he was talking about — but he got a hold of himself before even a word escaped, remembering that he was the one apologizing. "Because I, well — "

"I said I wasn't bothered, didn't I?" it was that light tone that dragged Kurogane's gaze to Fai, "I'm sure Sakura would have called me out if I'd lied about that." Although there was a bit of a laugh in Fai's voice, Kurogane didn't feel as if it stemmed from Fai mocking him. If Fai had wanted to make fun or embarrass Kurogane, he could have easily done so at breakfast when the other two could hear, but the only source of embarrassment for Kurogane had come from himself. "It's not like you're a kicker; it's fine."

That wasn't the only thing, though. Since they'd reached this safe haven, the last of whatever had blocked Kurogane's memory had rapidly fallen away, and though Kurogane had liked Fai well enough, it was Yuui that he had grown to love in Valeria.<sup>92</sup> The man in front of him was similar enough that he couldn't help but draw the parallels, and it seemed even his body was reacting unconsciously, but what Kurogane couldn't sort out was whether he was now well and truly falling for Fai as Fai, or if he was simply an adequate substitution for Yuui.

If the begrudging respect Kurogane had developed for Fai over the last several months had developed into a crush, that was fine — great, even — but it wouldn't be fair to either of them if he was just swapping one twin for the other.

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<sup>92</sup> As with Tomoyo, Fai's influence is falling away from Kurogane with him being under seal. He's still able to affect Yuui because of where he is, and that's part of what's draining them.

So while Kurogane indeed was not a kicker, at this point he almost wished that he was, but until he knew for sure what he was feeling, Kurogane was not about to make his emotions Fai's problem, so instead he shrugged off the prince's response as best as he could. "Whatever."

Fai's smile grew sharp and in that instant, Kurogane knew that whatever was about to come out of the man's mouth, he was going to hate it. "But no funny business or you're on the couch," Fai declared, as if he had caught Kurogane trying to be sneaky.

"As if I would!" he shot back, and later he wouldn't remember just how Fai had teased and prodded him into giving chase through the woods, and there was no force on any of the three planes that would force him to admit it aloud, but Kurogane was grateful for it all the same.

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The next several days were an exercise in patience. Tomoyo had reached out to Kendappa with all the information they had so far, hoping that she would be able to uncover something useful to the situation, but while she researched, and with there being nowhere else they could think to go, the four of them simply waited. As the hours idled away, Kurogane began to doubt that retreating here was a good idea after all. As much as the fluorite kept them from being detected, it also prevented them from casting their senses out. The whole world could have vanished on them, and they would only find out when they finally ventured down unless someone managed to send them a message before being obliterated.

That, and Kurogane was getting a little tired of being a human lightning rod. Sure, charging the generator with his electrical attack a couple times a day saved a lot of fuel, but he was a fighter, not a power plant.

More than once, Kurogane caught Fai napping the afternoon away, and at first, he figured that it was one way to pass the time, but each day these naps grew longer and longer, and Kurogane knew it had to be something beyond laziness. It was when he caught Fai shirking off his chores as well that Kurogane confronted him.

"How cruel!" Fai whined as he stretched out just to curl up again. "You wouldn't begrudge an old man a little vacation, would you?"

"You're one year older than me," Kurogane reminded him.

"And you think working hard even when there's no work to be done is a virtue and not a personality disorder," Fai countered around a yawn that was clearly false but triggered Kurogane's sympathetic response anyway, though he managed to keep his mouth closed so it wasn't too obvious he'd yawned back. "We should be conserving our strength, not keeping busy for the sake of being busy."

And Kurogane knew he had a point, which was why he decided not to say anything the day before when he'd skipped on sweeping and clearing the snow from the deck. Making dinner, however, was not "keeping busy for the sake of being busy," and so Kurogane crossed his arms

and continued to loom over Fai's napping form. "I suppose you think snacking on daydreams is an adequate substitution for a meal."

"Nope," Fai murmured, "But DIY night is a staple in many households and allows everyone to eat exactly what they want. Everyone wins."

Something had to be wrong. Fai could be a lazy sack of bones from time to time, but he liked showing off his cooking skills, almost as if that one skill made up for how clumsy he was at the other chores he hadn't been raised to perform with staff paid to do so his whole life. It was clear that whatever was going on, Fai wasn't ready to talk about it, so Kurogane dropped the matter to storm off to the kitchen to get dinner started himself.

"Sakura? *Sakura!*"

Fai was off the couch and outside in an instant to the sight of Sakura in a daze, floating several feet off the ground, and Tomoyo grasped her hand as she rose higher to tug her down only to be drawn into a trance herself, and in the next instant, Fai knew exactly what was happening.

"Kurogane!"

"I got them!" Kurogane returned, coming around from the back and drawing his sword and breath, but Fai grasped his arm as Sakura began to speak.

"Not yet."

*"We are no longer safe. Shelter must be sought in the kingdom of sand."* Fai and Kurogane exchanged a look and Kurogane kept himself at the ready as Fai brought forth the staff. *"There will all answers be found. There will the path to the end be seen. The truth must be found or all will be for nought."* It was only then that Sakura's eyes began to slide shut. *"Everything — "*

*"Fuuka — "*

"Return to the form which you were meant to be — "

*" — will be alright."*

*" — Shourai!"*

*" — Clow Card!"*

The card's grasp on the girls released and they dropped straight into a cushion of wind and Fai breathed a sigh of relief as Kurogane brought them safely to the forest floor. "Dream?" Kurogane asked.

"Dream," Fai confirmed, only to drop to his knees in the next instant, hitting the ground hard to catch Sakura when she pitched forward as she attempted to sit up. Fai steadied her, feeling much like he needed support himself as she rubbed at her eyes and got her bearings.

“What happened?” she asked groggily.

“We were pulled into a dream,” Tomoyo explained, now picking herself up into a seated position, much more sure in her movements than Sakura managed.

The message had been clear enough, but Fai had to know: “Do you remember what you saw?”

Sakura only shook her head at that, but Tomoyo, much more used to dreamwalking, answered, “It showed us what would happen if the King’s men trapped us here.” By the look on Tomoyo’s face, it wasn’t pretty, but she spared them the details, only mulling it over a moment before she continued: “The kingdom of sand looked like it should be the AUZ; that’s where we must go next.”

“Alright,” Fai nodded, rising carefully from his kneel. Sealing Dream had taken a lot out of him, and he reasoned it must have been that it was a higher powered card. “Let’s pack up and get moving. Can you stand?”

“Now?” Sakura asked, accepting Kurogane’s hand to help her and Tomoyo up.

“We are no longer safe’,” Fai quoted. “We should get moving as soon as possible.”

“I’ll text Shaoran we’re coming,” Sakura decided.

“Your boyfriend?” Tomoyo asked with a little surprise, to which Sakura nodded.

“He’s head of the research team at the former site of Castle Valere.”

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When the first thing Fai saw Kurogane heft into the back of the truck was a mattress with all its dressings, Fai knew he was up to something, but he didn’t get the chance to ask him about it because Kurogane spoke up as Fai began to march up. “I’ll take the first leg.”

“You barely know how to drive,” Fai countered, which wasn’t entirely false — Kurogane hadn’t had a need to learn until he’d come to Ceres — but that wasn’t the point.

“And you’re barely upright; don’t think I didn’t notice,” Kurogane shot back, masking his concern with irritation. Fai had hit the ground too easily to help Sakura, but Fai had to be feeling especially weak if he had left Kurogane to help both her and Tomoyo up instead of offering his hand as well. “We haven’t stayed alive this long just to die when you nod off at the wheel. Besides, it’s not like anyone else will be on the road.”

Fai glowered up at Kurogane, but he had better battles to pick and this was not one of them.

“Fine.”

“Fine,” Kurogane agreed with just as much heat.

“What are you two arguing about now?” Tomoyo asked with a bit of exasperation as she brought down her bag.

Fai’s miffed expression was hidden behind a grin and Kurogane had to wonder if Fai thought he was really fooling anyone, and while Fai reached for her bag, Kurogane set off to find a tarp, a couple pallets, anything to keep the birdbrain from flying out the bed at highway speeds. “It’s nothing. Let’s get this packed up.”

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Before, Kurogane would have assumed it would have been difficult to cross the border into the AUZ, but with no one left to patrol it, they were simply able to drive across, several gallons of fuel firmly attached to the back, as there would be no stations standing in the wastelands. By then, Kurogane had switched off the driver’s seat with Tomoyo, and Sakura had nodded off in the back seat hours ago, with Fai still dead — no, not dead, Kurogane revised in his head as he consciously kept track of the prince’s signature, passed out most certainly, but still alive — asleep in the bed of the truck. It was Tomoyo who glanced over Kurogane’s way with some concern after night fell. “Will he be okay?”

It was a valid question. The life-sucking properties of the AUZ became apparent as soon as they crossed into it, and Kurogane could feel his magic slowly leeching out the longer they stayed in it. It was slow, but steady, and he knew he’d be fine for at least a few days, as would Tomoyo, and even Sakura, but Fai’s condition had been steadily deteriorating ever since he’d sealed his magic away nearly a week ago, and Kurogane had to wonder what manner of sealing spell he must have used. Ordinarily, when someone sealed their magic away, it either reached an equilibrium or grew slowly as it gathered in disuse. He’d only ever heard of it fading away under seal in the dying or possessed.<sup>93</sup> “He will for now,” Kurogane decided. “Are there any protections you can put on him?”

Tomoyo hummed thoughtfully. “Text Aunt Tsuyu for me? She may know one I can use.” Kurogane wasted no time fishing Tomoyo’s phone out and sending the message, something Tomoyo did not miss. “You’re really worried about him, aren’t you?”

“If we’re going to beat Ashura, we need him alive,” Kurogane responded automatically, to which Tomoyo tsked, ticking him right off. “What?”

“I thought *you* were supposed to be the adult here, that’s all,” Tomoyo remarked as if it were of no consequence at all.

Of course Kurogane was worried. In the past, of the three of them Fai had always been the weakest — one of the reasons Yuui had been the master of the cards. Kurogane and Yuui had taken extra steps to protect him when the boy had insisted on accompanying them to the end. If

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<sup>93</sup> See Chapters 24 and 29: The Dark and The Hope.

Fai died now from a stupid seal of all things, Kurogane wasn't sure he'd ever forgive himself. That much he could admit to, even out loud if Tomoyo asked.

It was more than that, though. It was that Fai wasn't afraid to stand his ground with him, even from the start. It was that Fai was clever. It was that Fai would tease and poke and prod and get right under his skin, but intuitively know when to stop. It was how defiant and bright and gentle he was in turns, shifting as quickly as the wind to adapt to the next challenge. It was the catch in Kurogane's throat at seeing Fai in his clothes, and the way he didn't poke fun at the big scary man who cuddles subconsciously in his sleep. It was —

"Kurogane?" Tomoyo called softly, and Kurogane deliberately did not startle, only looked Tomoyo right in the eye. "Sakura said it, right? Everything will be alright." Tomoyo's smile was so gentle and her voice so certain, that Kurogane found he was able to believe her, too. Her grin then turned a sight mischievous with her next suggestion. "You should get some rest, too."

"Tomoyo," Kurogane began as a warning, but she was having none of it.

"I'll wake Sakura," she promised. "But you're the strongest now. We can't afford for you to start slipping, too."

Kurogane hated it, but she was right, and as Tomoyo slowed them to a stop so Kurogane could leave the passenger seat, he didn't fail to warn her. "Wake us at the first sign of trouble."

"We will," she promised again, and Kurogane couldn't ask for more than that.

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Fai barely stirred as someone shuffled in next to him. Struggling his way to awareness felt like the hardest thing he'd ever had to do, but at least the person next to him didn't seem alarmed. Maybe he could still rest some more. "Kurogane?"

The eyes he could see even in the dark seemed worried, and Fai knew it was Kurogane when a hand came up and ruffled his hair. He subconsciously pressed into that sensation, taking a bit of comfort from it. "It's me. Go back to sleep."

Fai didn't need more encouragement to lay all the way back down. He was so tired. "I think something's wrong," he admitted quietly. Maybe it was what was left of Ashura's mark. Could the King be draining his magic through that? With sleep licking at the edges of his mind it was so hard to think.

"We'll figure it out," Kurogane assured him, and Kurogane had to be worried, too, to not berate him on that point. Fai nearly told him then how to undo the seal, but even in the AUZ, it had to still be too dangerous. If Ashura came for them here, could they fight him off? He couldn't fight what he couldn't understand. Dream had said there would be answers here. It would be safe then, Fai was sure of it — it had to be.

It wouldn't do for everyone to be so worried that their thoughts were so distracted with him and they missed what was right in front of them, and so he smiled Kurogane's way, though even that felt weak on his face. "I don't suppose I could flirt my way to you cuddling me early? Might help this cold I've got."

For a moment, Fai thought maybe he had taken things a bit too far, but then Kurogane huffed a soft sigh and tugged Fai closer. "Idiots don't catch colds," Kurogane reminded him.

"Not even the talented ones?"

"Especially not the talented ones." And here, Fai would have normally teased Kurogane for admitting he was talented, but he simply didn't have the energy for it. Kurogane seemed to know that as well. "Go to sleep."

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Fai awoke instantly as three things happened in quick succession: the ever-present buzzing on the edges of even his unconscious awareness that was the collective lifeforce of Ceres disappeared in the blink of an eye, he and Kurogane snapped to attention, and the truck was brought to a stop right in the middle of the deserted road. "Kurogane!" Tomoyo called as she exited the cab, presumably to see if there were any visible indications of what had just happened.

"We felt it," Kurogane confirmed breathlessly. "That mad bastard. He really — "

Fai didn't want to believe it. He wanted to tell them that it was possible they crossed a certain threshold and simply couldn't sense out far enough to read Ceres anymore. He wanted to tell them that disasters on this scale simply weren't possible. He wanted to tell them that this was all the work of Dream and that they would awaken soon to find it all to be one possible version of the future, and not this sobering present. That they still had time; that they weren't too late to save who was left, because it seemed there was no one now. "They're all gone," he whispered, more to himself than anyone else.

"What now?" Kurogane asked evenly, and Fai hated the only answer he had.

"We keep going," he decided, feeling exhaustion sweeping back in as the shock of adrenaline slowly faded.

"After he did that?" Kurogane demanded.

"We're worse off going back now than we were before. At least then there were people to save," Fai insisted, struggling to keep some semblance of calm, even just within himself — something he'd been training for for years. Before, at least there would have been a reason to risk their lives. Now, they could only assume Ashura had become more powerful, and with no one left to

protect, returning now would only be an unnecessary suicide run. If he was going to be a leader someday, he needed to start now. "The answers are here; we have to believe that."

"And what about you?"

Separated from his magic as he was, Fai knew it was still within him, somewhere, even if he couldn't reach it. Unleashing it now could be just as good as throwing up a neon sign for Ashura to see, without understanding the specific properties of the AUZ, especially now that they were the only sources of magic for hundreds of miles. Fai shook his head. "We can't risk it."

"Wait, so you've known how to undo it this whole time?!"

*"It's me,"* Sakura's voice came, a little muffled from where she still was in the cab.

"We can't risk it," Fai asserted slowly, tiredness cutting into his ability to control his temper, "Especially not now."

*"We're okay. Are you..?"*

"You're practically at death's door and you still want to wait?!"

*"Yeah, we felt it, too. Well, not me, but ..."*

"He could sense it."

*"Just the four of us. ... No, there's four."*

"So you're going to throw your life away on the off-chance that he might sense you all the way over here?"

*"I know. ... I'm not sure, I think a couple hours still."*

"Bullshit it's an 'off-chance'."

*"I'm sure you'll see it, it's a pretty big truck."*

"You really think he can sense us all the way out here?"

*"Thank you."*

"We can sense him, can't we? We. Can't. Risk. It."

*"I love you, too. Be safe."*

"You're no good to us dead!"

*"I will. I'll see you soon. ... Bye."*

“And I’m no good to *anyone* if I’m the reason you all die!”

“Guys!” Sakura reminded them, “We need to keep moving.”

“So that’s two against one,” Fai concluded, as if the argument had been about returning and not him lifting the seal on his magic. “Tomoyo?”

Tomoyo frowned, considering. “I trust Dream’s premonitions, but Fai? Are you sure you can hold out? If we wait too much longer, we might not be able to wake you up to tell us how to undo it.”

“‘Everything will be alright’,” Fai quoted.

“Only if we make the right choices,” Tomoyo pressed, but Fai only shook his head.

“If I tell you now, you might undo it too soon. Don’t worry, I’m sturdier than I look,” Fai assured with the best smile he could muster.

Fai had never been sturdy, Kurogane wanted to argue, but he didn’t think it would do them any good, so instead he conceded for now. “Fine, but we’re undoing it as soon as we have whatever these damn answers are.”

“That’s fair,” Fai agreed.

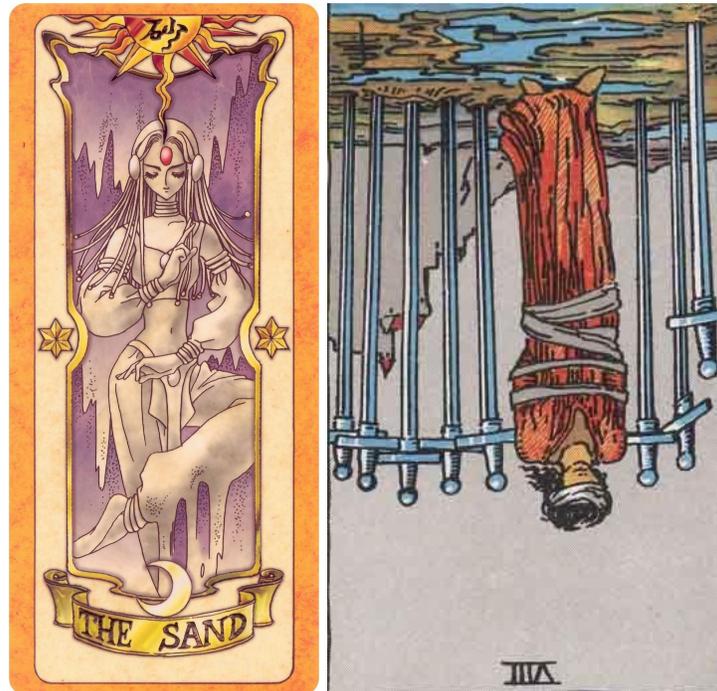
If Kurogane felt any satisfaction at winning that argument, it didn’t show. “Now go back to sleep. You’re wasting energy.”

Fai rolled his eyes but scooted back down all the same, despite the fact that complying with Kurogane’s order was exactly what he wanted to be doing right then. “Okay, Mom.”

“I am *not* your mom,” Kurogane growled.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Fai replied around a yawn, and then he was only distantly aware of the rest of them trading off driving and co-pilot duties, or the truck moving again. What he was aware of was the warmth beside him — sitting this time, not laying — and the hand in his own, and soon he drifted off to sleep, not feeling quite as tired anymore.

## The Sand



“Yuui?”

*As much as he loved that voice and the one attached to it, he shouldn't be finding her here in the halls. At least she did not seem as ill today. Yuui took some comfort in that. “Mother,” he made a show of play scolding, trying not to visibly rush to close the gap between them so she wouldn't have to, “You should be resting.”*

“It's alright.”

*Even her gentle tone couldn't keep Yuui from fretting, as much as he tried not to show it. “But the shields — ”*

*“Will hold,” she assured him, brushing some hair out of his face. “I'm worried about Fai. Has he been getting into trouble?”*

*“No, Mother,” Yuui assured her with a well-practiced smile. “We've been staying away from the Dead Zones, like we promised.”*

*“I still worry,” she murmured, and Yuui hated when she was like this, when sorrow seemed to be creeping just around the corner and he could never quite discern its source. It had been there even before death had started inching through Valeria, and it had only been growing since.<sup>94</sup>*

<sup>94</sup> Queen Freya suffers from depression, and the curse on her children and what has been happening in the kingdom don't help. See Chapter 28: The Nothing.

*Nowadays, even Yuui's most powerful smiles were hardly a weapon strong enough to ease her mind, even for a moment. As if she snapped out of whatever had grabbed her mind, she smiled down to Yuui, though even that seemed weak. "You're stronger, so you need to look out for him, okay? For me?"*

*"Always," he promised, still holding on to his own grin like a candle against the dark, before taking his mother's hand in his own. "And I'll look out for **you** by getting you back in bed so I can smuggle you some cake later!"*

*"Oh, Yuui," she allowed herself to be towed with a chuckle, but even after that, the sorrow snuck back in, taking hold, and sometimes, Yuui had to wonder if his mother was even still in there at all. "I can only pray that the weight of the world may soon slide from your small shoulders."*

*"Mother?"*

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The hand Fai was holding wasn't his mother's when he woke, but Sakura's, and she seemed to notice him stirring instantly. "Almost there," she murmured, though her quiet tone did not quite mask her excitement, "We spotted the camp a couple minutes ago."

The relief Fai felt at hearing that was tangible, and he was nearly fooled into believing it was sleep that had done him well, but Sakura's flow of energy was just a bit off, and it only took Fai a moment to understand why. "Sakura — "

"Shh," she bade him with a playful finger to her lips. "We wouldn't want to be scolded."

Fai had half a mind to scold her himself. She had the smallest amount of magic of the four of them, and had no business lending Fai some of her power in the AUZ of all places, even if hers was the most compatible. Instead he just pulled, intending to coax Sakura's hand away to break the flow, but she only squeezed a little tighter in response. "That's dangerous," he warned, though he was sure she knew.

"All of this is dangerous," she countered with warmth, "But there are some risks worth taking."

Fai was not enough of a hypocrite to argue with her on that point. Instead, he switched to a lighter topic as he pulled himself into a seated position as well: "By the way, when's your birthday?"

"It's April 1st," Sakura responded with confusion heavy in her voice at the aboutface the conversation had taken.

"An Aries, huh?" Fai confirmed with an intentionally contemplative tone. "Interesting."

Sakura took the bait, leaning forward a bit in her interest. "Why's that?"

“You see,” Fai began, holding up one finger then drawing on the bed floor as if he could illustrate his point there. “I have a magic item that can detect if someone is telling the truth called Libra, and Libra is Aries’ sister sign, right across the wheel from each other. It can find the truth, and you know when something’s a lie. Perfectly complementary, as they should be!”

“That’s amazing!” Sakura replied, now fully pulled into this new information, and more importantly, no longer in contact with Fai. With the broken connection, she was no longer serving as his donor, just as he had planned. “So even our zodiac signs can affect our abilities?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. You see — ” Fai continued, glad to be instructing on a little bit of magic theory, especially if it meant he could keep even just one of his friends from worrying for just a little while.<sup>95</sup>

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Kurogane remembered what Castle Valere looked like once upon a time. He remembered how pine forests ended with farmland that was cut through with train lines shooting out in 8 directions like points of a compass and gave way to sleepy suburbs. He remembered how the further into town one got, the denser and older the buildings became. He remembered the winding lanes and the light rail that snaked around just the same, suspended above and situated besides buildings in turn. He remembered how, as one grew closer to the heart of the city, entire roads would be closed off to vehicle traffic, instead populated with tables and chairs and stalls and always, always people. He remembered the ancient walls of the castle proper, long carefully rebuilt to more readily allow people to enter and leave the historical keep, always maintained in the traditional masonry all the same. He remembered within the keep, how most of the preserved buildings that were once the entire city centuries ago were now museums and embassies and government buildings. He remembered Castle Valere itself, sticking up tall and proud upon the hill, right in the center of it all.

He remembered a largely friendly people who had simply been living through their lives. He remembered festivals as each Dark Moon gave way to the New Moon with celebrations spanning the course of three days, and how the city nearly shut down entirely the week preceding the astrological new year for new year preparations. He remembered, though he was not of an age to drink at the time, how lively the pubs were in the warm afternoons of spring and fall, and the cool nights of summer. He remembered the harsh winter, and how even as the population knew they were rapidly heading for the end — and why, for the sake of all else, they had not been permitted to leave — they took to festivities with even more furor, as if that alone could push away the unbearable dread. They were terrified — *he* was terrified — but they knew duty, and tended to each other as best they could.

He remembered a city proud of its past, a city that looked toward the future, a city that was, while not perfect, wholly, undoubtedly alive.

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<sup>95</sup> I explain a bit of astrological magic theory in Appendix A.

Now, as they reached the research camp, all that remained was the topography, a cluster of tents, and sand as far as the eye could see.

Back then, Kurogane had not seen what exactly had become of Valeria in the end. He'd seen it touched with death and decay when they'd fought Earthy, and then he remembered waking up back in Japan. There was a major difference between empty cities and dead vegetation, and the existence of absolutely nothing that it had become.

The thought that Ceres was likely now the same made him want to be sick.

As they approached, a man with light hair flagged them down, so Kurogane pulled up to that tent and rolled down the window.<sup>96</sup> The man smiled and made his way over. "You're Sakura's friends, right?"

"Yeah," Kurogane replied and if nothing else, the other man's smile grew wider and internally Kurogane wasn't sure what he was going to do with himself if he was stuck with the company of not one but two smiling idiots.

"Perfect! We've set up quarters for you right over here," and here he pointed at the pair of tents to Kurogane's right, and Kurogane was not looking forward to being the one assigned to babysit Fai. "I'm Yukito by the way."

"Kurogane. That's Tomoyo," Kurogane added, jutting his thumb beside him before cutting the engine while Tomoyo gave a polite wave. "Sakura and Fai are in the back." Or were in the back; Kurogane could hear the tailgate drop now that he'd parked.

"Fai? You mean the — ?" Kurogane's face must have shot Yukito a Look without him even telling it to, because he stopped that sentence dead in its tracks, though he did peek back in Fai's direction curiously before smoothly changing the topic as Kurogane exited the truck. "Syaoran should be by soon; I think he'll want to show you around. If you need anything, you can find me in requisitions three tents that way."

"They got bedrolls in there?"

"Cots."

"How about bathing facilities?"

"That would be — "

"Syaoran, over here!"

Kurogane glanced back to see a boy about Sakura's age bound over excitedly, to some relief. When he'd heard that her boyfriend was head of research, he'd been a bit worried that Sakura

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<sup>96</sup> Fun fact: Touya had moved to an outer town to be closer to Yukito without leaving his family altogether. Unfortunately, that meant he was taken by Ashura early on.

was dating someone much older — someone Kurogane would have to beat into the ground for hitting on a 14 year old girl.<sup>97</sup> Though it was good to see that was not the case — “That kid’s in charge here?”

Yukito chuckled at Kurogane’s disbelief. “He heads the research team, but I promise there’s adults administrating. Think of him as the study group leader. Anyway, you were asking about the showers — ”

Kurogane tuned out Sakura in favor of getting specifics from Yukito, and would have missed the end of the introductions, if Syaoran hadn’t been so enthused. “Fai? As in Prince Fai?”

*Shit.*

As much as Fai was probably used to having some degree of celebrity status, Syaoran’s excitement seemed a bit much — the kid practically had stars in his eyes. Inwardly, Kurogane hoped Sakura wasn’t the jealous type.<sup>98</sup> Fai put on a winning smile. “The one and only.”

“Oh wow! I have so many things I wish to ask you — ” and Kurogane saw in real time the moment Fai connected the dots in the middle of Syaoran’s questioning by the way the grin froze on his face. “How did you escape the calamity? Are there any others who made it out? Why did Queen Freya close the borders in the first place? Did she know what was causing the blight? Or maybe — ” Fai’s eyes flicked to Kurogane and Kurogane knew he was *pissed*, and for a moment, he thought Fai was of a mind to have it out with him right here in front of everyone, when Yukito swept on over.

“Syaoran,” he said, placing a hand on Syaoran’s shoulder and cutting off the stream of questions. “I’m sure the Prince is tired from the journey. Why don’t we let everyone settle in first?” Syaoran at least had the good grace to be embarrassed and went red as a tomato, and Yukito shifted his attention, assessing Fai, glancing back to Kurogane, and then quickly back to Fai.<sup>99</sup> “I’m sure we’ve got some clothes your size if you’d like to change.”

Kurogane wondered if Yukito could tell just how tight Fai’s smile had become. “That would be wonderful..?”

“Yukito,” Yukito supplied with a much more natural one.

“Yukito,” Fai repeated and the blue eyes that swept Kurogane’s way were cold in a way he hadn’t seen even when they were in competition. Kurogane didn’t doubt that Fai was itching to get out of the borrowed shirt now. “Thank you. Lead the way?”

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<sup>97</sup> In CCS canon, Sakura is about 3 months older than Syaoran.

<sup>98</sup> Sakura is the opposite of the jealous type. See Chapter 24: The Dark.

<sup>99</sup> Yukito, ever perceptive, picks up that Yuui is in Kurogane’s clothes and they are fighting right then, and Yuui definitely does not want to be wearing those clothes right then.

Tomoyo drew close to Kurogane as Fai and Yukito walked away, and spoke in a low tone. "I thought you told him."

"Not everything," Kurogane grumbled, to which Tomoyo shook her head.

"I'd say he's going to kill you, but I'd wager he'd stop one step short." Kurogane didn't get a chance to ask what exactly that was supposed to mean, because in the next instant, Tomoyo spun merrily on her heel. "Syaoran, I've heard so much about you!"

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Night came quickly in the desert. Kurogane had stepped into the shower at sunset, and by the time he exited, the Milky Way was clear in the sky. Under different circumstances, he would have taken the opportunity to admire the sight. Tonight, however, he returned straight to the tent he would, allegedly, be sharing with Fai. Whether the man actually came back or not, he wasn't sure of.

Still, he waited once he settled in. If Fai wanted to confront him, he could. In hindsight, it had been a stupid decision not to tell Fai before they'd come here. Of course whoever was researching the AUZ would know Valeria's recent royal lineage, and of course it was going to come up while they were here. While Kurogane stood by his decision not to tell him while they were trapped in Lock, there had been plenty of time in the cabin or even on the long drive here, and Kurogane just hadn't.

He could say that he didn't know if telling Fai about his own past may have an adverse reaction to the memory block. He could say the right opportunity never came. He could say that if Fai had just taken some initiative and researched Valeria himself, he would have found out on his own. None of these were lies, strictly speaking.

In reality, Kurogane didn't know why he had been so against telling Fai about his genuine royal heritage. It wasn't like him to be cagey or unforthcoming. Quite the opposite, he prided himself on his ability and willingness to be direct. He served the truth. He didn't omit facts. He didn't spare feelings.

So why had he done it?<sup>100</sup>

It was nearly midnight when Fai finally slipped into the tent, and the instant his eyes landed on Kurogane, his mask went up, and Kurogane was reminded of the last time Fai had directed such a look his way, back when he'd captured Time. It'd been half a year since then, and they both had made so much progress. Being back to square one stung in a way Kurogane hadn't

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<sup>100</sup> Some of it had been Fai's influence, and some of it was him recognizing that Yuui was not doing very well mentally, and that learning about his role in the politics of Valeria may have made it worse.

expected.<sup>101</sup> “Thought an early riser like you would’ve been long asleep by now,” Fai commented with apparent cheer, crossing over to the unclaimed cot.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Kurogane grumbled.

“I’m sure Yukito would have something for that.” Kurogane just grunted noncommittally at that, but if Fai was bothered, it didn’t show. Instead, he perfunctorily pulled off his boots and slipped beneath his blankets, chattering throughout, “Well, I don’t have anything keeping me from getting a good night’s sleep, so turn out the light if you don’t need it. Good night!”

For a moment, Kurogane didn’t do anything but stare at the back of that blonde head, but when it became clear that Fai was content to completely ignore the matter, Kurogane gave in and switched off the lamp before attempting sleep himself. In the morning, he would wonder if Fai’s comment had been a hex of some sort or if it was just Kurogane himself that kept him from sleeping for a long time yet.

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When Fai woke in the morning, he found he wasn’t feeling refreshed at all, but that didn’t surprise him. He’d burned through the small amount of magic Sakura had lent him, and he wasn’t oblivious to the strange properties of the AUZ putting even further strain on his already taxed system. Hopefully, Dream’s predictions would come to pass sooner rather than later. Fai wasn’t sure how long he’d be able to last out here with his powers locked away.

Fai was sure he didn’t want to linger here any longer than necessary, especially with the present company. Even with his magic back, the emotional toll of keeping his guard up would wear him down all the same. He hadn’t thought himself to be a gullible person before, but patterns were emerging that he could not ignore. First Ashura, and now Kurogane, and he found himself wary of Tomoyo, even, though at least she had been forthright enough to tell him when she wasn’t at liberty to reveal something to him — as far as he knew, anyway.

He couldn’t imagine why Kurogane would offer him information on Valeria only to attempt to conceal Fai’s own involvement in the affairs. Fai wasn’t stupid; he’d already guessed that Kurogane must have been the mysterious third party that he and Yuui had faced capturing the cards the first time around. However, it may have been a mistake to assume that they were truly on the same side now just because a different threat had emerged.

Getting comfortable in the alliance and allowing his emotions to get involved had been reckless and sloppy, but Fai had no one to blame but himself for entering such a situation in the first place. He could have maintained distance; he could have remained skeptical and taken everything he was told with a grain of salt. He could only assume that he’d latched on to the

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<sup>101</sup> It’s TRC Tokyo Arc but backward. Yuui is pulling up his mask instead of dropping it after being faced with a perceived betrayal.

sense of comradery that had been new and exciting and something he had been sorely missing before — and found himself missing now.

There was nothing for it, though, and so Fai sought out Syaoran first thing with the excuse that the events had been so long ago and he had been so young then that he didn't have concrete information to offer, but perhaps Syaoran's notes would jog his memory. Syaoran had been more than pleased to invite Fai back to his study and grant him permission to go through any files he could find.

So Fai did. He skimmed through some reports and paid close attention to others, appropriating a notebook for himself to investigate certain things on his own later. The specific properties of this space were of special interest. He hadn't had much time to study the effect in Ceres, but research had been going on here for over a decade.

The first thing that was apparent was that each iteration of teams shortly after research began were populated solely by medium-level magic users or better. Anyone with low magical potential invariably became ill and had to leave the site for their own health within a week, but there appeared to be a point where a person's own replenishment outdid the draining properties of the area, making them safe to stay for longer durations. It also appeared that the strength of the effect was not uniform — there were hot and cold spots throughout that had been documented thoroughly. It seemed that areas that had previously been nothing but nature were relatively cool, while sites that were once cities ran hot.

The site of Castle Valere, which had once been quite densely populated, was definitely hot.

Documentation of the actual events seemed to be based more in theory than fact, as the isolationist period had not allowed much information to escape, and the cataclysm had destroyed any records that had existed within Valeria. It was verifiable that Queen Freya had cast and maintained a barrier that, for the most part, prevented anyone from entering or leaving the country in the couple years before it disappeared from the map, as was the royal lineage — and Fai noted with no small surprise that he and Ashura were related by blood.

The timeline of major disappearances was mostly based off of satellite images as a baseline. From those, they could see when large parts of forests died, and heat map records of cities gone cold. From that and the study of the sites themselves, the team had been able to extrapolate a rough timeline of when most of the disappearances had occurred. Different authors debated on the exact dates, but most seemed to agree with each other within roughly a week's distribution, so Fai concluded that it was likely accurate enough.

It was when he explored the hypotheses behind what had occurred that there seemed to be a good deal of discord among the experts. Many of the findings seemed to clash with existing widely accepted theories on the creation of magical effects, and how they manifest, spread, and dissipate, especially regarding the theory of balance. They had evidence of mass destruction, but no counter effect to zero out the scales again — no known creation that would have caused

it if the effect was a negative offset, and no known drop in power elsewhere in the world to power it if it was not.

Fai's stomach went cold at the thought of exactly what increased use of power may have necessitated that much blowback to keep things balanced. On the surface, the Clow Cards seemed self-contained: they ate up the residual energy stored in them from their creator, and spat out their special effects. However, if it wasn't the stored energy that powered them — <sup>102</sup>

Fai snapped himself out of that train of thought before he could take it much further. He worked with the cards; he would have noticed if the flow of power through them wasn't even. Assuming that he was the cause of all this was exactly what Ashura would have wanted him to conclude, and so Fai knew he'd have to look deeper to find the truth of it. All could not be as it seemed.

Outside, the wind kicked up sharply, and the sound of it had Fai sucking in a breath, because that should not have been possible. The science behind wind was well understood, including that it required energy — magical energy — to make movement possible. It was why they were not at risk for storms (sand or water); that sort of weather withered and died less than a mile into the region.

Abandoning the research, Fai released the key. There were more pressing matters, such as how the Clow had managed to follow him all the way out here.

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Yukito had thrown up a barrier before Fai had made it out of the tent and Fai had him drop it for just an instant so that he could move beyond it and get a better read of the situation without the shield muting his senses. It was immediately obvious it wasn't the wind moving at all, but the sand — trillions of particles sailing through the otherwise still air, grating on and wearing down any exposed surface.

Out in the middle of it, using a wind spell as a shield of his own, was Kurogane. Fai hated it, but the man had the right idea, and not wanting to waste any magic of his own, nor breathe in or be blinded by the sand, Fai was quick to make his way into the safety of Kurogane's sphere. "It's Sand!"

"No shit!" Kurogane shot back, eyes constantly flicking back and forth.

"Where's the body?"

"It won't stand still!" Kurogane confirmed before swinging out his sword sharply to launch an attack at what appeared to be spines that cut through the surface of the sand for just a moment, only to duck back below ground in an instant. "It's like a worm."

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<sup>102</sup> This is explored more in Chapters 28 and 29: The Nothing and The Hope.

“How original,” Fai muttered. It was always worms with sand, and he never understood why. Worms didn’t even like sand — it was too dry. Why couldn’t it ever be a sand coyote or a desert flower? “How about Freeze?”

“I need water for that.”

And so would all of Fai’s water-based cards. If there was no water nearby, they could draw from the humidity in the air, but there was none all the way out here. Time wouldn’t be an option, either unless their timing was perfect; Kurogane would not be able to hold that spell long enough to locate and dig the worm out of the ground to seal it. Fai grimaced. What they needed was a way to get it out of the ground. Taking a chance, Fai drew a card. “Thunder!”

Electricity crackled. Lightning struck the ground, dissipating in the multitudes of grains and losing strength with each division, and by the time it reached where the presence of the Clow was the strongest, it was too weak to be damaging. Another option out the window.

“We need stronger magic!”

“There has to be a way,” Fai insisted. Maybe if he burned the sand into glass, they could restrict Sand’s movement and force it to surface that way. It would be difficult controlling the heat and it would burn through his magic quickly without physical fuel to feed off instead, but it was worth a shot and so Fai reached for Fiery instead. He didn’t detect the stone that had kicked up until it hit his hand and the staff was knocked out of his fingers to revert to the key and disappear within the sand. The sudden decrease in power was felt instantly, and Fai found himself dropped to one knee in the next breath. “Kurogane, seal it!”

“I need the main body for that!” Kurogane shot back, and Fai knew that, but there had to be something he could do.

“Then draw it out!”

“With what?!”

“You’ve got plenty of attacks! Try fire!”

“Just release your damn power, mage!”

Fai grit his teeth to bite back the curse that threatened to spill past his lips — it wouldn’t have helped the situation anyway. Kurogane was right and they had to do something. Yukito’s shield wouldn’t last forever, and suffocating in the sand was not exactly the ideal way to go, but neither was whatever Ashura could bring to bear and at least they knew how to fight sand —

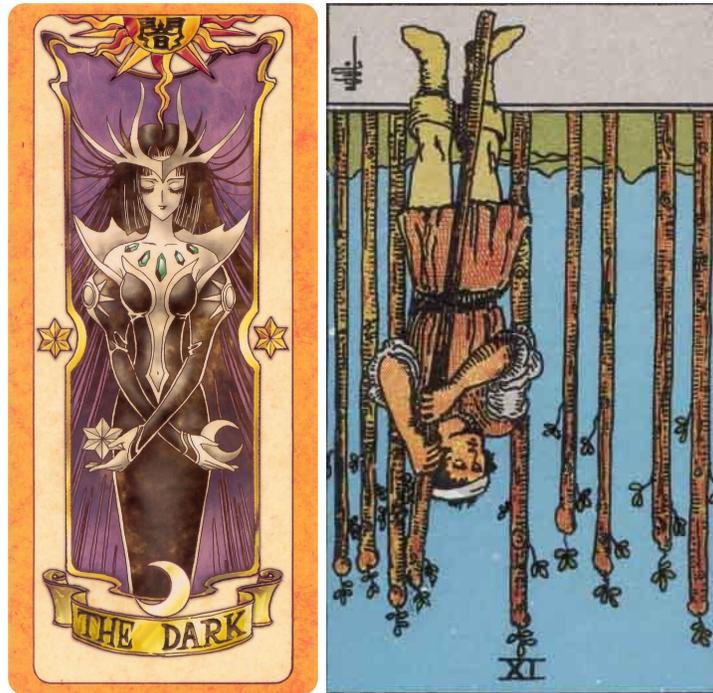
“His arm!” Tomoyo shouted to be heard over the wind, “The anchor is on his left arm!”

Fai didn’t have the opportunity to react. In an instant, Kurogane clamped one hand down on Fai’s wrist while the other unerringly sought out the exact release spot as if it had become visible through his sleeve now that Kurogane knew where to look, and the instant Kurogane

applied to slightest amount of his own power, Fai felt all his magic snap like an overstretched rubber band.

And then, nothing.

## The Dark



*“You’ve noticed it, right?” Yuui was saying, looking straight ahead at a forest of dead trees. It wasn’t the cards that had done this.*

*“Noticed what?” someone to his left asked.*

*“That Fai’s getting weaker.” Whoever was with him didn’t say anything and Yuui took a deep breath. “I overheard the doctors. They said it might keep going until he — ” Yuui couldn’t get the word out. The trees were getting out of focus. “They said it’s because of our curse.”*

*“Curses can be broken.” Yuui wasn’t so sure. “Has Mirror been working?”*

*“Yeah,” Yuui confirmed. “They want to help him, too, but — ” Yuui’s vision slid to the left, and even within the space of the dream, Fai knew he was about to see who was with him, but instead, the sight went black “ — There’s a final test, right? I won’t be able to count on the cards then. I need you to protect him instead. Please.”*

*“I’ll do what I can.”*

*There was a silence then, and there in the dark, Fai couldn’t understand why. “I was wrong about you. You really are very kind.”*

*“I should beat you up for that.”*

*Yuui's laughter was bright, "As if you could!"*

*"I'm gonna slam your empty head so far underground people'll think you're an ostrich!"*

*"You gotta catch me first!"*

---

Fai woke to a pain stretching out across his entire body, but also distant as if that body had gotten a little away from him, somehow. He tried to think of why, but his thoughts felt unnaturally muddled, slow, and a little bit sticky. The canvas above him helped him remember the tent city in the AUZ, but just what had happened to send him into such a state escaped him.

The easy flow of his power did not. It felt nearly depleted, but it was there, moving freely once again. Fai meant to sit up and attempt to look at his back, but there was a gentle hand on his shoulder coaxing him back down. "Try not to move yet, your Highness."

Fai opened his eyes to the sight of Yukito on a chair beside the cot Fai was in. Even his vision was a little funny, colors gone just a bit wrong. What was happening? "Can't be a Highness of a country that no longer exists."

Yukito's head cocked to one side. "Valeria or Ceres?"

"Yes," Fai murmured, trying to force himself to think straight, but he couldn't. "What's wrong with me?"

"We had to give you a pain medication. You might be feeling a bit fuzzy."

Fuzzy was a massive understatement. "I got hurt?"

Yukito nodded. "You weren't prepared when the seal was lifted and so your power was unleashed all at once. The resulting backlash left you with physical damage, but your core is still intact, so your magic will recover."<sup>103</sup> And as Fai peaked down at what he could see of himself, he did see the signs of what Yukito had just said: thousands of incision-like cuts, all smooth and thin, with some shorter than his pinky nail and some spanning the entire width of his body. The worst of them were under bandages, while the more minor ones were treated with a liquid sealant. "I should be able to heal you properly tomorrow when some of my magic replenishes. I had to use most of it on the barrier."<sup>104</sup>

The memory of Yukito's barrier slid across Fai's mind, bringing with it most of what had happened. "Did it hold?"

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<sup>103</sup> This could have easily killed someone (either the person whose magic was released or anyone in the blast zone), especially at Yuui's level of power.

<sup>104</sup> Most was used on the barrier, the rest had to be used on healing Kurogane, who had been outside Yukito's barrier.

Yukito's smile was gentle. "No one else got hurt," he assured Fai, answering the real question there. "I've never seen a power quite like yours before. Watching it in action was extraordinary."

It was not a topic Fai wanted to linger on, though at least it seemed Ashura wasn't coming for them — for now. "You treated me?" Yukito nodded at that. "Was there a mark on my back?"

It was then that Yukito's countenance fell, somber and pensive. "There was no physical mark, but I did detect traces of something concerning that might have been its effect. Something or someone has been feeding on your power, or at least it was. I was hoping you could enlighten me about it."

*So it's finally gone*, Fai mused. He didn't feel any better about it. At least now he knew why being under seal had been so exhausting — he had been metaphorically eating for two on a diet of one the whole time. "I can't enlighten anyone at all," he lamented, and as he sat up this time, Yukito did not attempt to coax him back down. It was then that he noticed the table to his right, and the key and card waiting there. He had assumed that Kurogane would have kept the card, and the possibility that the key would be lost to the sand permanently, but here they both were.

"Kurogane brought them by for you," Yukito murmured.

Fai had figured as much, and he had questions about that. Had Kurogane said anything about why he'd given them back? Was the key easily found or did they spend hours sifting through the grains to find it again?<sup>105</sup> Did he seem to regret taking Fai's magic into his own hands, or was he as sure of himself as ever?

Fai wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answers to those, so instead he gathered his hands in his lap and faced Yukito directly. "Tell me everything that happened after my magic was released."

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Having lunch alone with Sakura had been nothing short of delightful, in Tomoyo's opinion, even if there was a slight undercurrent of anxiety to it all. Not regarding Fai, of course (Yukito had assured them that Fai was fine and would just need some rest, and Tomoyo had no reason not to believe him), but because of the unknown topic that lurked on the horizon. After a bracing sip of tea, Tomoyo smiled Sakura's way. "So, what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"Oh that," Sakura responded as if startled by the question, laughing a little awkwardly, and shifting her hands around as if not quite sure what to do with them. The question came out quickly and loudly at first, but lost steam as Sakura went on, ending in a hopeful whisper: "I was wondering if you would possibly maybe think about considering being my girlfriend?"

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<sup>105</sup> Kurogane can sense the key so he knew approximately where it was, which helped a lot.

That was not what Tomoyo had expected to hear. It was not even close to being related to anything on the list of what Tomoyo thought she would hear. Sakura had a boyfriend, didn't she? She couldn't have forgotten that.. Right? "But, Syaoran — ?"

Sakura brightened a bit at that. "Oh, we already talked it over and he thinks it's a great idea!"

That didn't really answer anything. "He does?"

"Mm-hm!" Sakura nodded. "Supports it 100%!"

Surely Sakura couldn't be dumping Syaoran for her, and with Syaoran perfectly ok with the proceedings. This had to be a dream, or a delusion. There was no way this was possibly happening. "Really?"

"Of course!" Sakura assured her. "It's only fair. He's got Ryuoh after all!"

"Ryuoh?"

"His boyfriend," Sakura declared before all at once cottoning onto the confusion. "Oh! We've got an open relationship. We're dating each other, and he's also dating Ryuoh, and we're both free to also date other people — we just have to talk about it first, that's all. And we did, and he also thinks you're a really great person, and so I was hoping you'd want to go out with me sometime?<sup>106</sup> Unless I misread the situation and you're not into me at all, in which case — "

Tomoyo flushed to her roots. Surely she hadn't been that obvious. "No! No, that's not what — " Tomoyo took a calming breath. This wasn't something she'd expected at all. The fact was that she did like Sakura, and she'd been content to know that Sakura was in a healthy relationship. Syaoran seemed to be a good guy and Sakura seemed really happy with him, and that had been enough. Tomoyo couldn't have Sakura for herself, but Sakura was happy, and that was fine. This was a dynamic she hadn't considered, and it threw Tomoyo for a loop. "So you'd be dating both of us?"

"Only if you're comfortable with that," Sakura hedged a bit nervously. "We don't have to date at all if you're not okay with that. We can go back to being friends and I won't make things awkward at all, I swear! So please don't feel like I'm pressuring you or anything. This is 100% up to you."

Tomoyo giggled a little at that. She couldn't picture Sakura pressuring her into anything. Still, could Tomoyo share her love like that? Would she get jealous? Was this new relationship something she could really not only be okay with, but participate in in such a way to allow both Sakura and herself to flourish? Tomoyo didn't have those answers just yet. "Can I think about it?"

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<sup>106</sup> This is my ultimate fix-it for poor Tomoyo. It's implied in Chapter 29: The Hope, but Tomoyo does take Sakura up on the offer.

Relief spread across Sakura's features in a rush. "Of course. For as long as you like."

"Alright," Tomoyo agreed. As she sipped again at her tea, she hoped the answer would come to her swiftly. She'd hate to leave Sakura waiting.

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Apparently, it had been a quick affair. Fai's power manifested in a sharp wind blasting out in all directions that had been strong enough to leave a small crater behind and to knock the main body of the card clear from the sand it was hiding in. The card was sealed, and Fai was brought to the medical tent for treatment.

Yukito had not volunteered information on how the key was retrieved and Fai did not ask.

It took a bit of convincing, but Fai eventually talked Yukito into lending him a fresh set of clothes and allowing him to leave the tent for some rest with the promise to return first thing in the morning for further treatment.<sup>107</sup> Fai felt a little guilty for the lie, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Even at its currently reduced level, his power would only be a beacon to Ashura. Just because the King had yet to come didn't mean that the possibility was out the window entirely. The longer Fai remained, the more likely it was that Ashura was to act on his own. So Fai brought out Fly when he made it to the edge of camp and, after making sure no one was paying attention, he started out to the south. He'd cross out of the AUZ to the very edges of Jade, where his magic could recover without the drain the AUZ presented. If Ashura came for him there, he'd be far enough away from populated areas that he would be the only target and casualty, hopefully. If Ashura did not, then Fai had time to plan further.

Even if he wasn't satisfied with his plan, Fai intended to act as soon as he was back at his peak. No more running; no more hiding. He'd face Ashura with everything he had before more people could die, even if it meant he would die trying. Either Fai would win and the threat would be over, or he would lose and it would all be over.

Fai hadn't been oblivious to how much stronger Ashura had become since this had all started, and he wasn't an idiot. He knew that losing at Ashura's hand would mean that the King would become that much more powerful. It was very likely that Fai was doing exactly what Ashura wanted him to do. But the King was mad, and that meant Fai had logic on his side.

There were theories about the upper limits of magical capacity. Artifacts could only store so much power, and it largely depended on their size and composition to determine just how much could be stored before the sheer force of the magic destroyed the vessel. The same should,

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<sup>107</sup> Yuui's clothes were just as shredded as he was. The poor guy is in the tent city equivalent of a hospital gown.

logically, apply to mortal bodies. Clow Reed had once been touted as an example of a human that had reached the absolute limit, and now all his power was stored within the Cards.

Between Ashura's increased power, Fai's natural store, and what existed within the Clow, Fai was banking on Ashura biting off more than he could chew, and maybe Fai would live long enough to see just what happens to a body pushed past its magical limits before death took him as well.

If he was wrong — well, the rest of the world wouldn't have very much longer to resent him for it.

Fai was more concerned about what would happen if he won. All the magic Ashura had would have to go somewhere, and there was nothing natural left in Ceres to absorb it.<sup>108</sup> Maybe he could enchant some items while in Jade. It didn't particularly matter what — Fai would come in with a sack full of stones if he had to — he just needed enough to be able to capture the rogue magic and disperse it safely over a wide enough range that it didn't present a tempting target for anyone else who only sought power — something that would activate on its own, even if Fai himself was dead. Until then, the risks of someone else absorbing it and putting him right back at square one, or the magic itself running wild and out of control were high.

That was another reason he had to do this alone: none of the others were strong enough to survive the potential initial backlash. Not to mention that they would never agree to a plan where Fai intended to die as the best-case scenario. His head insisted that they would never tolerate Fai putting his own magic and Clow's out of their reach forever; his gut still firmly believed that they were truly his friends and wouldn't want to see him kill himself when there could still be other options.

His gut, however, still told him that he could trust Ashura, and so even though it broke his heart, Fai had to go with his head on this one. There was no one here he could rely on but himself, and that would have to be that.

Darkness fell so swiftly and completely that Fai at first thought that he'd been too late and Ashura had come, and that this sensation of nothingness had to be what it was like inside the effect before he was incorporated into it completely. He couldn't sense anything — not the everpresent background static of the other still-living nations, not the camp to his back, and not even himself. Everything was gone, except Fai realized with a start, the Clow.

Taking a steadying breath, Fai brought forth a small flame in his hand just to test his theory. He couldn't see it, couldn't even see himself, and he couldn't sense his magic being used, but he could feel the warmth the flame radiated. Carefully, he manipulated it around his hand, sliding it along his palm, between his fingers, and across the back of his hand until he was satisfied. This

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<sup>108</sup> Living things are able to contain more magic than their inanimate counterparts because they naturally develop a current of magic. With the potential energy of it dedicated to circulating in an established pattern, it does not accumulate the pressure that tends to blow apart inanimate containers at the same levels.

wasn't an absorption field — it was an altered, isolated space in which Fai existed, but light did not.

The camp wasn't gone, it just wasn't in the same place as he was right now.

Relieved, he cast about, but he couldn't sense anything else, or see anything at all. The sensation of the Clow was spread too evenly for him to determine where the main body was. It was entirely possible that he was inside it, just like he'd been with Maze.

There were only four cards left, and that meant this one had to be Dark, and if Fai's memory served him right, it couldn't be caught without light, and it was a higher-powered card, so whatever cards he did have, they wouldn't be able to outshine the crushing darkness.

Instead, Fai attempted a light of his own. He started with smaller spells at first, to conserve what power he had regenerated, but as he worked through medium-level spells up to spells designed to serve as a light source for miles, Fai found he couldn't even bring forth a flicker.

"Shit," he muttered to himself, not enjoying the possibility of being stuck in a place like this forever. He had enough inner darkness to deal with as it was; being robbed of light entirely would be nothing but torture.

No sooner than he thought that, a stream of light like a beacon shone behind him and Fai wasted no time turning back to charge directly at it. Something told him this would be his only chance, and so as he drew close, he switched the Staff away from Fly so he could seal it, hoping his height in the air and momentum would be enough to keep him from a painful meeting from the ground.

"Return to the form which you were meant to be!"

Fai swung directly at the brightest point —

"Clow Card!"

— and the staff struck something solid before the sealing spell took effect.

## The Light



*“I’m gonna slam your empty head so far underground people’ll think you’re an ostrich!”*

*“You gotta catch me first!”*

*Kurogane did, though he hadn’t really wanted to. He hadn’t wanted to for a while now, but Yuui didn’t have to know that. Yuui could still think of them as mild enemies, or at least competitors — it was better that way. Kurogane had thought that himself not that long ago.*

*But there wasn’t anything necessarily bad about Yuui or Fai. Yes, they were after the cards, too, and that had made them enemies in Kurogane’s mind for a long time, even when they’d teamed up to take down the more powerful or destructive cards. His mother had sent him to capture the cards, after all. Allowing the twins to catch them instead would be against his orders.*

*His mother had never told him he had to work alone, though, and when Kurogane revised his thinking — that he and the other two were working together for the common goal of eliminating a threat and not fighting each other for possession — it became obvious that he and Yuui were more natural as partners than enemies.*

*Before, Kurogane would have caught Yuui. He would have caught him, beat him to the ground if he had to, and taken the cards and staff for himself.*

*Now, with Yuui caught between Kurogane and a tree because Yuui had become distracted by the emergence of the final card and **not** because Kurogane had necessarily put forth any effort*

*at capturing whatsoever, Kurogane didn't know what to do with him. He didn't want to hurt Yuui. He didn't even want to mildly inconvenience him at this point.*

*What he wanted to do, he couldn't allow himself. This was going to be the last card, and then Kurogane would be off back to Japan. It wouldn't be fair to either of them for him to do what he wanted just then.*

*Instead, Kurogane huffed out a sigh and ran a rough hand through Yuui's hair when Yuui noticed Fai's signature coming closer. He couldn't stand to see Yuui looking so scared. "I'll protect him, don't worry about that."*

*For just a moment, Yuui relaxed and smiled his way. "Thanks." Kurogane's heart hurt at the relief in that one word, but the moment passed and a determined grin settled on Yuui's face. "What do you say we put an end to this?"*

*"Bout damn time."*

---

The memory stuck with Kurogane most of the day. That was the last time he had spoken with Yuui, and though Kurogane's memory of events cut off soon after, the certainty that he had failed to protect Fai then did not make him feel any better about the events of now. If Fai had been pissed at him for failing to inform him of his lineage, he doubted that he'd be forgiven for trampling over his autonomy as he had.

For someone as smart as Fai was, he could be an obstinate idiot at times, though. Fai had to know that keeping the seal on much longer without compensating for the drain of the AUZ was going to kill him sooner rather than later. Lingering here even a few days in the state Fai was in would probably have proven fatal, and the moron had still insisted on keeping that blasted seal on. It made Kurogane wonder if somewhere under the smiles and forced optimism, Fai had a death wish. It would have explained a lot.

That only meant he'd have to keep a closer eye on him, because if Fai's aim was to die, there was only one way Kurogane could see him doing it, and he was certain the idiot would take great pains to ensure no one else followed to help.

He'd already lost Yuui to the cards; he wasn't going to lose Fai, too.

As if that very thought had spurred Fai on, Kurogane felt the presence of Fai getting further and further away, and Kurogane bit off a curse as he stormed out of the tent to the overwhelming brightness of a desert day. Shielding his eyes, Kurogane waited for his vision to adjust, but all he could see was the white-out of the sun's rays. He glanced behind himself, in the direction Fai was going, and even the tent was completely washed out and —

"Shit," Kurogane muttered, looking down and seeing himself clearly, and nothing else. It wasn't the sunny day, but one of the final cards. At least Fai seemed to have paused for now; that

would give Kurogane a bit of time to deal with this. First things first, he'd have to find the point where Light and Dark met, or he'd never get out of here.

He turned a small circle, trying to glimpse his shadow, but there was none, and the presence of the Clow was stretched thin and even over a vast space, with no apparent point of concentration where the brightness would be strongest. Irritating, but not impossible to overcome.

If he didn't know where to find Dark, he'd lure Dark to himself instead. Kurogane drew his sword.

*"Sen Ryuu Hi Kou Ge Ki!"*

The dragon spiraled up in a column of light and just as Kurogane predicted, a shadow flitted over from the distance like a moth to the flame. Kurogane wasted no time and swung towards it

—

*"Shoutai Konrei!"*

— and his sword struck something solid before the sealing spell took effect.

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Whatever it was Fai hit slowed his descent enough that he barely felt the impact with the ground when he landed. The wind created by the spell had kicked up some dust and some of it had gotten in his eyes, but Fai was just relieved that he could even see the dust at this point. He was out of the card, and as soon as he could see again, he could sneak away and no one would be the wiser.

Except when the dust settled, the sealing staff was still braced against Kurogane's sword, and who would be holding it, but Kurogane himself. Kurogane hadn't been wrong when he'd called him unlucky, Fai griped internally. If Kurogane frowned at Fai's physical state, Fai was content to ignore it, throwing up a mask of a smile instead when both cards floated his way.

Seeing Kurogane's face sour even further only made Fai want to grin harder. Kurogane's tone wasn't nearly as peeved as his face was when he broke the silence, returning his sword into his hand. "You should be resting."

"But I'm back to full strength, thanks to you," Fai tossed in a backhanded sing-song.

"Bullshit," Kurogane grumbled. "Besides you're injured."

"Merely some flesh wounds," Fai shot back dismissively, turning back towards the rest of camp, but Kurogane caught him about the elbow, stopping him in his tracks.

"They're still wounds," he insisted. "And you don't want them getting infected."

Fai jerked his arm from Kurogane's grasp, twirling even further away in the same motion to create just a little more distance. "Yukito's going to heal them tomorrow anyway."

Kurogane scoffed at that. "Like you were planning on still being here tomorrow." Fai was content to leave it at that. It didn't matter if Kurogane knew he was going to leave; there was little the man could do to hold him back at this point. Even with his own magic still recovering (and Fai did not forget for a moment that it was Kurogane's fault that it had been released all at once in the first place), the cards alone held more than enough power for Fai to fight his way out if he had to. "You know if you sneak away, we'll just follow anyway," Kurogane called at his retreating back.

Fai was glad he was no longer facing Kurogane for the grimace that crossed his face. It was one thing if Kurogane followed him and got himself killed; it was another thing entirely if non-combatants met the same fate. Because Kurogane was right — Tomoyo would follow, and there was a good chance Sakura would as well. Maybe even the whole camp. These weren't fighters — they were scholars and explorers, nothing more than fodder if put against Ashura.

All at once, Fai had to wonder why he'd even bothered to pretend with Kurogane. It wasn't as if the false cheer was fooling him, and so when Fai half-turned back to address him, he let the resentment he felt show openly. "You shouldn't," he informed him.

"Someone's got to protect your ass," Kurogane argued.

"You'll die," Fai replied, because they would, because Fai was certain he would and there would be no one left to save anyone then.

"Not if we kill him first."

Fai had to wonder at the arrogance of that statement. Did Kurogane really have no concept of just how powerful Ashura was now? How could he really seem so certain that there was even a chance that even if they were to defeat Ashura, they wouldn't kill themselves in the process?

Fai had to wonder at his own arrogance. How was his own plan any different from what Kurogane was proposing to him now? And was there really any difference between dying at Ashura's hand by Fai's side, or dying at Ashura's hand after he had failed? Maybe the two of them weren't so different and Kurogane just wanted to get it over with as badly as Fai did.

And Fai was so tired of fighting. "There are preparations to be made," he said, because he wasn't going to invite Kurogane to come, but he wasn't going to stop him if he did.

"Then make them," Kurogane replied. "We'll go when you're ready."

Fai walked away then, mentally tallying how many books he could appropriate from the record tent, and how many stones he'd need to enchant to make up the difference, and how many extra stones he wanted to make Kurogane carry just to spite him before he escaped his

influence for good. Fai wouldn't kill him, but there were far too many coincidences now to rationalize trusting him again.

All at once, Fai realized that there was a way to ascertain Kurogane's loyalties, and it was something he could do that very night. It would mean tipping his own hand, but if Kurogane was truly not a friend, it was better to know now than during the upcoming battle. The further he got from Kurogane the more certain Fai was that this was the best route to take. It was best to get started now. There was so much for him to prepare.

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Once again, Fai was late to return to the tent, notebooks tucked under one arm, and what Kurogane could only identify as disdain on his features in the low light for the brief moment Fai's eyes met his. Fai didn't waste any time breaking his attention away to focus instead on turning down his cot without so much as a huff.

Kurogane didn't play along. "Is that your answer?"

"Answer?" Fai scoffed. "I didn't know there was a question."

"You're mad," was the obvious answer. Mad about the deception, mad about the seal, mad about not just letting him walk away and die without giving anyone the chance to help.

"Mad doesn't begin to cover it," Fai muttered and Kurogane wasn't sure for a moment if he knew he'd actually said it out loud. Fai then breathed in, held it a beat, and released it in the same pattern Kurogane himself did when he was stopping himself from lashing out. "Just go to sleep, Kurogane."

He would have loved to — Fai wasn't the only one of them who was tired — but nothing good would come of letting the situation fester. "Not until we discuss —"

"There's nothing to discuss," Fai continued in the same monotone, still fussing with the blankets, and Kurogane almost wished that he'd just yell at him instead. "You, Ashura, Tomoyo — all of you do whatever you want and tell me whatever I need to hear to keep me doing what you want." And Kurogane knew that was the last thing he or Tomoyo meant to do, but he wasn't sure it was even possible to convince Fai otherwise at this point. "Well, I'm done. I'm going to figure out how to stop Ashura on my own, and I will go and stop him on my own, and I don't need you or anyone else to manipulate me into doing it."

"You can't seriously think we've just been manipulating you this whole time," Kurogane ground out around a sneer.

"Oh please!" Fai threw the notebooks down with a harsh slap, glaring at Kurogane over one shoulder. "Tell me: what else am I supposed to think?"

And that was the crux of it, because Kurogane did not want to tell Fai what to think — Kurogane could eat tactics for breakfast, but Fai was clever in ways Kurogane hadn't imagined. There was no point in telling Fai what to think, because he probably already thought it and was five topics ahead by now. Kurogane needed Fai as an ally more than Fai needed him — that Kurogane was sure of. Still, he couldn't let the situation stand. "That we're on your side!"

"You?" Fai shot back, incredulously, "On my side?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes!" Kurogane asserted, fight or flight reflex forcing him to stand, but Fai didn't do anything of the sort in return. Instead, he studied Kurogane for a lingering moment, and Kurogane wasn't sure what he was looking for or seeing, but he hoped at least that it wasn't enough to make him quit their small team for good.

Then, Fai rubbed his thumb against his forefinger as he plopped into a seated position on his cot, dispelling the illusion that had hid his staff and the two cards in his hand from Kurogane's sight. Fai turned his hand so Kurogane could see Libra there with Illusion, and while he didn't smile, his expression was no longer hard. "You're telling the truth," Fai murmured after a sigh, setting the cards aside to pull off his boots, staff resting in the crook of one elbow, "Or at least you think you are."

Well, that was one way to fix this, Kurogane figured, though that didn't mean he approved. Whatever Fai had been doing all evening had been a drain on the little power he had managed to regenerate, and he didn't need to be spending more. "You shouldn't be wasting magic like that in your condition."

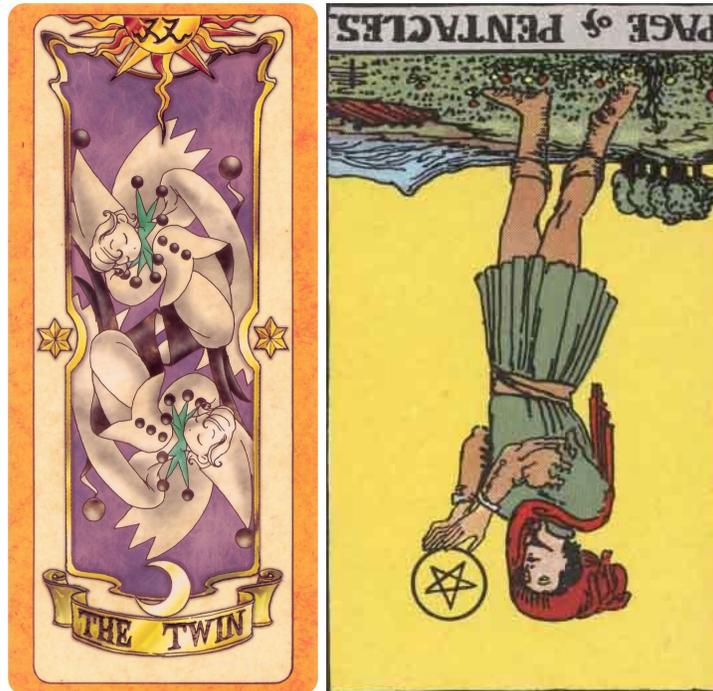
"You've got a funny idea of what constitutes a waste," Fai returned, setting his chin in his free hand and casting his eyes to one side. "Knowing who your friends are is not a waste."

Kurogane couldn't argue with that, so he crossed his arms where he was and matched Fai's game of look-away. "So what? You forgive me now?"

"No," Fai said without any hesitation, before pulling up one corner of his sheets and sliding into the cot, "So make sure you don't do it again." It was only then that Fai dismissed the staff, and as Kurogane thought he would, Fai slipped into sleep almost instantly without the magic of the Clow propping him up.

Kurogane's response to that was for his ears alone.

## The Twin



Fai ended up keeping his promise to return to Yukito for healing after all, and when he emerged from the tent, he was not at all surprised to see not just Kurogane waiting for him, but Tomoyo, Sakura, and Syaoran as well. Letting Kurogane come was one thing, bringing the children along was an entirely different matter. “You can’t come with us,” Fai decided, attempting to be stern.

It was Tomoyo who stepped forward and took Fai’s hands in her own. “I know we can’t fight with you,” Tomoyo acknowledged, meeting Fai’s stare with a gentle one of her own, “But we’d like to support you for as long as we can.”

Behind her, Sakura and Syaoran voiced their agreement and Fai couldn’t help but feel incredibly fond. “What do your dreams tell you?” he asked, because maybe Tomoyo knew something that he didn’t.

Maybe she did, because she only smiled at him, “That right now, what you need most are friends.”

Kurogane must have known it was a losing battle, because he shook his head at them both. “We’re going to need a bigger truck.”

Yukito was only too happy to fork over the keys to an SUV and help them lash fuel canisters to the back, and an hour later, they were rumbling down the road, Sakura of all people driving

(everyone agreed Fai still needed to rest and that Kurogane might as well, too, and between the three teens, Sakura was the most confident driver). This left Kurogane (needing the most legroom) in the passenger seat, Tomoyo behind him, Syaoran beside her, and Fai taking advantage of Sakura's lack of height for legroom for himself on the driver side.

Syaoran spent a good portion of this leg of the trip after conversation died down trying to look out windows without seeming to be staring at anyone and generally just looking awkward trying to do so, when he seemed to finally gather himself up a bit to look at Fai while he picked up his messenger bag from the floor of the car. "Uh, Pr— Fai?"

Fai didn't keep the moderate surprise off his face as he turned from the window himself. "Yes?"

Syaoran visibly attempted not to fidget. "You're going to fight the guy who caused all this, right?"

"Kurogane and I are, yeah," he confirmed.

Syaoran still looked a little uncertain as he dug around his bag for something. "I didn't tell anyone I was taking this," he prefaced apologetically.

Curiosity piqued, Kurogane glanced back at them while Fai's eyebrows reached new heights. "Taking what?"

"This," Syaoran admitted sheepishly as he pulled a small box from his bag. It didn't seem to be anything special, except for the small lock on the front suggesting otherwise. "It's an artifact from the site," Syaoran explained as he fished through a couple pockets before coming up with the key. "It survived the cataclysm, and — well — "

It was when the box popped open that Fai could feel it — gentle waves of a magic so very much like his own but not quite the same.<sup>109</sup> His heart ached with familiarity even before he caught a glimpse of the item inside: a necklace, and one he had seen recently in a memory within a dream. It was something his mother had once worn, and Fai was so enraptured at the fact that it had survived when everything else had turned to dust that he almost missed Syaoran's ramblings.

" — It had to have been powerful to do that when nothing else did, and the magic in it feels a lot like yours so it should theoretically be compatible enough that you should be able to use it without hurting yourself, and I figure you could use all the power you can get and if anyone should have the right to take it, it's you. And I really hope I didn't overstep or make assumptions or violate any rites you have by taking it this way but — "

"Syaoran," Fai cut in softly, taking the box with both hands. "This is wonderful. Thank you."

Focused on the necklace as he was, Fai didn't see the way Syaoran beamed his way, or the curious stares he was receiving from everyone else. Carefully, Fai took the silver chain in his

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<sup>109</sup> It's actually more similar to Fai's than Yuui's.

hands and brought it over his head, lowering it as if it were something immensely fragile until it rested against his neck and the cerulean stone against his breast. Of its own volition, the stored magic began to seep into him, warm against his chest and settling almost as though it were a living thing cuddling up against his own core.<sup>110</sup>

Somehow, he just knew: Freya had worn this right until the end, when the blast had come and she had held the shields around Valeria to ensure it would go no further. She was the reason none of the neighboring nations were affected, and even with almost no warning, she had prevented Ashura from gaining her magic by moving all she could spare into this simple stone.

<sup>111</sup>

It was just a drop against the pond of power Ashura had gained in that one blow, but it had mattered — not to Ashura, but nearly 2 decades later to Fai. This gift of restorative magic would help his own to regenerate. Before, he had planned to divert them to Jade, as he had planned to do alone, so that he could come to his full power more quickly there. With this, they could avoid the extra trip, and stop Ashura that much sooner.

Within Fai, Hope grew stronger. His mother was one person, but she had done so much to stand against Ashura without even knowing the extent of the threat. Perhaps two knowledgeable people really could do even more.

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Of all the times for Earthy to emerge, it just had to be while Kurogane was behind a dune taking a shit. Cursing green and blue, Kurogane tracked the card as it (thankfully) went straight for Fai (instead of choosing to literally bite him in the ass), and as Fai in turn led it further away from the kids. That didn't stop Kurogane from wrapping up his business as quickly as possible, but at least he didn't have to give himself a hernia doing so. Fai was a capable magician; he could handle it.

Kurogane would regret that rationalization very quickly. When he rounded the dune, things happened in quick succession: Fai took down the dragon-like body of Earthy, and it hit the ground with significant force, one of its spines shearing off and rebounding back into the air. Tomoyo reacted quickly, building up a shield, and Kurogane knew in the pit of his stomach that this was similar to what Yuui must have seen all those years ago. (But Kurogane could not identify just where that thought had come from because he couldn't recall seeing anything like this. Was this how Fai had lost his memory? Why couldn't *he* remember?) The debris crashed into the incomplete shield, which buckled on one side, and then Kurogane couldn't see anything at all through the dust thrown in the air.

Fai reached them before Kurogane did, and Kurogane felt a bit of relief at that. Fai had always been their healer, even if he couldn't heal himself. The kids would be okay; Fai would heal them.

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<sup>110</sup> Having belonged to Freya, the magic responds to both Fai's and her desire to protect Yuui.

<sup>111</sup> I cannot emphasize this enough: Freya was a badass. See Appendix B.

Except, as Kurogane drew near and saw Tomoyo laying in the dirt (conscious but only barely), Fai was not healing at all. Sakura and Syaoran were fretting, and Fai had his shirt off and was pressing it against Tomoyo's side, his cousin looking even paler than ever, even as Kurogane saw red. "What the fuck are you doing? Heal her!"

Fai didn't even look at him, too focused on applying pressure to that one point and trying to determine if his attention was better served elsewhere. "I can't!"

"What do you mean you can't?" Kurogane raged.

"I can't!" Fai insisted, eyes wet and panicked and completely honest for the brief moment they met his, "I — My magic isn't compatible. It's — !"

"That can't be right," Kurogane muttered, uncomprehending, "Yuui was the one who could never — " Realization hit him all at once and Kurogane could only watch as Fai — no — *Yuui* nodded sadly.<sup>112</sup>

"I'm sorry," Yuui whispered.

Kurogane crouched down next to him, actively trying to distance himself from the growing sensation of panic. Tomoyo was getting paler. Her eyes were shut. Losing his head wouldn't help anyone. "How can I help?"

"You — " Yuui blinked rapidly, either chasing away tears or trying to sort through his racing thoughts, probably both. Kurogane didn't think he'd ever seen him at such a loss for words before. "We need a healer. She's losing a lot of blood. Someone's got to stop the bleeding or — " Yuui's breath caught in his throat, and Kurogane could see the wheels turning in his head as he put together a plan. "Kurogane, take over."

Kurogane did, pressing both hands in seamlessly as Yuui pulled his own away, grimacing at just how soaked through the shirt was. "What's the plan, mage?" Kurogane asked as Yuui placed his hands on Tomoyo's shoulders instead, reaching in and through her body.

"We just need to stop the bleeding," Yuui rattled off almost feverishly, breaths coming faster and faster with each passing moment. "Doctors do that all the time without a healer. If I can just plug it up, somehow — just until we can get her to help. I don't have a needle, but maybe some kind of organic material could..." And Yuui moved his hands to the dirt, pushing his magic through that instead, reading even through the vehicle several yards away. "No — that's too far off. We just — all we have is *sand!*"

Yuui's hands flew to his hair, then, leaving streaks of blood and grit there, but Kurogane doubted the man knew or even cared at this point. "Sand, sand, what is sand? Silica — silicone!" At that moment, Yuui thrust his hands back into the sand and his magic gathered, having a distinct purpose. Kurogane and the other two could only trust that he knew what he was doing as

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<sup>112</sup> Kurogane is the last to know. Yuui knew after Sand.

transformative magic worked its way through the grains and carried the result up into Tomoyo. Swiftly, the flow of blood slowed to a halt, and though Tomoyo's life force was weak, it grew steady.

Yuui nearly doubled over on himself, trying to regain a semblance of control over his emotions again, even as he reached for the key. "I think that will hold for now. Can — does anyone have a signal?" It was a stupid question — while the camp had a satellite-linked tower, the ones in Ceres had been destroyed — but Sakura, Syaoran, and Kurogane checked anyway. That didn't seem to stop Yuui, who picked himself up, not even bothering to wipe off his hands, and brought forth Fly. "Sakura, I need you to enter a dream and tell Yukito to expect us. Can you do that?"

"I'll try," Sakura assured him with a nod, and Kurogane knew that was the best she could promise. She had an affinity, otherwise Dream wouldn't have targeted her days ago, but almost no training. It would take a miracle for her to lure Yukito into a dream at this distance to inform him. Yuui seemed to accept that, and he balanced himself on the staff before reaching forward wordlessly. Kurogane understood and gingerly lifted Tomoyo into his arms. "Is that safe?" Sakura asked fretfully.

"I know what I'm doing," Yuui assured her, and Kurogane nodded at that. He had no doubt that between his own magic and the months of practice, Yuui was more than capable of ferrying Tomoyo with him on Fly. It would be the quickest way.

But it meant the rest of them would have no choice but to stay. "Take care of her," Kurogane ordered, not because he didn't believe Yuui would, but because he felt he had to say something and anything else that came to mind was too dangerous or fragile for this moment.

Yuui met his stare directly, and Kurogane could only wonder how he had ever thought that these eyes were Fai's before. "I will," he assured him, already rising into the air. "I'll be in touch!"

As Yuui shot off into the distance faster than Kurogane had thought possible, Sakura settled herself comfortably on the ground far away from the dark stain in the sand, Syaoran murmured something to her that may have been a spell, a reassurance, or a lullabye, and Kurogane, unable to do anything else, resolved himself to wait.

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Sakura had dropped into sleep swiftly, and Kurogane was optimistic that she would be able to reach Yukito if only just because of that. It was Syaoran, after several minutes of darting his eyes back and forth across Sakura as if he was reading a book, that offered confirmation: "I think she did it," he announced quietly.

Kurogane didn't move from where he had seated himself, barely bothering to glance their way. Even though Yuui and Tomoyo had moved beyond his range to track, he kept his senses outstretched, just in case a threat fell into his range. He didn't protect Fai, and he didn't protect Tomoyo, but he'd be damned before he let anything happen to these two as well. "You can tell?"

Syaoran nodded. "I can read things," he admitted. "What they are, what they do, how something can interact with another." It made sense, then, why Syaoran would be head of research out here. With a power like that, he had an edge on figuring out exactly what the effect was, and was well-equipped to figure out how to fight it. It must have been how he'd known to fetch the necklace before they left as well. "She's made a connection to someone, and she's a little relieved. If she didn't reach Yukito, it must be someone at the camp."

It sounded right enough to Kurogane that he didn't question it. "Can you communicate with her?"

"Not directly," Syaoran answered, still never looking up from Sakura as if afraid he might miss an important sign. "I could maybe send a feeling and read how she responds to it, but I don't want to risk breaking the connection prematurely." Kurogane hummed an acknowledgement to that, and silence stretched between them for a short while before Syaoran spoke again. "The connection is over, but she's not coming out of her sleep."

"Probably staying in dreams to make it easier for her to be contacted," Kurogane supplied. He had many dreamwalkers in his family, and though he didn't have the power himself, he knew plenty about it. "If Yukito is a dreamwalker as well, he'll be able to tell her when he's done healing Tomoyo." Because Kurogane refused to believe that it wasn't a "when" instead of an "if".

"That makes sense," Syaoran agreed, adjusting his sitting position without breaking his gaze. "I hope Fai makes it in time."

Kurogane let out a breath, but decided it wasn't his secret to tell. Just how long had Yuui known he wasn't Fai, and how could Kurogane been so blind as to miss that? Yes, there were circumstances that would allow a twin to stand in for a magical contract, but the simplest solution was to require no substitution at all. So why hadn't he thought of that before?<sup>113</sup>

He believed Yuui when he'd said he'd had no memories before Ashura had found him, and he'd sounded sincere when he'd been confused about his relationship with Yuui and how he was apparently accessing his memories. It was impossible to fathom the number of reasons Ashura might have had to give him his brother's name, not the least of them simply mixing the identical twins up. Kurogane doubted that was the truth of it.

Something about all of this reeked of magical interference, and he was of a mind to grill Yuui for whatever it was he knew once he returned, but for now, all he was doing was chasing his own thoughts in circles and getting nowhere fast.

He needed another opinion, and Syaoran could possibly offer one; it was not his secret to tell.

"Everything," Sakura murmured without warning, sounding as if in a trance, eyes still shut, "will be alright."

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<sup>113</sup> It's more of Fai's interference.

Kurogane believed her.

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Yuui didn't know how long he sat there just outside of Yukito's tent. One moment he was landing fast enough that even now he was feeling the pain in his ankle, and the next Yukito had taken Tomoyo from him, magic already working in his hands, and disappearing behind the flap.<sup>114</sup> He figured Sakura must have been successful, if Yukito had not bothered wasting time with questions or reassurances. That was a little encouraging. That his emotions were still too shaken up for him to be able to focus on tracking Tomoyo's life force to see if she was recovering was not.

He should have never allowed the children to come with them. He'd known it was dangerous, but he'd caved anyway. Syaoran could have just as easily passed off the necklace here in camp. It had been foolish to bring them into danger like that, and now Tomoyo was possibly paying for his mistake with her life. He should have been firmer. He should have forced them to stay behind.

Yuui was sure Kurogane would never forgive him for this.

There was nothing else Yuui could do, though, except to keep an anxious vigil. Time passed, but he wasn't sure how much. No one attempted to speak with him, and that was fine. He wasn't sure what he could say even if someone did. There weren't any questions he could answer. He knew first aid, but he couldn't answer just where he had pulled the idea of silicone from, or how he had been able to recall a chemical formula that would work in that situation — one for which all the necessary elements had been in the sand below.

He'd studied alchemy — was quite good at it, even — but what happened in the desert was something else entirely.<sup>115</sup>

He wasn't Fai. He'd had an inkling with the last memory he'd received, but the events of today and Kurogane's actions had proved it. His memories told him that Fai had been a healer; Kurogane confirmed it. Since he was the twin that couldn't heal — was the twin charged with the Clow — that made him Yuui.

And Kurogane's outburst had proven that he was the blank space, just as Yuui had suspected. Not only that, but Kurogane also remembered. Whatever memory block that was still concealing Kurogane's presence wasn't affecting the man itself, and it wasn't affecting Yuui's knowledge of any of it. Either that was one sloppy spell, or it had a purpose that Yuui could only guess at.

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<sup>114</sup> His ankle has some permanent damage from not caring for it properly in the early chapters of this book, making it liable to give out on him more easily than his other one.

<sup>115</sup> This was a combination of Fai knowing silicone would be a good alternative, Yuui's natural affinity for air (knowledge), and the cards working together to bring the information related to the chemical formula to Yuui's mind.

“Hey,” Yukito’s voice at his side was so quiet and careful that Yuui was almost afraid to look up and find sorrow there, but he had to know, and so after a shaky breath, he glanced up, and found Yukito’s smile. “She’s not awake yet, but do you want to see her before you wash up?”

Yuui blinked owlishly before looking down on himself with disgust. He was still shirtless with blood all over his front and his hands caked in a disgusting muddy mix of that and dirt. No wonder no one had approached him. “I — ”

“Come,” Yukito bade, reaching down to offer Yuui a hand as if he wasn’t bothered at all. “It’ll help.”

Yuui took that hand with some disbelief and let Yukito pull him upright and lead him inside where Tomoyo was resting. Her coloring was better, and Yukito must have taken a moment to change her clothes because they were clean, and Yuui could only be thankful for that. He wasn’t sure if he could have stood to see her as bloody as he was just now. She looked for all the world like she was simply sleeping. Was Sakura still sleeping? Did she know?

Yukito’s voice startled him when it came: “You did well. That silicone patch saved her life, and you didn’t do any additional damage getting it in her. The material was so sterile there wasn’t even a risk of infection.”

“I made it from sand,” Yuui commented, feeling disconnected from his body as he did so.

Yukito nodded at that. “Even microbes can’t exist outside a body in the AUZ. Using the sand was very clever. I’m not sure I would have thought of that,” he praised, and all of Yuui’s feelings seemed to cave in on himself at once. He’d nearly killed her, but he’d saved her. His quick thinking saved her life, but he wasn’t even sure those thoughts were his thoughts. So many people had died so quickly and he hadn’t cried for any of them, but none of them were close to him like Tomoyo was, and when Yukito wrapped his arms around him, Yuui tried to pull away because he was absolutely disgusting and he didn’t want to see any of that get on Yukito, but Yukito only held tighter, and Yuui didn’t know the last time anyone who wasn’t Ashura had held him that way, and the dam inside him burst.

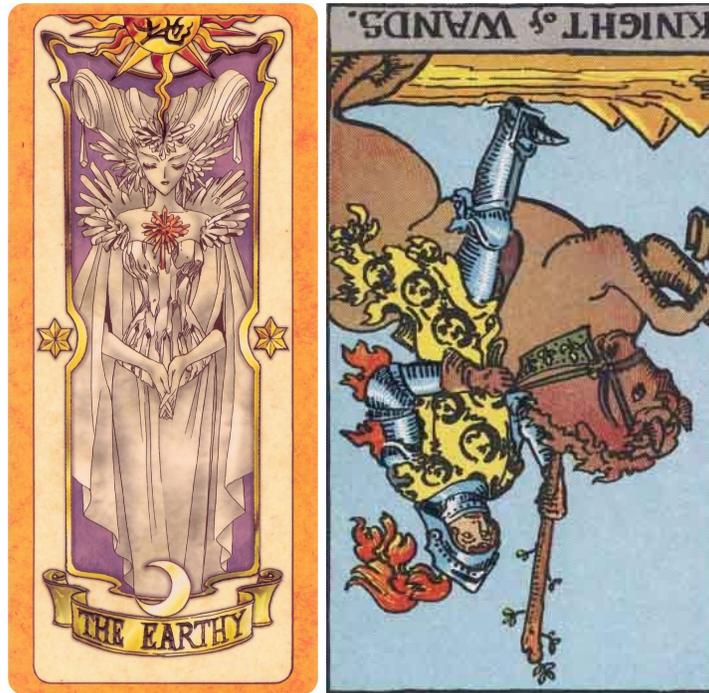
Yuui sobbed and it wasn’t a pretty thing. He was covered in dirt and grime and he didn’t even really know Yukito, but the man was there and comforting him, neither of them speaking. Yukito held him tight like he could tether Yuui to his body with the contact alone and all Yuui could do was clutch him back and try not to collapse to the floor.

He felt raw and disgusting and embarrassed and accepted for all of that, and it took much longer than he would ever admit to pull himself together and finally stop crying.

When Yuui’s breathing evened out was when Yukito finally eased up, and though his clothes were quite possibly as ruined as Yuui’s own were, he still smiled. “She’ll probably wake tomorrow. *You*, however, need a shower now.”

Yuui did not doubt that one bit.

## The Earthy



“They made it on time,” Sakura was saying even before she opened her eyes. Yukito was much better at this than she was. All she’d been able to do in the dream was show Yukito what she’d seen and heard. Yukito had been able to communicate clearly. It was something Sakura could aspire to, one day. “They’re both okay.”

Syaoran relaxed at the news, but Sakura could feel the relief from Kurogane as if it was a physical thing lapping against her senses. For all he tried to seem tough and uncaring on the outside, he really was nothing more than a big mama bear underneath. “So the idiot..?”

“Yukito’s helping him clean up,” she relayed, “And then I guess he’s heading back here with more supplies.”

Kurogane grumped and crossed his arms. “What he should be doing is resting.”

“There’s no time,” Sakura responded awkwardly, twisting her hands in her lap. This wasn’t news from Yukito, per se. Sakura was naturally more a dreamseer than a walker, and she had shared with Yukito what she had seen between when they first met and when he came back. They’d both agreed on the interpretation. “The battle is coming, and it would be better if it was away from the camp.”

Sakura couldn’t help but fidget as Kurogane studied her. The man was intense if nothing else. It was Syaoran who spoke first, though, winding his fingers through her own: “What do we do?”

Sakura couldn't help a small shrug. "We wait. Fai will pick up Kurogane, and we should be close enough here to be able to report back whatever happens, but far enough away that we'll be safe."<sup>116</sup>

"I don't like that 'should'," Kurogane grumbled, not to Sakura's surprise.

"There are many paths forward to the future. Nothing is for certain until it happens. But," she added, almost as an afterthought, "I just can't help feeling that everything will be alright."

It was more than simple optimism or hope. It was a surety that was shot through every dream she'd had since she'd met Tomoyo.<sup>117</sup> They would all make it out of this intact. She wouldn't settle for anything less.

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Yuui didn't think he'd been as uncertain about anything in his life as he was swinging back to pick up Kurogane. Taking the man with him was a massive risk. On one hand, Kurogane might be the edge Yuui needed to beat Ashura, but on the other, if they both died there, no one else in the world had the knowledge or experience they had that would give them as good a chance as they had now. That was the only reason Yuui had agreed to let Syaoran and Sakura stay where they were. If Yuui and Kurogane failed, whatever those two perceived could make the difference in future battles.

The world would have whatever Sakura and Syaoran learned, and everything Yuui had. There hadn't been time to write things down, but he had taken a few minutes to transfer every memory, relevant theory, and hypothesis about the situation he had into one of his notebooks. He'd stash it in the SUV for the kids to find if they failed — it was the least he could do.

If he didn't fail, he just hoped the kids would heed the scrawled note on the front and leave it be. Some of the things he'd included were personal to say the least.

He was still feeling fragile, but lighter as he sailed through the air, and he spent the flight making use of every physiological and psychological trick he knew of to fortify himself. He couldn't afford to be weak now. By this time tomorrow, either he would be dead, or Ashura would be dead, or both, and one moment's hesitation could turn the tide.

Whether he was prepared or not, the trio came up fast, and Yuui touched down with as much visible optimism as he could muster. There wasn't much trading off to do; the kids had everything they needed in the car, and Yuui had everything he and Kurogane would need in his pack. He only stopped off long enough to exchange reassurances and a hug for Sakura, and to

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<sup>116</sup> That was why Earthy emerged there. It wanted them to stop at the best location between the camp and Luval.

<sup>117</sup> Exposure to someone else with the power of dreams helped Sakura's own abilities develop, similar to being under an apprenticeship.

hide the notebook with the excuse of relieving himself, before he was in the air again with Kurogane at his back.

“So what’s the plan?” Kurogane asked, raising his voice against the wind.

“I get us as close as I can without him detecting us, and we hoof it from there,” he replied. “Then we wait at the ridge at Luval until first light. That way we’ll have the high ground and the sun at our backs.”

“Do you really think that will help?”

Yuui did not begrudge Kurogane his dubious tone. In a fight where both parties could fly, there was little point in a high ground. “I’ll take any advantage we can get.”

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It was with a cautious judgement of Ashura’s effective range of power that Yuui brought them to the ground at last. It was closer than he’d expected, and he didn’t think that they’d have to hurry across the terrain. Yuui judged the start of the ridge’s slope to be less than 2 miles away, and then they would have all night to ascend. They could take their time, cover their tracks, and conserve some energy at least.<sup>118</sup> “Last chance to retreat,” Yuui offered warily, but Kurogane did not back down.

“Fat chance,” he said instead, and it was with that that they began the hike.

For a long time, they marched in silence, not for fear of detection, but for lack of anything to say. They could have attempted a more concrete strategy, but Yuui had never seen Ashura fight, and the gaps of knowledge they had in his recently discovered abilities made any attempt at planning worthless. They could have traded jokes or swapped stories, but the heaviness of the task ahead made any attempt at lightening the situation seem insurmountable.

Finally, after they had made it some way up the slope and were navigating a narrower passage, Yuui broke the silence. “Am I in your memories?”

“Yeah,” Kurogane replied cautiously, to which Yuui nodded.

“You’re not in mine,” he admitted, and he could feel Kurogane’s eyes at his back. “I can hear you, but whenever I look at you, the vision goes black.”

“That’s weird,” Kurogane commented thoughtfully and it was several paces later that he spoke again, “Ashura couldn’t perceive me before. Tomoyo said it was because of a protection, and that explains why I couldn’t get close, but..”

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<sup>118</sup> Yukito was able to heal Yuui’s ankle some, making him able to do this hike in the first place, but the weakness is permanent.

“But the power difference between her and Ashura is too great,” Yuui continued after Kurogane trailed off, “He should have been able to sense you, if not see you.”<sup>119</sup> The conclusion was obvious, but strange. “I know we decided it was Ashura tampering with my memories, but I don’t think he’d conceal you from himself as well.”

“You think it’s that other party you brought up before?”<sup>120</sup> That had been a long time ago, now, back after Return had shown Yuui so many things that he still barely understood.

“It has to be,” Yuui decided. “If Ashura had tampered with my memories at all, that means he would have seen them, but if someone else hid you from me first, that meant he wouldn’t have seen you, either.”

“So someone’s protecting me,” Kurogane agreed, catching up to walk beside Yuui now that they were clear of that narrow spot. “Who? And why?”

“I don’t know,” Yuui admitted. “But we should use it. If Ashura doesn’t know you exist, and can’t perceive you, you’ve got the tactical advantage.”

“For one shot,” Kurogane cautioned. “Once I hit the bastard, he’ll know something’s up and do something about it.”

“Then you’ll just have to make sure that shot counts,” Yuui concluded. “Think you can just run support until then?”

It wasn’t in Kurogane’s nature to sit back and let someone else fight the fight, but this wasn’t an average street brawl. He and Yuui had fought together enough by now that he was fairly confident he could hide his moves inside the other’s for a while at least. It might fool Ashura long enough to make a difference. With so much at risk, Kurogane didn’t feel he had much choice. “I’ll do it, but I’m stepping in if he corners you.”

Yuui shrugged at that, and his expression then wasn’t quite a grin, but it was a break from the grave expression he’d been wearing ever since Tomoyo had gone down. “Then I’ll just have to be careful not to get caught.”

“You’re a slippery fuck,” Kurogane assured him, speaking from much experience. “Trying to hold you down’s like trying to grab the wind.”

“Ohhhh,” Yuui sang out, suddenly loud and dripping with innuendo, not willing to miss what could easily be his last chance to mess with Kurogane. “I’m a slippery fuck, huh?”

Kurogane blushed clear to his ears. “Like I would know!”

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<sup>119</sup> See Chapter 20: The Lock.

<sup>120</sup> See Chapter 16: The Dash.

“Want to find out?” Yuui asked, not at all joking, but by the way Kurogane growled at that, he clearly thought he was, so Yuui carried on in an easy tone. “We’ll have a couple hours to camp before daybreak,” he bargained, “Might as well have one last go if the world might end anyway.”

Kurogane studied him as they kept marching forward, reading something Yuui couldn’t perceive from the situation, and exactly what he was thinking was a complete mystery when he made his decision: “I don’t want it to be like that.”<sup>121</sup>

Yuui could have asked Kurogane exactly what he meant then, but Kurogane wasn’t taking the bait — either the teasing or the sex — and he could respect that. Kurogane rejecting the proposal didn’t feel like a rejection of himself, so he couldn’t even rightfully say it stung. The offer was there, and declined. Wasn’t the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last, though Yuui took a little pride in admitting he’d turned down more than had turned him down. Still, it had been a while; life had been hectic since the Clow had come into the picture. With the conversation stalled, Yuui shrugged and continued with this new thread. “How long has it been for you?”

“How long has what been?” Kurogane grumped.

“Since you last had sex?” Yuui asked like it was obvious. When Kurogane didn’t immediately respond, Yuui went first, just so Kurogane couldn’t accuse him of just fishing for information to embarrass him. “It’s been since last Spring for me. Almost a year, can you believe it?”

Yuui had admitted it with a bit of a laugh, but it seemed the easy mood was not contagious, because Kurogane’s scowl only deepened. “We’re getting off the subject.”

“Alright, alright,” Yuui appeased. He didn’t want to fight Kurogane now, not really. “How about what you miss most about Japan?”

That topic, at least, did not get shot down immediately, and Kurogane’s grimace then was much less serious. “The tea here sucks.”

Yuui couldn’t help but burst out laughing at that, but Kurogane didn’t take a swing at him for it. Instead, at least the corner of the mouth that Yuui could see turned upwards and Yuui was willing to call that the beginnings of a grin. Once he had himself back under control, he mulled his own question over in his head. “I miss Ceresian festivals. Everything’s just been so serious lately. When this is all over, the first thing I want to do is get a bunch of people together and party until we pass out!”

Yuui expected a barb about how he couldn’t be serious about something if his life depended on it, but that remark didn’t come. Instead Kurogane thought for just a moment before deciding, “It suits you.” A few paces later, Kurogane had made up his mind. “When this is over, I’m taking a long, hot bath.”

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<sup>121</sup> Kurogane is only 1 romp away from being a big ol’ virgin. As he’s also a romantic, he wants their first time to be special.

Yuui boomed at that, not because he didn't crave one after spending so long on the run, but because it was boring. "Everyone wants food and baths and sleep. What's the one thing you *really* want to do? You just stopped the end of the world, what do you do to celebrate?"<sup>122</sup>

Again, Kurogane met his eyes like Yuui should already know, and again, the moment passed without him learning anything. Instead Kurogane pointed ahead to a relatively flat area. "We should take a break while we've got the chance."

"Yeah," Yuui agreed with not a small amount of hesitation. It wasn't like Kurogane to avoid the subject. Maybe it was just nerves, but after a moment Yuui decided that if Kurogane wanted space, then he could have his space.

It wasn't like they were really friends or anything. Once Ashura was dead, Kurogane would go home, and that would be that.<sup>123</sup>

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The hardest part was the wait. Yuui hadn't been wrong when he'd said they would have a couple hours to stake out the area before the sun would rise. From the safety of the dampening field Yuui had generated, they peaked over the ridge, and Ashura was down in the valley, sitting on a throne of stone, seeming to gaze out in their general direction.<sup>124</sup> From how far up they were, it was impossible to know if he had spotted them and was staring them down, or had simply parked himself to watch the sunrise.

More than once, Yuui thought to break the silence with an apology. "I'm sorry I let Tomoyo get hurt." "I'm sorry I couldn't heal her." "I'm sorry I'm not really Fai." — all of them were true, and all of them felt like they would start another fight, and Yuui couldn't really afford that just now. He needed Kurogane at his side just a little longer, and then Kurogane could beat his ass to his heart's content if they both survived.

The world turned. The sun peeked up from over the horizon, and its first rays shone on the Ceresian sea, then slowly crawled their way through the beach. Were the docks still there, morning would have come for them, but as it was, the edge of dawn crept away the shadows until even Ashura himself was bathed in its light.

Yuui stood and dropped the field. It was time.

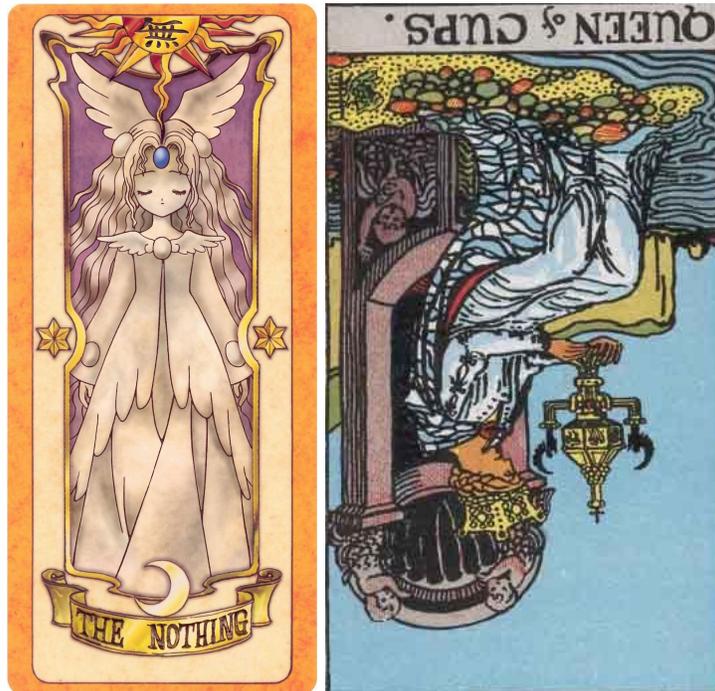
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<sup>122</sup> "You." — I'm kidding, we get the answer to that in Chapter 29: The Hope.

<sup>123</sup> Kurogane's habit of "I don't want to make a move just for one of us to die today and miss the other for the rest of his life" does nothing to help poor, loveless Yuui.

<sup>124</sup> Up to you what he's thinking. I imagine he's playing cards with Nothing in his head to pass the time.

## The Nothing



Yuui didn't bother to maintain the illusion that he had the element of surprise. Ashura was mad, not stupid, and he should have detected the distortion the dampening field created long before sunrise. Ashura had been waiting, just as Yuui had, and Yuui did not want to have this fight in the dark.

Truthfully, he did not want to have this fight at all.

In the morning light, it was clear that Ashura was looking right at him, but Yuui didn't allow that simple fact to unnerve him. "You know why I'm here!"

"Of course," Ashura called back, jovial, as if this was a happy reunion. "We must end this, young Fai."

Hearing Ashura as he had always been gave Yuui a speck of hope that he didn't want to entertain for the certainty that he would see it crushed. "Will you come peacefully?"

"No," Ashura replied, as if it were of no consequence at all. "You will stop me here, or I will fill this world with Nothing. So, won't you grant my wish, Fai?"

That was all the warning Yuui had before Ashura sent one of those dark blasts his way, but Ashura was still a long ways off and so Yuui had plenty of time once he was clear to see how it

ate away the very rocks where he had been just moments ago. It wasn't just life Ashura would take now, but everything he touched.

He tried to keep that in the front of his mind. "Why? If you do this, there will be nothing left even for you!"

Ashura's smile gave nothing away. "I will see the Phoenix rise."

"So he is mad," Yuui muttered only loud enough for Kurogane to hear. Ashura intended to raise the dead, that was the only explanation. The gathering of power, the mark he'd left on him as a child, Yukito's warning of someone feeding off him — it was all beginning to make sense. "See sense, my King! The dead are gone, you can't bring anyone back. You must stop — !"

Yuui evaded the next attack with a smaller margin. Soon, Ashura would become serious and one of them would close the gap. He needed a plan by then. He needed —

"If you won't fight him, I will!" Kurogane called from a formation somewhere to Yuui's right, and Yuui scarcely dared to glance that way. He had to act.

Another blast, faster this time. Ashura was getting impatient. "Come now, Fai. Have I not taught you to eliminate all who would threaten your people? Surely, I have established myself as a threat."<sup>125</sup>

"I have no people!" Yuui shot back angrily. How could Ashura wipe out two entire nations and treat it like it was nothing more than a game? "You've killed them all!"

"Then not only have you learned nothing," Ashura taunted, and the next moment, he was right before Yuui, so quickly Yuui had scarcely seen him move, "You've already failed."

"Time!"

Yuui took in a breath, surprised that he was still alive, before coming to his senses and getting some distance from the frozen Ashura again. "You're supposed to be conserving your energy!"

Kurogane was taking none of his shit. "And you're supposed to be kicking his ass, not letting him get in your head! Now are you going to kill him or not?"

Yuui had time to grimace before the powers of Time slipped away and the fight was in motion again, Ashura's blast coming to existence where Yuui had just been. Ashura only seemed amused at the turn of events. "So you are willing to use them. Good!" He launched another of those blasts and Yuui had to wonder at why. Ashura knew as much magic as he did, if not more.

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<sup>125</sup> "Just fucking kill me already!"

So why only stick with one attack?<sup>126</sup> “But even with all the power of Clow, you could only ever hope to beat me to a draw.”

If Ashura knew about the Clow, that was one secret weapon Yuui no longer had. He had to end this, and fast, before Ashura tried to hit him at point blank again. Time was not a card to be used lightly. Yuui drew a card he could easily use at range. “Arrow!”

The volley was fast, and with each wave that forced Ashura back, Yuui advanced, but he couldn't escape the notion that this was too easy, and he found he was right when Ashura smiled, and another blast opened up before him, swallowing up the arrows, and it was with a shock Yuui found the card grow cold in his hand.

“That's one,” Ashura declared, switching to the offensive, but Yuui evaded the first blast and deflected the second with Erase — a strategy that worked only once, and the when the next struck, that card, too, fell cold and useless. “Two!”

If Ashura intended to destroy the cards one by one, Yuui wasn't going to play around to find out that he could. He had to finish this quickly. “Fiery, Shield!” For a moment, it looked like the combination would work, Ashura trapped inside with a fire that would burn him and consume the air, but Yuui did not allow himself to feel cocky and he wasn't too surprised when Ashura used his attack to consume those two cards as well.

“You'll have to do better than that, Fai!” Again, Ashura charged, and Yuui discarded the Clow as a strategy entirely. Clearly Ashura had the advantage over them if he could eliminate two of the most reliable cards at once. Yuui put aside the matter for later and drew lightning to his fingers instead, bypassing his more natural wind affiliation as something that would not be effective against whatever Ashura was now. He couldn't blow him away, but he doubted Ashura could do much harm fried to a crisp.<sup>127</sup>

Behind him, Kurogane took his cue, readying one of his energy attacks as well, and just as Ashura drew close enough that Yuui was sure he couldn't miss his mark, he shot his power forward. As he expected, Ashura brought up his magic to absorb the brunt of the attack, but electricity was flexible, and Yuui managed to arc enough over the radius to score a hit and Ashura was knocked backwards into the ground.

It wasn't over, but it was a promising start, and as Ashura picked himself off the ground, Yuui could see where the blood was welling up from his arm under his robes. Ashura was powerful, but not invincible. The problem with lightning attacks, aside from being damaging to the user without a conduit, was that they used a lot of power that was easily wasted either branching off in unproductive directions, or being absorbed by nonconductive materials. In order to be sure to

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<sup>126</sup> He would have been able to use them at the beginning of the possession, but Nothing's magic has absorbed it by now.

<sup>127</sup> This is a nod to Fai's lightning attacks in TRC.

hit his mark and reduce the waste, Yuui would have to get much closer to Ashura than he would like, or he would simply run out of steam before the job was done.

Hoping short bursts in and out of Ashura's defense would work, Yuui chose a card: "Dash!" Gathering energy to his fingers again, already feeling raw from the volume of destructive energy he'd been channelling through them, Yuui zipped right up to Ashura, fired, and rushed back out of range of Ashura's counterblast. He'd had a slight advantage of speed before, and the boost was not something Ashura was able to compensate for, it seemed, so Yuui repeated the action from different angles again and again in quick enough succession that Ashura was unable to get any more of his quips in, much to Yuui's relief. The shocks were smaller and less damaging so that Yuui did not risk frying himself in the process, but he could see them gradually wearing Ashura down, and so he kept at it.

That kind of speed is hard on the body, though, and as Yuui feared might happen, the ankle he'd hurt the day before gave out as he switched to a retreat, and so he kicked off with his other leg and used his own wind magic to further the distance of his jump and drew another card. "Fight!"

That card rushed forward and Yuui drew out another card. "Illusion!" It wouldn't hide Yuui's energy, but he and Ashura had been throwing attacks around that left residual energy and would make their senses fuzzy. That was enough to allow Yuui to mask his power enough, and with himself invisible, maybe Kurogane could get away with an attack or two himself.

Ashura, however, did not seem too concerned about losing sight of Yuui at all, even as he dispatched Fight just as easily as Yuui had thought he would. He simply stood where he was, guard not even apparently up, but who needed to block with their body when their magic could destroy anything it touched? Still, being cautious, Yuui waited until the last second to draw lightning into his hand —

And Ashura fired straight in his direction, with Yuui only just releasing the small amount he had built up for the attack to devour his lightning instead of him. Just to his left, Kurogane let off an attack of his own, only a blink behind Yuui's defensive strike, and that clipped Ashura's blast as well, striking ground just inches away from where Ashura stood. Ashura didn't even flinch.

"That was a good attempt," Ashura praised, not quite looking directly at where Yuui had settled still masked by Illusion, not able to precisely pin him down, "But I know you can do better."

Yuui knew Ashura had to just be goading him on intentionally, but he couldn't stop the anger from burning cold in his gut. Was all of this nothing more than a game to him? Did all those lives really mean nothing in the end?

"If you can't fight me with an intent to kill, then I will simply strike you down," Ashura continued, still calmly, as if they were discussing the upcoming Spring. "Then, when I consume your strength, there will be no force left on this world to stop me. Surely, you've figured that out by now?"

This was not the Ashura Yuui had known — that man was gone, if he'd ever existed at all. Yuui had been blind once, and Ashura had murdered again and again while Yuui had been oblivious. Then he'd been frozen, unwilling to act on what he could not bring himself to believe. And all the while, Ashura had taken more and more lives.

"If it's any consolation," Ashura began to pace forward slowly, regally, as he had done in Court every day of his reign, "I'll take your friends first. I know you would not wish for them to suffer in fear for long. I'll grant them that mercy, at least."

Yuui had to stop him here. There was no other acceptable option. Ashura would die here, or they would both die here.

"I think I'll go to Piffle next — "

The staff in Yuui's hands was hot when he leapt forward, focusing all his power and concentration on the spot he was aiming for on Ashura's back.

Ashura pivoted quickly, raising his arms.

And then, there was light.

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### 1988

When Queen Freya learned she was pregnant again, she had been overjoyed, as was everyone else in the know. It wasn't until it was discovered that she was pregnant with twins that questions began to arise. It had already been foretold that her line would only have 2 heirs this generation; having already given birth to one son, twins would have rendered the prophecy false. Kakyo's predictions had not been inaccurate yet, and so, worried that something was terribly wrong, Freya went to the Witch.

Yuuko confirmed her fears: only one of the twins would survive through childbirth. However, Freya knew that Yuuko's specialty was beyond simple predictions. Though Yuuko could not put off the death forever, she could stall it for a time, for a price.

Relieved that they would have more time to find a way to rid her children of the curse of death that surrounded them, even if it meant her reign would come to a premature end, Freya paid.

It was Ashura, however, who was tasked with finding the solution. His skill and power was higher, and Freya did not know when the appointed time would come that she would pass. It only made sense to let the one more likely to be able to fix things in the end take up the search.

At first, Ashura meant to discover the exact nature of the curse — because it had to be a curse of some kind, to condemn a child to death before he was born. Once he could identify it, they could find a way to undo it, or find a loophole around it, but through all his consultations and scrying, all that ever became clear to him was the symbol of the Phoenix. The context wasn't

clear — were one of the boys a Phoenix, or perhaps would their passing allow another to rise again — but there was one thing of which Ashura was certain as the years passed: Fai's power had failed to grow.

At birth, Fai and Yuui had been every way the equal of the other, but where Yuui's power grew as he aged, as did every other magician Ashura had ever heard of, Fai's had only been declining. If one of them were to die, Ashura had a feeling he knew exactly which one it was.

Ashura's own power had plateaued at his age, and when he considered that there were more powerful magicians out there — magicians who could cast a curse so strong even Ashura's own magic could not see it — the plain solution was that he would need more power. With that, he would be able to discern the curse, and bring an end to it.

Magic, he knew, was everywhere. There were no living things without because magic was the source of life — the very thing that separated the living from the dead — and not knowing how much longer he would have before the death they had set aside would come for his nephews, Ashura began to seek out more power the most efficient way he knew how.

At first, it had been a bush here, or a flower there, or sometimes an older tree no one would think strange to finally die off. He took the magic from them and brought it into his own. As time went on, and with no apparent progress being made, he took into the forest more often, siphoning the life from the area around him, accepting at first that there were insects now that he was robbing of life, not just the plants or fungi or single-celled organisms. It would be worth it in the end, he justified, just to not see his family taken from him. As desperation kicked in and Ashura began taking from larger and larger fields every time, he would find fish now dead, and birds, and mice, and frogs, and a part of him knew that there was something wrong — he wasn't himself; the scale of the destruction he was creating could not be justified for one life — but he found his actions slipping beyond his will until one day Ashura stripped an entire meadow of life, and though there was no body to be found, Ashura knew one of the lives he had taken in that blast had been that of a child.

For the first time in a while, Ashura found himself able to stop. This now went beyond plant and animal life. He had taken that of a human — he was a murderer now — and still something in the recesses of his mind assured him that it was all okay. As long as he found the answer and saved his nephews, everything else would be alright in the end.

It whispered that the Phoenix would rise. The Phoenix would undo all that had been done, so long as Ashura could save it first.<sup>128</sup>

Ashura knew it had to be a form of madness, that death could not be undone and that there was no magician left alive that was stronger than he was now. He should have been able to see past any curse in existence. That reasonably whatever it was that would take one of his nephews away, its manner was that of something very different from a curse.

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<sup>128</sup> Ashura essentially wound up with a magic addiction, not dissimilar to his fate in TRC.

Meanwhile, Freya had seen the death of the forests in the kingdom, and once the news reached her that it had taken a human life as well, she sealed off the borders. Whatever it was that had infected her lands, it would not spread to other nations. If the cause could be identified and the people screened, then evacuations could begin, but until then, she could not justify risking the entire world on the hope of saving her people as well.

Unbeknownst to her, whatever it was living within Ashura could slip through the shielding without raising alarms. Ashura continued to reign in Ceres, bar the moments when his control slipped, and he returned to Valeria to take life again. He found he couldn't tell anyone — what good would it have done? No magician alive could have stopped him now, and he was certain whatever was possessing him would kill anyone who came after him. It would be better for a force to realize it on their own, and come together to overwhelm him with sheer numbers. There was no other solution he could see, because he couldn't die yet — not until his family was safe.

The deaths proceeded slowly, often occurring months apart, until the new millennium began approaching. Quickly, Ashura found he would be missing multiple days in a row from his memory as a new force also began to grow within Valeria. It was almost as if whatever was controlling him was in competition with this hitherto unknown power, and they both grew at the same rate, so far as he could tell.

It couldn't be a good sign, and Ashura thought more than once to end this with his own hand, but time was running short, and Fai's power was nearly spent. Either he would find the solution, or Fai would die, and whichever was reached, Ashura could seek his own end then.

It was as if this very resignation had struck an accord with whatever it was living within him, and Ashura found himself aware and partially in control when a lightning attack cut through a pillar of earth and sent it crashing down on Fai.

The dust settled, and Ashura saw with knowledge he hadn't possessed before. There was Fai, magic all but gone, using a jacket in an attempt to stop the flow of blood from another child's chest. Around him were the Clow cards — this *thing* knew what they were — and beside him, the fluorite staff, and this had to be the solution. Clow's power could sustain Fai for his natural lifespan. Fai need not die here. All he had to do was gain mastery of the cards, and everyone who was left could survive.

All he had to do was defeat Nothing, and somehow, everything would be alright.

Except, Fai was not the master of these cards, and soon the body of the child Ashura was unfamiliar with vanished to somewhere beyond Ashura's senses, and Fai's lifeforce hovered without a body in the cup of Ashura's hands. The cards and staff were gone, returned to their true master, and all that was left was Fai, warm in the palms of his hands.

In that moment, Nothing took him again.

2000

“They’re all gone,” Yuui spoke as if in a daze, seeing nothing alive so far as he could see, sensing nothing alive in Valeria aside from himself, his uncle — or something that used his form — and this new warmth on his back. “You killed them.”

“I’ve taken them away,” Nothing agreed.

Yuui realized then there was still Hope. “Will they come back?”

“If you win.”

Yuui took a deep breath, held it, released it. Everything was riding on him, now. If he panicked, it would all be over. “I won’t lose. I can’t.”

Nothing, looking every bit like the Ashura he knew, smiled. “Then let’s begin.”

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Afterwards, Ashura had understood. He knew what sat inside him — he knew why it did what it did and what it intended to do, and that made it all the easier. With the cards dormant, he only needed a little extra magic to keep them alive. He could take from nature again and remain in control, so long as he could provide what Nothing needed to maintain balance.<sup>129</sup>

He made no attempt to rid himself of it, even though with his new understanding, he could. All that would happen is that Nothing would inhabit another person — someone less able to control it than Ashura had been — or it would not be able to gain a foothold, at which point Yuui would start taking damage just by maintaining the cards himself. Because for every thing the cards made, something had to be unmade. As the power of the cards grew, so Nothing must as well, or risk the same.

And Ashura knew, also, what would happen when Yuui eventually won.

The mark he left on Yuui was just one more measure of control. If his power had been allowed to grow naturally, the needs of Nothing would have grown with it, but Ashura knew what he needed most was time. Time to prepare Yuui for what he would eventually have to do, time to make sure the Japanese offshoot of Clow’s line was aware of the events so they could send in their own again, time to make sure the seed he had planted all those years ago had been allowed to grow roots and flourish, time to make ready he who would be King.

So as it came closer to the day Yuui would have the key again, and the cards would be fully active again, Ashura found taking the step to accept the magic of human life much easier than it had been nearly two decades before, and with his willingness to work with Nothing to attain their

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<sup>129</sup> Recall in *The Sand* there were theories about the balance of power. In CCS canon, Nothing was created to take the negative offset from the other cards’ creation, and so was exactly as strong as the other cards combined.

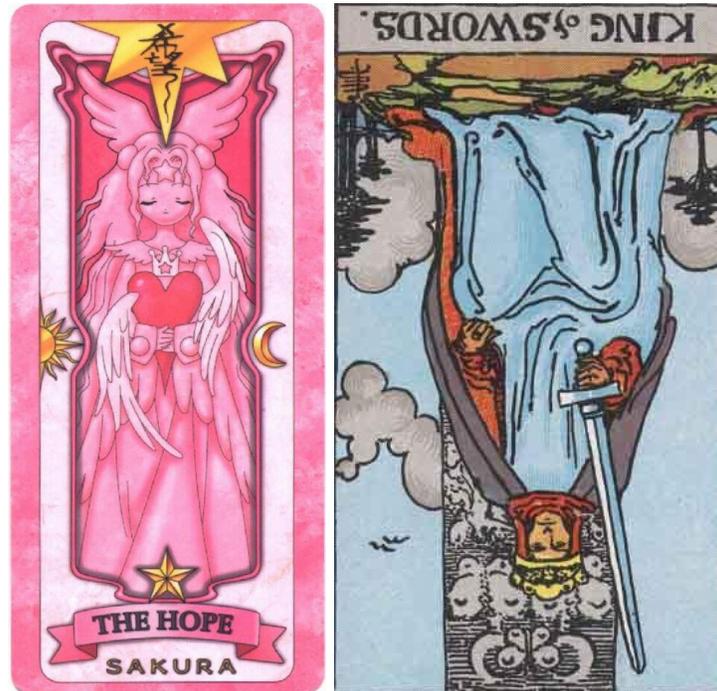
shared goals, he found he had more say. Ashura could keep the progression methodical and controlled, and the kingdom could be at ease for as long as he could manage. This, he had decided, was the easiest path for everyone. This was the path most easily recovered from.

Although Ashura very much regretted what he had to do, Yuui leaving Ceres for Valeria gave Ashura the opportunity to do exactly what he needed to be absolutely certain that the power of the Clow and Nothing were perfectly in balance, because he knew exactly what would be there to tip the scales.

It would be enough; it had to be enough.

The Phoenix would rise.

## The Hope



“Is it over?” Sakura asked from where she was leaning up against Syaoran in the tent they’d pitched the night before. It wasn’t so much anything she’d detected as it was a sudden impression — something in her subconscious declaring that everything had been brought to a close. It felt final. It felt like the end.

“Yeah,” Syaoran confirmed, pulling her even closer. “It’s over.”

1999

It wasn’t just that Yuui was better at offensive magic, Fai knew even before they’d found the Book of Clow in the library. Yuui’s magic was strong and always getting stronger and Fai’s simply wasn’t. Of the two of them, Yuui would be much more capable at handling the cards. That was just a simple fact.

But it was not one Yuui needed to know, and so Fai instead convinced him that the arrangement was simply the most logical for other reasons and watched his brother take possession of the Clow.

If Yuui noticed that his magic was stronger than Fai’s, he only assumed it was from the boost that the cards had given him, and Fai had no problem with that. They were twins, identical in

every way; it would only make sense that the cards were what threw their powers out of balance. It was explanation enough for Yuui, anyway.

At first, Fai had dismissed his lower power as simply not getting as much mileage out of his as Yuui did. Yuui's magic was versatile; Fai's was only truly skilled in barriers and healing arts much the same as their mother's was — not the sort of thing he had the opportunity to use every day. As time went on, however, it slowly became apparent that that simply was not the case. With the advent of the cards, Fai began using his magic nearly every day, but it never got stronger.

It wasn't until the battle with Fight that Fai realized it was just the opposite.

The barrier should have held and it would have when they had first started out this new venture, back when Fai had more strength. He'd held off worse under even more duress before. The only explanation for how it had folded like paper beneath Fight was that he had somehow become weaker over time.

Fai's magic was becoming weaker with each and every use. He didn't tell Yuui. Yuui had enough to worry about as it was, and Fai was certain he could fix this. Somehow.<sup>130</sup>

It was pure luck that Yuui needed his assistance less and less as he accumulated more cards — luck they were told they would not possess in spades and so Fai tried not to test it. He conserved his magic as well as he could so he could heal Yuui and even Kurogane when things went south, and everything turned out alright.

Yuui had noticed the gap was widening, even if he hadn't realized the extent of it. Where before, he would make a duplicate staff with Mirror and send that with his brother — something that had only some power but it was better than nothing at all — on a hunch, he gave Fai the real one instead. The cards had a will of their own, after all. Fai couldn't command them, but that didn't mean they couldn't elect to help when they could, and Yuui himself could boost the properties of the false staff with his own magic, which balanced out to him losing almost none of his own control in practice. Of course Fai would need the extra help; the power of the Clow had been steadily ramping up until it had reached levels Yuui could not have imagined. It would have been impossible for Fai to keep up without some kind of assistance.

There was no will or power strong enough to completely withstand the crashing of earth, and in the moment it smashed through Fai's barrier, Kurogane's magic, and every card that had come to their aid, it was Kurogane who took the brunt of it.

If it had happened when this had all begun, Fai knew he could have healed him. He could have used every element in his surroundings to build the chains of atoms and molecules that would become tissues that he could knit across the wounds until they were nothing more than a raw, aching spot. He could have taken the blood that had spilt and replaced it within Kurogane's

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<sup>130</sup> In TRC, the magic in Fai's right eye got weaker with each use, while the left became stronger with each use. I paralleled that concept with the twins.

body. He could have made it as if this had never happened and it had all been just a terrible dream.

It hadn't. For the first time in his life, Fai simply did not have the strength left to command the forces that would allow him to heal, but that didn't stop him from trying. There had to be a way to stop this. They were just kids. Kurogane shouldn't have to die like that.

"What will you do now, Fai?"

He didn't know, and even as he babbled that to Ashura, Fai's mind was racing with every theory, every bit of knowledge, every rumor about magic he had ever heard in his life. There had to be something that could save him. There had to be something that could work. There had to be a card here that could stop this.

There wasn't.. Yet.

Scrounging up every last scrap of magic he wasn't even sure he still had, Fai put all that was left of himself behind the force of his wish. Kurogane would not die; nobody would die, and Fai thought his chest would burn from the heat of the hope he felt in his heart. Even as his senses slipped beyond his body as if everything physical about himself was melting away, Fai knew that he, also, would not die. Ashura would not allow it. *Fai* would not allow it.

Hope sprung eternal, alive, and *real*.

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*Year 2018*

The staff in Yuui's hands was hot when he leapt forward, focusing all his power and concentration on the spot he was aiming for on Ashura's back.

Ashura pivoted quickly, raising his arms.

Yuui felt the staff strike solid nothing the same way it did when sealing away a card, and in that moment, he was convinced that this is what it felt to be consumed by Ashura's attack. So he opened his eyes to meet his fate head on, needing to know what sort of death his people had been put through. Before him, Ashura was sustaining his attack, neither advancing nor being beaten back, though not through either his or Yuui's complacency. Between them were two cards, seemingly blank.

And on Yuui's staff was another pair of hands, bracing with him, holding Ashura back, and when Yuui glanced back to see who it was, he met with a face so much like his own.

Fai did not hesitate — "Now, Kurogane!"

*"Shoutai Konrei!"* — and neither did Kurogane.

Both Ashura and Fai began to be swept up in the gale that Kurogane's reversion produced, but the action was slow, fighting to work through the sheer volume of power in play to complete its job. Neither man struggled against it, and Yuui did not have long to wonder why Ashura seemed so relieved by these turns of events when Fai spoke up beside him. "Kurogane can force us into the cards, but you still have to seal them, Yuui."

He didn't understand. He wasn't sure he *wanted* to understand. "I can't — "

"We won't be gone," Fai assured him, "But we have to finish this."

Fai had never done him wrong before, and Yuui knew without a doubt that somehow, this being beside him really was Fai — not an illusion or an imposter, but his brother — and so Yuui took a deep breath, adjusted his grip, and spoke the incantation one more time: "Return to the form which you were meant to be, Clow Cards!"

Yuui's magic joined Kurogane's, and Fai and Ashura were each swept into one of the cards that had appeared. When the magic settled and they landed in Yuui's hand, he drew them close for study. The first, heavy with negative magic in a way none of the other cards had been, was Ashura, and Yuui read the name aloud — "The Nothing" — and the magic in it resonated just a moment before Yuui shuffled it back to find the card with Fai — "and The Hope."

There was a resonance there, too, even stronger, and the staff in Yuui's hand burned so quickly that he let it go with a start, leaving it free to fire a single charge straight up in the air before clattering to the ground.

"The fuck was that?" Kurogane asked, voicing the question at the front of Yuui's mind as they both tracked the effect while Yuui stooped down to retrieve the key. Whatever it was domed out only when it had reached high up into the sky, slowly shimmering back down to the earth, and both Yuui and Kurogane braced themselves for whatever this new threat was, not sure they even had the energy left to put up a proper fight.

At first, Yuui thought he was seeing things as the tips of the spires of Castle Luval began to fade back into existence, but slowly more of the towers materialized below like ink running down a page, and surely it had to be impossible, but Yuui was certain that up in the sky he could spot a bird.

"Over there," Kurogane drew Yuui's attention to the ridge, where the trees were slowly returning, nature inching its way back down to the coast like a carpet rolling downhill, and Yuui was enraptured by the sight, gaping in rapt silence until it wasn't silence anymore.

His ears picked out a windchime first, followed shortly by birdsong, and even though all his knowledge and experience told Yuui not to hold out hope, the first confused exclamations of people began to sound in the rebuilding market where he and Kurogane now stood. A market that was steadily filling with —

“People!” Yuui gasped, grasping at Kurogane’s arm in ecstatic disbelief. There was the barkeeper of the place Yuui frequented who would pretend Yuui wasn’t royalty when he asked, and further up the street, the woman who sold the best pastries in town, and over there, the merchant with the strange wares in the back Yuui had been unfortunate to be subjected to three times in the same repeating day. “Kurogane, it’s — they’re — !”

“They’re back,” Kurogane breathed, just as in shock and overjoyed as Yuui himself was.

“It’s the Prince — !”

“Prince Fai — !”

“We have to warn him! The King — !”

It wouldn’t do to inspire a panic, so Yuui squared his shoulders, lifted his head high, and stepped forward, commanding all the authority that he could muster. “People of Luval!” he announced, projecting his voice as far as it could go without magical help, “I can finally say that the force which has threatened our people has been vanquished!”

Excitement swept through the masses and with a small flourish, Yuui transformed the staff with Fly and alighted it, rising to be seen above the crowd.

“We leave now to the castle to verify the status of the other towns so we may begin coordinating aid where it is needed. Once I know more about the state in which we find ourselves today, I will send word immediately. Regardless, at sundown today, I will provide an update with what we do know, so that we can decide together how we wish to advance towards our future. I promise, I will not leave you in the dark!”

Another wave of chatter erupted and Yuui reached down with an offer that Kurogane accepted as wordlessly as it was offered, and together, they flew straight for Castle Luval.

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Yukito sensed the shockwave of magic while it was still far off, and he had the barrier erected around the camp before it reached them, but it only took him a few moments to drop it again. This power wasn’t an offensive one at all, but something restorative, so he let it work around him unfettered, even though he didn’t know what the end result would be.

He took a deep breath and soon had to follow with another and another, not able to get enough of it. After living at this camp for so long and being so accustomed to the dead air, breathing in lungfuls of life again was like a balm.

It wasn’t just the microbiological organisms, either. Structures were returning, and the plants and fungi, and the animals — and Yukito waited, not daring to hope for such a miracle after so many years — and soon, people.

Yukito returned to the healing tent even as the others in camp began to ascertain what was going on and explain to the newly returned what they knew of the situation, but if there were injured, then his own place was here.

Tomoyo was sitting up when he made his way inside, looking out the window with no small amount of awe. "They really did it," she whispered with a smile.

"They did," Yukito agreed, passing Tomoyo her phone. "Why don't you tell Sakura you're okay?"

"Of course!" Tomoyo agreed, before attempting a call and only getting a busy signal. That wasn't entirely unexpected — everyone was probably trying to contact their loved ones right now. Undeterred, she shot off a text instead and waited. Sakura had said everything would be alright, and Tomoyo had no doubt she herself was included in that prediction.

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Sakura received two texts in short succession as she admired the meadow by the highway she and Syaoran found themselves in.

Why the fuck is it winter? — TK

I'm awake now. I hope I didn't worry you. Are you and Syaoran alright? — TD

"My brother's back!" Sakura exclaimed as she typed out her responses.

We're fine. Are you still hurt? — SK

It's a really long story but I'm just so glad you're okay — SK

"He's back?" Syaoran repeated, forgetting his own phone in his instant excitement, instead patting himself down for the keys to the SUV. "That could mean everyone in Ceres is back. Or, wait — I mean, I know it sounds crazy after all this time, but if both sets of disappearances were from the same cause, there's a chance people have come back in Valeria, too! We've got to —"

Just a little tired. It seems Valeria has been returned, at least in the capital. — TD

Syaoran and I will head back as soon as we pick up here — SK

Are you and dad safe? — TK

I am but you should check on dad. Syaoran and I have to return the car to Yukito — SK

When did you start driving? — TK

Long story – SK

Sakura snatched the keys up with a bit of a laugh and slid them into her own pocket. “Let’s clean up camp first, and then if you’re not too excited, I’ll let you drive.”

“Right,” Syaoran said, embarrassed, “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Sakura assured him with a kiss on the cheek. Seeing Syaoran get excited like that made her heart feel full, knowing that his research made him truly happy. “I like seeing you worked up, but one of us needs a level head to drive.”

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The first thing Yuui did upon returning to the castle was delegate. Representatives were appointed to contact each town to determine their status: had they returned, was there damage, and what assistance would they need. Another was assigned to reach out to their ambassadors in other nations and arrange for therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and anyone else proficient in mental health management to be brought in, and to send out feelers for aid in other forms should they need it. Quick censuses were to be taken, the border at Valeria was to be open for passage regardless of papers, infrastructure was to be inspected, and repair teams were to be dispatched immediately and without question or concern for cost.

Finally, once Yuui had assigned a team to gather the data he’d requested and report on the status of his instructions, and with orders to text him regarding any matter they could not resolve on their own, he was able to break away and join Kurogane in private.

“What the hell happened?” Kurogane asked without preamble.

“So far it seems like Erase on a much wider scale,” Yuui answered a bit distractedly, pulling his phone out of his pocket to check it only to find it had been a phantom vibration, and placing it on the conference room table instead.

“I can see that,” Kurogane replied testily, “I mean during the fight.”

“You mean Fai,” Yuui surmised, less confident about the subject now than he’d been an hour ago. In the moment, he had been certain that it had been Fai by his side again, but now with a bit of time and some space to think, he could not be so sure. Hesitantly, he drew Hope from the deck. It certainly looked just like Yuui, and so should resemble how his twin would look.

And Yuui had been trying to ignore it, but ever since the two cards had been sealed away, his back had felt cold. It was possible that with Ashura (or whatever had been posing as Ashura) sealed away, whatever influence he’d had on the mark that had vanished was gone as well, but Ashura had said it himself, hadn’t he? The Phoenix would rise.

Yuui didn’t even realize he’d reached back with his free hand until Kurogane was manually turning him around, and Yuui rested his weight on his uninjured leg. “Let me take a look at it,” he

offered and Yuui didn't stop him when Kurogane coaxed the shirt off of him, or when he ran one hand slowly down the length of his spine to rest warm at the small of his back. "I don't see a wound," Kurogane murmured behind him.

"Any magical traces?" Yuui asked.

"None," Kurogane confirmed, and his hand lingered a moment longer before Kurogane seemed to remember himself and pull it away.

Although Yuui was tempted to tell himself that this sort of thing was not Kurogane's specialty and that he should get a second opinion, he knew he'd only be fooling himself. The mark was gone, and that meant whatever was connected to it was gone as well. He turned back to Kurogane as he pulled his shirt back over his head, and brought the staff forth. "Do you think the cards will have any answers?"

Kurogane shrugged. "We can ask."

Yuui didn't think the cards would lie, but he took Libra in his hand as well anyway before bringing forth Hope. The presence in the card materialized before them, sitting on the edge of the table with one leg crossed over the other and his chin resting in his hand. "Long time no see," Hope greeted with a smile, "Got everything under control now?"

"We do," Yuui answered with some conviction, leaning against a chair for a little more support.

Hope peeked over to Libra in Yuui's hand, but if he was offended, it was covered up by his grin. "Don't worry, I don't think I'd trust me, either."

It was Kurogane that cut quickly to the heart of the matter. "Are you Fai?"

"I am," the card confirmed, and Libra in Yuui's hand did not react.

Yuui's mouth went dry. "How?"

Fai leaned back, braced by his arms. "Since I had the staff when the last card was caught, Nothing thought I was the master of the cards. We fought; I lost. I was almost out of magic and Kurogane was dying, so I tried to use some of Clow's magic," Fai shrugged then, gaze cast aside as he reminisced. "It didn't work, but I knew the cards were alive, and they had free access to Clow's magic.

"So I tried to become a card, instead," he continued lightly, as if cheating death had been the easiest thing in the world. "When my consciousness meshed with the collective of the cards, I learned that Ashura was Nothing, and that he'd have to consume Kurogane too if you lost, Yuui. So I used what magic I had left to erase Kurogane from your memories and Ashura's, and transport him back to Japan. But that left me stuck as a half-formed card with no magic left, so Ashura chose you as a donor and planted me on your back so I could use your spare magic to grow stronger until I could exist separately again."

“So it wasn’t a limiter,” Yuui realized somberly. It had acted like one because Fai had needed the magic, but it wasn’t there because Yuui was at a risk of becoming a monster without it after all. That had been a lie, and not one he thought Ashura had needed to tell. Surely Ashura could have told him that it was a sigil that allowed him to donate spare magic to someone who needed it, and Yuui would have gladly kept it. There had been no reason at all for Yuui to believe himself dangerous for most of his life.

“Not exactly,” Fai confirmed. “I was just taking what you didn’t need. It started fading because you grew a lot stronger with the Clow and with all that extra magic — it was like being able to get off life support and start really recovering. I still couldn’t exist separately without a body, though, and you still needed to seal Nothing, so I waited until you fought him so you could get the extra boost when you needed it and finish forming my card at one time.”

It was a lot to take in, and Yuui didn’t even want to touch on the complex feelings he had about Ashura right now. His brother was here and immediate and alive at least on some level — someone he hadn’t mourned for years because Yuui hadn’t known he existed. He’d only been aware Fai had existed for a relatively short period of time, and many of the memories he’d had had a dulled emotional impact because Yuui had thought he was seeing events through another’s eyes. He was relieved that Fai was alive in some capacity, but he still wasn’t sure to what extent that was accurate. “So you’re just like all the other cards now?”

“Not exactly,” Fai said with a shrug. “All the other cards were created with a magic base. My base is a human soul.”

“And Ashura?”

Fai’s countenance dropped. “He was another special case. Nothing is a special card. It fulfills the Theory of Balance by absorbing the negative offset from both the creation and the use of the cards, and that means it has to be exactly as powerful as all the other cards combined at all times, or it throws everything off and effects start appearing outside the closed system of the cards, usually starting with causing harm to the person using them.

“It found Ashura while he was trying to become more powerful to try to break our curse — ”

“Curse?” Kurogane cut in, looking to Fai and Yuui in turn. “What curse?”

“Only one of us was supposed to live,” Yuui explained, himself only having recovered the memory recently. “They were able to delay it with the help of a witch, but they couldn’t remove it entirely.”

“It would have been me that died,” Fai elaborated. “I had a physical defect that prevented my core from adequately recovering when my magic was used. Eventually, I would use up the last of my magic even if I never used it, and I would die, but I think we managed to bypass that,” he admitted with humor. “Anyway, Nothing merged with Ashura. As the cards became active the first time, they began to act freely with no master to control them, but since Clow’s magic was

only there to sustain them and not power them, they consumed some of the natural energy around them to use their powers until they could be sealed.

“Since they became more powerful, Nothing had to as well until someone could master every card and either destroy them or become an alternate fuel source, at which point, the resources Nothing consumed could be released, because it, too, would be able to use the new fuel.”

“So that’s why everyone could come back,” Yuui concluded a bit distractedly. “With everything on the same fuel source, they would balance out naturally when they consumed it at the same time.”

“What about Valeria?” Kurogane asked. “What happened to them?”

Fai smiled. “They should be back by now, too.”

That was more than what Yuui had expected and he found quickly that he had to sit down, and not just because his ankle was killing him. Ashura hadn’t killed them because he hadn’t needed to. If consuming them was a permanent affair, it would have been better to kill them and to absorb their cores into his own than to leave them in limbo, but with the possibility that they wouldn’t have been needed anymore — Nothing would have had to consume even more power to sustain all those people even as he drew from them as a power source. It was one thing to eat a plant, and another entirely to keep it alive while pruning it as a food source. Ashura hadn’t been the monster he’d thought he’d been. No one had died, they’d just been set aside for a time, but Ashura had played the part of a monster because he’d needed Yuui to get past his attachment and seal him away, or so it seemed so far. “You said the first time. What about what happened the second?”

“I’m afraid that was because of us,” Fai admitted. “Because you were getting stronger, I was getting stronger as well, and since I was close enough to being a card for the cards’ purposes, Nothing had to compensate for me as well. When the cards became active again, they were under a failing seal with no master of the deck — ”

“Which put us right back at square one,” Kurogane deduced, to which Fai nodded. “So Ashura is part of Nothing now?”

Fai hesitated just for a moment as his expression became grave. “Yes and no. When Yuui lost the first time, everything in Valeria was consumed, including Ashura, but Nothing wasn’t sealed. It retained Ashura’s body to do its work and so it became part of the card. Ashura himself continued to live within Nothing with everyone else, though because his body was actively in use by Nothing, he was able to still retain some control. Still, when Nothing was sealed away, it took Ashura’s body with it.”

“So Ashura’s soul was returned without his body?” Yuui asked, to which Fai nodded. “You told me sealing you wouldn’t kill either of you!”

“It didn’t,” Fai argued. “Ashura technically died 18 years ago.”

“You still tricked me!”

“Because you wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t!”

Yuui couldn’t rightfully say that Fai was wrong on that one. Part of him was still adamant that there would have been some way to save Ashura, too, if only if he’d been smarter or faster or more resourceful.

The truth of it was that Ashura was really gone, though, and there was no bringing him back. At least with Fai, he could speak with him through the card. Ashura would have moved on to whatever afterlife there was by now, leaving Nothing as nothing more than a physical copy. Yuui wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Ashura had lied to him and hidden things from him and manipulated him for years. Ashura had been like a father to him, and taught him everything he knew about magic and its properties, and set him up with the tools he needed to rule Ceres when the time came. Ashura had known all this would happen from the start, and did everything he could to save Fai and Yuui, even knowing it would end with his own death.

“I’m not sure if it helps,” Fai hedged, and Yuui could only wonder how much of his confliction showed on his face, “But all the cards can communicate with each other through Clow’s magic, so I know Ashura knew what would happen when Nothing was sealed. He chose to let Nothing keep his body so that he could continue to guide you through it until the end — so that he knew you wouldn’t be alone.”

“Were all those people aware the entire time?” Kurogane asked with a bit of horror, and Yuui was more than a little grateful for the change in topic. Loneliness wasn’t a subject he wanted to address just then.

“No,” Fai assured him. “Ashura was a special case because Nothing inhabited his body. Everyone else stayed asleep.”

That brought Kurogane some relief. Being alive and aware in a null space for that long would be extremely psychologically damaging. Yuui, however, realized the issue that came with nearly two decades of sleep. It was great that everyone was back, but — “There’s going to be a lot to explain to the people of Valeria, not to mention the rest of the world. They’ve been gone for nearly 20 years.”

“I can help,” Fai offered. “I’m probably the best expert you’ve got on the situation.”

“How far can you even travel like that?” Kurogane asked, gesturing to Fai on the table. “The effective range of the staff can’t be more than a few hundred meters, and it wouldn’t be practical to drag Yuui to every interview.”

“Not far like this,” Fai admitted with a sly look, “If I had a body, however...”

“Wait, wait,” Yuui started anxiously. “I can’t condone another Ashura situation.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Fai offered. “Nothing needed an existing body with a living soul because it had a magic base, but I was originally human and still retain my soul. If we build a body, I can inhabit that, and it should be fine as long as the body stays functional.”

“But the curse — ”

“Was that mother would only sire 2 heirs,” Fai completed. “Well, I’ve been watching you for 18 years and I don’t want a part of it. I abdicate all my rights and responsibilities of being in line for either the Valerian or Ceresian thrones. I’d rather focus on healing, anyway. Speaking of which — ” he continued with some irritation as he snatched up one of Yuui’s hands, examining the raw and scraped up tips caused by the repeated use of lightning attacks “ — just how long were you planning on waiting to get these treated?”

Yuui at least had the decency to look embarrassed. “There were more important things — ”

Fai sighed, already working on these fingers so he could get started on the other hand. “You’re impossible,” he chided. “You need these things and your foot, too, you know. Don’t go around treating your body like garbage like this.”

“I don’t do that,” Yuui objected, to which Fai levelled him with an unimpressed stare. “Really, I don’t!”

“No,” Kurogane cut in sarcastically, “You just let yourself drop from heights and barely bother to catch yourself, and leave seals on so long they almost kill you, that’s all.”

“That’s not the half of it,” Fai grumbled, having been present for all of Yuui’s nonsense. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“I — ”

“Or slept?”

“That’s not — ”

“Have you even bothered to drink water?”

“Alright!” Yuui gave in as he snatched his hand back and made use of the phone on the table. “Yuzuriha? Could you please send up drinks and lunch for three to conference room 4?”

It was Fai’s turn to object. “I don’t need to — ”

Yuui covered the mouthpiece and shot Fai a look. “You’re getting your body back. You need the practice.” Fai didn’t get another chance to argue before Yuui thanked Yuzuriha and ended the call. With a sigh, Yuui rested his head in his hands, trying to think of the next step, which would obviously be to contact the leaders of Valeria and explain the situation they found themselves in.

“So, what are we telling Mom?” When Fai didn’t answer, Yuui looked up again, though Fai wouldn’t meet his eyes. “What?”

“Mom wasn’t part of Nothing,” Fai told him quietly. “I think she gave everything she had to maintain the shields around Valeria in the end, and there wasn’t anything left for Nothing to take.”

It wasn’t completely unheard of, Yuui knew, for someone to even use the magic stored within a soul on something they were dead-set on accomplishing, though verifiable stories like that were few and far between. Still, something told Yuui that wasn’t the whole story, and he pulled out the necklace from beneath his shirt. “Maybe she didn’t give everything,” he murmured.

Fai wasn’t the only one who could use a new body.

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Becoming the de facto king was a strange process for Yuui. There had been several investigations by different parties across the globe to verify everything Yuui said, and to determine if any foul play was involved. Explaining the return of Valeria had been just as long and arduous a process, though at least the research teams had been able to assist with that.

Ceres itself was easier to manage than Yuui had thought it would be. There had been no damage aside from what was created during battles, and every person who had gone missing was restored. There was an underlying collective trauma, especially in the areas that had held out longer, knowing the effect was coming. For some of the first taken, the ordeal seemed nothing more than a strange dream. All the previous systems were in place, and all the previous experts were able to resume their posts — meaning Yuui could delegate the everyday matters while he dealt with the other issues that arose from the Clow.

It had taken time to build the bodies he needed. For Fai, they were able to nearly copy Yuui’s own body, but there were still many tests to be conducted to be assured of the copy’s functionality. The second body was an even more difficult job. For that, he tried to recall as vivid memories of his mother as he could, and trust the doctors and transmutationists to take it from there.

She wasn’t quite their mother. There had been something saved of her within that necklace, but it had been empty of any memories or knowledge Freya had held. Fai took her in, anyway, giving her the name Chii — neither of them would have felt right giving up on her just because she wasn’t exactly how they remembered.

Fai treated Chii like a daughter, and he set up a medical practice at Valere with Yukito as a partner to bring him up to speed on advancements in the healing arts. They also participated in the recovery efforts there. Valeria had been restored much as Ceres had been, and the transition of power from Freya to her eldest son Shei had gone smoothly enough, but bringing the country into the modern age and reestablishing diplomatic contacts had been much more

difficult there than it had been for Ceres. Not only that, but it seemed magical hotspots, draining or otherwise, persisted even with the country reborn. The research team rapidly changed their focus from studying the AUZ, to learning these new properties present in the restored Valeria.

Syaoran proved invaluable in this regard, and Tomoyo's dreamseeing and diplomatic nature caught the attention of the court, and so both remained at the capital as well, with Sakura at their sides.

After months of work, recovery, study, and progress, Yuui's coronation was drawing near, and through all of that, he'd had someone at his side.

"How much longer?" Yuui asked, laying back into the grass to gaze up at the night sky.

"Until what?" Kurogane replied, Yuui's head practically in his lap, but it had been long established that Yuui's idea of personal space was an odd one.

"Until your family sees sense and calls you back," Yuui said as if it was obvious. When Kurogane didn't offer a response to that, he continued: "It's very kind of them — and you — to have you stay and help for so long. I really do appreciate that."

"Is that what I'm doing?" Kurogane asked. "Helping?"

Yuui snorted a laugh at that, remembering a conversation that felt like a lifetime ago. "Well, you're not fighting me, are you." They hadn't fought since before Nothing was captured. Bickered, yes. Poked and prodded until Kurogane lost his temper, absolutely. From the steep angle, Yuui wasn't sure if Kurogane's frown had deepened or not. Yuui looked away, thinking of that same look from a different day. "You know, you never told me what you wanted to do when we saved the world."

For a moment, it seemed like Yuui wasn't going to get his answer, but then one of Kurogane's hands coaxed Yuui's head back by the chin, and Yuui felt frozen as Kurogane slowly bent forward. When their lips met, Kurogane was firm, but chaste, and he drew back to his original position after only a few seconds, not able to look Yuui in the eye. "That. I wanted to do that."

Yuui sincerely hoped he wasn't the only one blushing as hard as he was now, but it was hard to tell on a moonless night. "You can do that again if you want," he offered breathlessly. Kurogane would stay with him if he wanted, Yuui hoped breathlessly.

So Kurogane did.

## Epilogue



“You’re late,” Kurogane announced from where he was reading in their bed as Yuui entered their chambers late into the night.

“If you would agree to be a member of Court and not just my concubine, we could both finish our work at the same time,” Yuui offered lightly, not for the first time, as he started to shed some of his formal wear in favor of pajamas.

“I’m not your concubine,” Kurogane grumped, starting up the familiar argument for what had to be the hundredth time. “And take a damn shower before you get in clean clothes.”

“What would you call it then?” Yuui asked with a laugh in his voice, leaving a line of clothes on the floor behind him as he approached the shower just to see Kurogane mutter unflattering things to himself about him as he picked them up.

And Kurogane did, Yuui saw as he turned the knobs in the shower, hoping that leaving a trail to the shower would be temptation enough for Kurogane to join him in it. “Your consort, if anything,” he said, raising his voice to be heard above the sound of running water.

“Wouldn’t you have to be married to me to be the king consort?” Yuui asked, changing the direction of their bickering. It had been a year since they’d sealed Nothing away, and there was already pressure from Court for him to produce an heir. That meant taking a compatible official lover or wife, because Yuui wasn’t up to simply adopting a child and raising them on his own — he needed a partner for that, and Kurogane hadn’t expressed interest in making their

relationship legally official. It was fine, really. Yuui had Kurogane and he would find a way to keep Kurogane even if he had to take another partner besides, but he couldn't shirk his duties in that area forever.

"Move over." Yuui hadn't realized that Kurogane hadn't responded until the shower door was jerked open and Kurogane was joining him in the stall, batting Yuui's hands away from his hair in favor of lathering the shampoo himself. "I can fix that, you know," Kurogane offered after a few moments as Yuui pressed into the welcome sensation of nails on his scalp building up a nice foam.

"Fix what?" he asked, having forgotten the topic entirely.

"Marrying you," he clarified, urging Yuui to tip his head back and wash out the suds.

Yuui sputtered under the stream in disbelief. "Really?"

"Yeah," Kurogane countered as if it was obvious.

Surely Kurogane had to see how mad that offer was, but Yuui had to make sure he knew. "No tricks?"

"No tricks."

"But your family would know."

"They already do."

"You'd have duties —"

"Good, I've been bored up here."

"The press would never leave you alone."

"I can handle them."

"There's ceremonies to learn and expectations of behavior and —"

Sometimes the only way to shut Yuui up was to physically close his mouth, and so Kurogane applied that technique with his mouth as well in a lingering motion that indeed robbed the speech from his lips. "And none of that shit will stop me from marrying you."

Yuui kissed him then because he was sure his face was doing something utterly embarrassing, wrapping his arms around Kurogane's neck for a bit of leverage. When he broke away, his tone was sly. "You'll have to watch your language."

"Not in here I don't," Kurogane countered.

“They’ll expect me to put a baby in you,” Yuui continued with a heavy voice, to which Kurogane rolled his eyes.

“Not like you haven’t been trying already.” Yuui snorted out a laugh at that. “In case you didn’t notice, I don’t have the parts.”

“I can fix that,” Yuui responded, using Kurogane’s own words against him as he dragged his ankle up the side of Kurogane’s calf. “If I can build two fully functional human bodies from scratch, I’m sure I can overcome that particular hurdle.”

“This is not a Build a Man Workshop,” Kurogane muttered, and for a moment, Yuui thought that Kurogane was rejecting the idea outright, to which he was neither offended nor surprised. Kurogane, however, continued to surprise him: “But I’ll think about it. Now quit flirting and wash up so we can go to bed.”

“I think,” Yuui began as he pulled away from Kurogane to do exactly as was asked, “Kuro-grump is rather thinking about putting a baby in *me*.”

Kurogane did not protest that assumption at all.

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“Hey,” Yuui asked some time later, when they were laying back sated, and sleep was beginning to creep in from all sides. “Were you serious?”

“About marrying you?” Kurogane asked, already wrapped around Yuui like the human octopus he was in bed. “Of course I was.”

“It really won’t be easy — ” Yuui started, but Kurogane was having none of that.

“I don’t want easy. I want you.”

Yuui chuckled at that. “I’d say I’m pretty easy.”

“No you’re not.”

“I was,” Yuui argued, thinking back to the years between coming of age and the Clow began to grow active again. The things he’d managed to get away with as the Prince, even under glamour as his activities often were, would have been outright scandalous as the King.

“And now you’re not,” Kurogane asserted, burrowing his face in Yuui’s hair. “Sleep. We can plan your dream wedding in the morning.”

“Ok,” Yuui murmured, snuggling back against Kurogane — safe and warm and home. “I love you.”

“Love you too. Now *fucking sleep*.”

## Appendix A

In Chapter 17: The Change, we see Yuui make up a spell on the spot and it mostly blew up in his face. Here we will review the magical systems that were in play and why he experienced blowback from it.

First, we must consider that Yuui naturally has an affinity for air, which is associated with information, movement, thinking patterns, knowledge, and conversation. Because of this, his magic is a little out of balance at the elemental level, as most people's naturally are. Consider your astrological natal chart if you've reviewed it. Typically, one does not have an equal distribution of planets and important points across all elements. I personally heavily favor earth and water, and have no air in my chart.

In Yuui's case, this means that he has a knack for air-related spells and that they come naturally to him.

Next, we have the Clow Cards. Under the Sun, we have earth and fire, and also light; under the Moon, we have air and water, and also dark. This was deliberate in design to be a balanced system, however Clow's own magic heavily favored the Sun, and so cards falling under its control are more powerful (until they are balanced out by Star magic after Nothing and Hope are sealed). We established that air cards can be used for informational purposes a few chapters back, but as they fall under the Moon, they are not as powerful as they could be.

Next, we have the words of the spell. The words themselves carry a small amount of power, but their purpose is to help the user focus their intent by speaking it aloud. This helps clear away distractions and straying thoughts which may disrupt the spell and have dire consequences.

Next, we have the amount of power between the air cards and Yuui himself. The cards do not have an insignificant amount of magic, and neither does Yuui, however, the power of the cards are not stagnant. As more of the cards fall under Yuui's control, they are able to shift it around to a degree. This means other cards in Yuui's deck are able to lend some extra strength to the spell when necessary, though it does mean a degree of elemental contamination. This makes it very difficult to judge how much power one would receive doing a spell the cards are not designed for, and the purity of the magic in use.

Finally, we have the purpose of the spell, which is where Yuui trips up. He is accustomed to using the cards to gain knowledge at this point, but he asks to be shown what happened, which would make it a divination, and that falls under water magic.

This leaves us with a spell that requires mostly water magic, powered by Yuui's air-heavy magic and the air cards, and only receiving water energy incidentally. This happens earlier when Yuui asks the cards to show him what happened to Yuui in Chapter 12: The Song as well, resulting in

Yuui falling into a dream he couldn't control when the divination kicked in. As the spell in Mithril involved a larger target and much more magic, Yuui bit off more than he could chew.

The reason it worked at all was the water magic from the cards Yuui possessed, however much water magic was in his magic naturally, and the use of Illusion, which had not worked as he had planned. Instead, Illusion falls under Dark, which is able to stand in for either earth or water.

## Appendix B

This was a bit long for a footnote, but let me detail why Freya is a badass in this story.

She's a squishy mage. We see in *The Dark* that she was ill enough she was supposed to be on bedrest. Despite that, she is maintaining the shields around Valeria hoping to keep whatever is killing her people from spreading to other nations. This is not a small or easy thing to do. She has to outclass anyone who wants to get in or out by force for any reason, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, for literal years, and she's doing this as she's fighting depression.

In addition to this, she knows very well this might be the thing that kills her. In *The Nothing*, we establish that her reign will be cut short as payment for delaying the force that would kill one of her three sons. She's not even sure she can actually save them — she just wants to give them all the time she can to find a real solution.

At any time, she could give up. She could give up, accept that it was probably all pointless, and rest, but she doesn't. She makes the choice every day to do what is best for her children, the kingdom, and the world.

Finally, when the blast that takes out the rest of the nation does come, she's not far from ground 0. Castle Valere and the surrounding metro are the last to go. Nobody else has been able to resist the pull of Nothing until this point, but Freya manages to hold the shields around the borders as Nothing is trying to take her and every scrap of organic material it hadn't taken before. Then, just to spite Nothing, she moves every remaining drop of her magic into her necklace so it can't take her magic, too.

For all she knows, after she dies, Nothing is just going to move on to another nation. She might have been delaying the inevitable, but she bought the world more time at the cost of everything else. And with that time, Ashura, Fai, Kurogane, and Yuui together bring down Nothing and make sure all three of her sons live.

Freya is a fucking badass.