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Kureha
Bride of the Barrier Master

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Kureha

YEN ON
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KUREHA

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Prologue

The Ichinomiyas were one of the five clans sworn to defend the pillars that keep all of Japan safe, and within their jurisdiction stood the headquarters of the Association of Practitioners.

The Skull of Nirvana's infiltration into the headquarters and their escape with numerous dangerous talismans in hand were still fresh in everyone's mind; the Association's security was known for being incredibly tight, making the shock to the practitioner world that much greater.

However, the talismans were safely reclaimed and returned to their rightful place, while the Skull of Nirvana's members, boss included, were all taken into custody.

As much of a relief as it was to have the incident so cleanly wrapped up, the Association couldn't have anything of the sort happen again, so they reevaluated their security measures to strengthen them even further.

The captured Skull of Nirvana members belonged to the domain of practitioners, so they weren't handed over to the police. Instead, they were imprisoned in an underground facility beneath the Association Headquarters, a place designed to contain dangerous, problem-causing practitioners. The Skull of Nirvana members were confined to solitary rooms and placed under twenty-four-hour surveillance.

On that day, like any other, two security guards were assigned to observe them via a live camera feed. That was when one guard

noticed something odd.

"Hmm?"

"What's wrong?"

The other guard seemed puzzled as to why his partner had suddenly leaned toward the screen.

"Well, doesn't something seem off to you?" the first guard said, pointing at the screen. It displayed a male Skull of Nirvana member lying on his side in bed.

"Huh?"

When the other guard looked closely, he saw that the man was clutching his chest. He even seemed to be in pain.

Not long after…

"Aaaauughh!"

The man cried out in agony and flailed around, making the guards scrambled to their feet.

"What is it? What's going on?!"

"I don't know, but we should go check—"

Before the guard could finish saying *check on them*, a prisoner on a different monitor began screaming as well. Alerted by the sound, the guard looked over at that monitor and saw that the prisoner was writhing on the floor.

And it wasn't just these two; the cameras in each and every room showed their prisoners shrieking and struggling one after the other.

"What the heck's going on?!"

"First, call for backup! We're gonna need more than the two of us!"

"Got it!"

The guard hurriedly reached for the phone and requested assistance.

Chapter 1

Hana's parents were finally out of the picture. Yanagi's succession as the Ichise family head was soon reported to the Ichinomiyas, and with no one voicing any objections, the matter was resolved without issue.

Even if there *had* been protests, the Ichinomiya lord, Saku, would surely have snuffed them out. After all, it was by his own designs that Yanagi was set up to become the Ichise family head. Some underhanded tactics had been involved, but the other families didn't know the details, so that wasn't a problem, either. Yanagi took to the position as though he had been the family's head from the start.

With that, Hazuki ended her stay at the Ichinomiya mansion to return home with her brother. She certainly hadn't expected to be back so soon after her dramatic exit; it was hard for her to hide her discomfort at returning to a place where she had resolved never to set foot again.

A home without her parents felt…quiet. It wasn't long ago that she had dreaded going home every day and wished she could run away without ever turning back, but now she couldn't feel even a trace of the tension that used to hang heavily in the air. The only thing different was the absence of her parents. The mansion and its furniture were just as she'd left them, but there was a noticeable change in how she felt.

"They really are gone…"

As Hazuki looked around the house, her parents nowhere in sight, the situation finally felt real to her. Those parents who had bound both Hazuki's body and spirit were now, according to Yanagi, most likely never going to see her again.

But whether Hazuki was happy about that news was another question altogether—a question she couldn't answer. Her parents had controlled every part of her life up to that point, but she didn't exactly hold a grudge against them over it. That's why her feelings were so complex. If Hana were in her shoes, she'd shout about how they had it coming and cackle with glee, but Hazuki couldn't bring her feelings to that point quite yet.

Still, she was incredibly relieved to be released from her parents' stifling authority. There was nobody left to bind her. She was a free woman.

As Yanagi had mentioned to her earlier, all the servants who were close to her parents had been replaced, so Hazuki saw several unfamiliar faces around the mansion. It was a bit jarring, but it was nowhere near the effect her parents' absence had on her.

"Are you all right, Hazuki?" Yanagi asked, turning to Hazuki with a look of concern.

"Yes, I'm fine."

Hazuki laughed his question off, but deep down, her emotions were tangled in a complicated knot. Yanagi, likely picking up on that, offered support in a gentle voice that was far different from his usual unconcerned tone, which often veiled his true feelings.

"If anything's bothering you, then please discuss it with me. There's no need to bottle it up. Those people are gone, so you're free to do what you like."

"Okay."

Being free to do what she liked wasn't as simple as it sounded. Until now, Hazuki had been forced to follow her parents' every whim, while her own opinions had been ignored, so it was only a matter of course that she didn't quite know what she should do going forward. Her stay at the Ichinomiya mansion left her so busy dealing with

Hana and Nozomu that she ended up never having the solitude to even notice this issue, but now that freedom was in her hands, she was presented with a new dilemma about what to do with it.

"I'll be making sure to come home more often, too."

It was only recently that they learned of the grudge her father held against Yanagi, and it came as a surprise to Hazuki and Hana alike. The two had no memory of Yanagi sharing any pleasantries with their parents, but there certainly had to have been plenty of hints; it was just a matter of Hazuki and Hana not noticing them. Then again, despite how much Yanagi had thought of his sisters, the two had had their hands full simply dealing with their own problems.

"I have to go to work for now, but I'll be sure to come home by night. I know you must still be a bit shaken by everything, but I think we should start by having our morning and evening meals together from now on."

A family gathering together for meals, which seemed so normal at the Ichinomiya home, was foreign to the Ichise house. It hadn't been like that at first, of course. But despite meals being a time for families to come together, like the Ichinomiyas did, the Ichises had eventually found themselves eating separately. Hazuki couldn't even remember why it happened…

Given how loose this family's bonds had been, Hazuki could tell this was Yanagi's way of attempting to rebuild those bridges. However…

"Yanagi, will you be all right with work? You don't really have time to humor me, do you?"

Yanagi had set the record for being the youngest practitioner to ever reach the Fourth Color, Lapis, and his skills had earned him the full trust of the clan lord, Saku, so Hazuki had heard that he was kept busy day in and day out. A student like Hazuki had no way of knowing the details of the work her brother was tasked with, but she remembered how often he was away from home. His job clearly wasn't the type that gave him the time to relax at home.

Then again, she had a feeling one of the reasons for his frequent absence was that he didn't want to see his frigid parents. Still, she had no doubt he had plenty of work on his plate.

"If you're trying to be considerate of me, don't worry. I'm not a child anymore; I'll be fine on my own."

Hazuki, herself, had a bad habit of being overly considerate, which was why she didn't want to cause her brother any trouble. But Yanagi, seeming to understand her worries, chuckled, and with no hesitation, he reached for his wallflower of a sister's head.

Hazuki's eyes opened wide in surprise; she had no memory of even her own parents patting her on the head.

"This is what I *want* to do. So I don't have any regrets. Though I won't force you if you'd rather not have me around…"

"I—I would never think that!" Hazuki hurriedly denied after seeing the lonely look in Yanagi's eyes. The tension in Yanagi's expression eased just a bit.

"In that case, at least let us have meals together. That's what I want."

"Okay."

If Yanagi insisted that much, then Hazuki could never turn him down. She saw her brother as distant, but he was still someone she deeply respected. She was more delighted than anything.

"I'll be off, then. Those people are gone, so you can do whatever you like with the house from now on. I can't always be home, so you can go ahead and redecorate or hire help or whatever else you want."

"Okay. Thank you, Yanagi."

Her brother hurriedly left soon after, but the next morning, he stayed true to his word and returned home to share breakfast with Hazuki.

"I somehow made it in time."

"Welcome home, Yanagi."

Among the veteran servants who felt sentimental about Hazuki's greeting to her brother was Sae, the one who had provided the

catalyst for Hana and Hazuki to mend their relationship.

Hazuki's and Yanagi's eyes went wide as they took their seats at the dining table.

"Sae, don't you think this is a bit too lavish for breakfast?" Hazuki asked with a bit of befuddlement in her tone.

While not exactly a feast, the meal before them was still beyond the amount usually prepared for two people. And there were even some celebratory dishes such as red bean rice and sea bream served whole, all prepared for the first meal of the day.

"I wished to celebrate Master Yanagi's official succession and the start of a new chapter for you both, so I had the chefs spare no effort."

Sae's beaming smile seemed to exude joy from the bottom of her heart.

"Is that so?" Hazuki mused. She could accept it after remembering that they had yet to celebrate Yanagi's succession themselves. "Guess we'll need to call Hana over sometime soon and celebrate with her, right, Yanagi?"

"If Hana's the *only* one we need to call over, that is."

Hana read between the lines.

"Should we invite the clan lord as well?"

"I suppose we should. Given how much work Saku did during that last ordeal, I don't think I can go without thanking him."

"Got it. You're pretty busy, so I'll arrange it."

"Great, thanks."

Yanagi was a man of few words, so their meal together couldn't quite be called a lively affair, but the atmosphere was calm and soothing.

Having the chance to be so open with Yanagi and eat so peacefully was a situation that Hazuki couldn't help but find strange. But thinking about how this was going to be her new normal made the tension vanish from her expression. Yanagi seemed to feel the same way.

"Come to think of it, it's almost time for the school festival."

"Yes. Campus One should be hosting it this year, right?"

Once every year, Obsidian High School had all five of its campuses come together for a school festival. The food stalls, the attractions, and more combined to make it one of the biggest, most exciting celebrations of the year.

The location rotated in order from Campuses One through Five. Since the previous year's festival had been held at Campus Five, Campus One was supposed to be in charge this year.

Incidentally, as Campus One being under *Ichi*nomiya jurisdiction and Campus Two being under *Ni*jouin jurisdiction might allude to, each campus's number matched the number in each of the five clan names. This indicated to whom each campus belonged. The school festival being held at Campus One meant that the Ichinomiya family would have a large influence on it.

"Yeah. So I'll be working security on the day of the event. You'll be in this year's Campus Cup, right?"

"The members haven't been announced yet, but I think I'll be picked."

One of the events held during the school festival was a series of competitions in which students selected from all five campuses demonstrated their powers against one another. Only the cream of the crop were featured, so being chosen was a distinction that could give one a leg up when they pursued a career later on. However, Hazuki seemed uncertain, which puzzled her brother.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem with that?"

"Well, Hana's far more powerful than me…"

Hana, who could summon two human-form shikigami and had even turned an inugami deity into her shikigami, was powerful beyond compare. This was a recent discovery to Hazuki, who had always thought of Hana as weak, as someone she had to protect. She'd felt that way only because she hadn't known Hana's power, but it still embarrassed Hazuki in hindsight to think she had made such patronizing assumptions.

"Hana's in Class C, so we don't even know if she *can* be chosen. Ridiculous, isn't it?"

There was no record of a Class C student ever being selected for the Campus Cup.

"I agree, but if Hana *were* chosen, I figure she'd drag her feet, and I *know* she wouldn't be happy about it."

"Good point."

Hazuki could imagine it. The two girls had kept their interactions to the bare minimum since they turned ten, so Hazuki honestly knew very little about Hana, but she could still see it quite clearly. Perhaps this was a sign of the special bond between twin sisters, but who could say for sure?

"On that note, Hana says that she *actually* wants a career at an Ichinomiya company instead of becoming a practitioner. What do you think about that, Yanagi?"

Hazuki feared that Hana's grades might make it difficult for her to apply to typical companies, but she also thought it would be such a waste if Hana did not put her incredible talents as a practitioner to good use.

"Not much. That depends on Hana…or I should say Saku."

"The clan lord?"

"Joining the Association or starting a career would all take a back seat if they have a child."

Well, that was a bombshell. If Hana were within earshot, she'd probably have screamed loudly enough to get the neighborhood dogs howling along.

Hazuki was speechless. A pregnancy would certainly make Hana's plans for her future go up in smoke; that much was true. Hana was still planning to divorce Saku, but Hazuki knew that he was opposed, so she couldn't rule out the possibility.

"……"

Hazuki kept her thoughts to herself. She elected to pretend that she hadn't heard anything, and she forcibly changed the subject.

"S-so, Yanagi, you'll be coming to see the Campus Cup? I'd like you to come see it at least once."

Her parents had attended the Campus Cups before, but more often than not, it resulted in them chewing her out for not doing better rather than praising her. Hazuki was always doing the best she could, but not once were her efforts ever acknowledged.

After a moment of silence following the question, Yanagi nodded.

"Yeah."

Taking that response to mean the worst, Hazuki furrowed her brow.

"Is it hard to say for sure? You don't have to go out of your way, okay?"

"No, I don't mean that. It's just that it's been more than 'once.' I went when you were in your first and second years, too."

"You did?"

Hazuki's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yeah. It's only natural for an older brother."

"It is, huh…?"

Hazuki's lips curved into a subtle smile.

◆

Now that Hazuki had returned to the Ichise household, Hana's life went back to normal. She was a bit sad to see her sister go, but she could accept it by telling herself that it was Hazuki's decision, not hers.

It was Nozomu who was far more crestfallen. Hana spotted him numerous times staring longingly at the room where Hazuki had stayed and heaving a deep sigh. Not that he had much to be torn up over, considering he'd see her in class every day. He was much better off than Hana, who was in a different class and had much more limited time to spend with her sister. Still, it was hard for Hana to see the cloud of grief hanging over him and not feel a little sorry

for the guy, so she refrained from poking fun at him and pretended not to notice.

Despite a lingering sense of disappointment, time marched forward for the Ichinomiya household.

Following dinner and a bath, Hana was looking into a mirror and applying moisturizer. She wore the rather light attire of a tank top and shorts. Miyabi stood behind her, drying her master's hair with a blow-dryer and comb. She caught a glimpse of Hana's back while doing so and squinted slightly.

"Master, the scar on your back seems to have almost vanished."

"Really? Good to hear."

"I'm afraid I can't be so relieved when you never should have been scarred to begin with."

Getting her parents out of the picture was fine, but the plan for doing so required that Hana battle a strong shade, which at one point slammed her against a wall. The impact left a massive scar on Hana's back.

Specifically, she had been wounded heavily enough that it left a scar. The injury was painful, of course, but that receded surprisingly quickly. Soon, all that was left was the throbbing of the scar tissue. Miyabi was displeased by it, and every time she saw Hana's back, she grew more furious than Hana did.

Hana didn't wear revealing clothes like this tank top around Aoi or Arashi, so Miyabi and Azuha were the only ones who knew how the scar was healing. Aoi took the form of a man, so despite being her own shikigami, Hana still got embarrassed. Arashi had regrettably wounded Hana back when she'd saved him from his rampage as a tatarigami, so Hana started covering up to keep him from feeling guilty.

"That pompous little… I don't care if he's the Sankourou successor—how dare he allow you to be injured like that?! I should have given him a piece of my mind as well."

Considering her vaguely threatening statements and the vise grip she held the blow-dryer with, Miyabi seemed to be letting the rage

go to her head. Hana could practically hear the dying wails of the blow-dryer as it suffered beneath enough force to nearly destroy it.

The man making Miyabi grind her teeth was Yukizasa Sankourou. He was the future head of the Sankourou clan, and he had been a classmate of Saku's at Obsidian High School. The shade responsible for wounding Hana was originally something that Yukizasa had been tasked with defeating. That job had been pushed onto Hana as part of a plot to overthrow the Ichise children's parents.

This was all done with Saku's permission, however, so Miyabi and Aoi felt more than a little resentment toward him, too. That was why they had smiled sadistically when they watched Saku's mother, Mio, tear into him for what he'd done. Incidentally, it was Azuha who had snitched to Mio about it.

"If he ever attempts anything like that again, I'll see to it that he lives to regret it."

"Well, let's not go overboard."

Hana had already landed her hit on Yukizasa to let off some steam, so she wasn't too concerned.

As Hana finished applying an emulsion following her skin toner, Miyabi seemed to be done drying her hair, and she turned off the blow-dryer. Just then, the changing room's door burst open, and in came none other than Saku.

"Oh, I forgot to lock the door. Phew, barely finished in time."

"Master…please be more careful. Just think—what if this knave saw you in the nude?"

"Hey, I *thought* I locked it."

Hana could have been spotted changing had Saku's timing been any earlier. Hana was relieved, but Saku furrowed his brow and clicked his tongue.

"Tsk."

"What was that for?"

"Make sure you lock the door. What're you gonna do if Nozomu accidentally comes in while you're in the bath? Especially when *I* haven't even bathed with you yet."

"Again with the dirty old man stuff. You're not bathing with me for as long as I live!"

Hana glared daggers at Saku, but he was far from the kind of man who'd let that stop him.

"It's a husband's right to see his wife naked," Saku said with a face far straighter than those words warranted. "And your current attire is revealing enough as is! Don't ever wear those clothes in front of any man other than me."

Hana was part exasperated by the way he managed to pull something to be angry at out of thin air, and part incredibly embarrassed to have been so lasciviously oggled in her revealing (yet concealing) outfit.

"Stop looking, you idiot! I'll sue you for sexual harassment and drag your clan's name through the dirt!"

"Go ahead and try. I'll use my Ichinomiya authority to shut you down."

To the uninitiated, this might have looked like a typical lover's spat. If anything, the two were embarrassing themselves. But while Hana glared at Saku with the threatening energy of a cat with its fur standing on end, a jacket was draped upon her shoulders.

"Master, you'll catch a cold if you stay dressed like that."

"Thank you, Miyabi."

What a thoughtful shikigami.

After zipping the jacket up high enough to cover her neck, Hana finally felt relieved.

"I didn't say you had to cover up in front of *me*, you know."

"Shut up."

Hana shot Saku another glare, but all that did was make the corners of his lips curl up mischievously. Soon after, Saku seemed to remember something and changed the subject.

"Oh yeah, Hana. Keep your schedule open for next weekend."

"Why?"

"We talked about your full-course French dinner, remember?"

Hana's face lit up as soon as she heard those magic words.

"You're really gonna take me to one?!"

"Yeah, I promised."

"Hooray!"

Hana's eyes sparkled as she excitedly threw her hands in the air. This full-course French dinner was her compensation for being injured by the shade that Yukizasa had forced her to deal with, which Saku proposed as an apology. Hana graciously offered her forgiveness in exchange for this dinner.

"As you requested, I made a reservation for the highest-class full-course meal you could ask for."

"I'm getting even more excited!"

This was cuisine that the lord of the Ichinomiya clan, one of the five great clans protecting Japan, would call the "highest class." It clearly wasn't going to be the sort anyone could find at a hole-in-the-wall.

Hana was overjoyed, but she also casually slinked backward as Saku steadily advanced toward her. He paid her avoidance no mind and continued approaching until Hana's back reached the wall. Escape wasn't an option; Saku planted both arms on either side of her head. He had her caught in a *kabedon* wall pin.

Saku's self-assured grin was close enough to Hana that he could kiss her; her lips trembled as her body sensed she was in danger.

"Wh-what?"

"You're leaving all your shikigami at home when the day comes. Azuha too."

"Why?"

"We don't need anyone getting in the way of our date."

"Date?!"

"What're you making a fuss over? People call it a 'date' when a couple goes out together."

He wasn't incorrect, but only in the case of an ordinary couple. Hana and Saku were together because of a contract, and nothing more. They could divorce at any moment if Hana had her way.

However, Hana held her tongue; she had certainly learned by now that those words would throw him into a fit, and there was no telling what Saku would do then.

"You'd better leave them at home. Got it?"

"Easier said than done…"

Saku was trying to emphasize his point, but Hana could only look sheepishly behind him at Miyabi, who was holding the squeaky toy hammer responsible for felling the boss of the Skull of Nirvana in a single blow. She was aiming it right at Saku's cranium, prepared to swing it the instant Hana gave the word.

"Miyabi, I think that might be a little dangerous, so let's put that away."

"Oh dear, what a shame."

With an expression that made no attempt to hide just how much of a shame she thought it was, Miyabi made her squeaky toy hammer disappear. Hana had bought that squeaky hammer online as a weapon for Miyabi, and once it arrived, she'd imbued it with power to make it Miyabi's personal talisman. Just like how the shikigami themselves could appear and disappear at will, Miyabi could summon it or make it vanish whenever she liked. The great sword that Aoi wielded had a similar story; it was originally a toy Hana purchased online that she gave to Aoi after converting it into a talisman.

The weapons Hana made were fine enough for her to toot her own horn. If one of those were swung at Saku's defenseless dome, then the consequences would be rather dire. Then again, Saku was a Fifth Color—an Obsidian-rank—practitioner, so he'd probably avoid a fatal blow.

"I simply believe it's important to exterminate any insects attempting to bug my master before they become a problem."

Pouring from this divine, ethereal beauty's lips came a bit of venom toward Saku.

"Your shikigami are *really* overprotective."

"You've got some nerve telling me to leave them at home when you already know that."

Azuha and Arashi would probably stay home without any trouble if Hana asked, but Aoi was sure to throw a tantrum about it.

"Leave 'em anyway. Otherwise, your full-course meal is off the table."

"How could you?!"

Hana was shocked. She might actually need a plan. After she hemmed and hawed, a light bulb went off.

"Then how about you lend us Tsubaki for the day?"

Saku smirked as he caught on to what Hana was scheming.

"Fair enough. I'm sure Tsubaki will be happy to have some quality time with her beloved darling."

Hana felt a bit bad for Aoi, knowing how poorly he got along with Saku's shikigami. But full-course feasts didn't come around every day, so she chose to sacrifice her dedicated servant. That left only Miyabi…

"Miyabi, I promise I'll buy you a souvenir, so be a dear and watch the house, okay?"

Miyabi's disdain showed for an instant in her expression, but she had far more discipline than her emotional and childish shikigami sibling, so she hesitantly nodded soon enough.

"If that is what you wish, Master…"

"Thanks a bunch!"

Hana's head was occupied only with thoughts of her dinner. She began singing the phrase "full-course, full-course," with an elated smile. Saku, still keeping her pinned to the wall, gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

Hana froze.

Taking her lack of resistance to mean what he wanted it to, Saku moved in for a kiss on the lips. That was when the squeaky toy hammer was swung from behind him. Saku effortlessly dodged it as though he'd expected it from the start, but with the hammer failing to collide with its target, it hit the wall instead.

With an intense *thud*, the hammer opened a large hole in the wall. Saku looked none too pleased about it.

"Hana… Don't go handing out lethal weapons to your shikigami like candy. What would you do if I got hit by that?"

"I'd laugh at how you had it coming!"

Once she snapped out of her daze, Hana kicked Saku right in the shin.

Later, after Mio saw the hole in the changing room, a ban was issued on all squeaky toy hammer usage within the mansion. Hana ended up being scolded harshly over the property damage, which she felt was rather unfair.

◆

Finally, the day came for Hana to feast on her promised full-course French dinner.

She wore a formal, light pink dress adorned with lace, a far cry from her typical wardrobe. Her hair and makeup were beautifully done, and she looked quite pleased as she performed her final check in front of the mirror. This rather feminine style arguably suited Hazuki more than her, but having similar faces was a perk of being twins, so Hana was delighted to see that she could pull the outfit off just fine in her own right.

Aoi watched with a sullen look on his face. Tsubaki was stuck to his side with a blissful look on hers.

"Daaarling, let's have a little date of our own next time."

"No way! Master, I'm coming with you!" Aoi shouted.

"Now, darling, you have to be a good boy and watch the house with me. Besides, my own master ordered me to hold you tight all day looong!"

"LET ME GOOO!"

Tsubaki stuck to Aoi like glue, pinning down any hopes he had of escape.

"Master, should I stay home, too?" Azuha asked in her cute, childlike voice as she fluttered around Hana's head. It figured that with Aoi's attempts to come along, Azuha would ask as well.

"Sorry, Azuha. Saku told me not to take any of you along."

"Master," Aoi said, pouting a bit, "what do you value more? Us, or your full-course dinner?"

Hana couldn't answer immediately, so she stared off into space. Her shikigami were important, but it was hard to say no to a full-course meal.

"Master…," Aoi said accusingly, pointedly glaring at Hana after he seemed to pick up on the whispers of her heart.

"Ah-ha-ha," Hana laughed awkwardly as she continued to avoid looking Aoi in the eye. "Of course, you all are more important to me. That should be obvious."

"But the look on your face says the full-course dinner is important, too."

"Well, I mean…"

Unable to endure her master's hesitation, Miyabi let out a long sigh and interjected.

"Aoi, I think that's enough."

"Aw, come on!"

"This meal is a reward that our master earned by defeating that shade, so you'll just have to accept that and see her off."

"Ugh…"

Aoi understood, but he was still upset about being left behind.

"Fine, I get it," he said reluctantly. In the end, he let her go.

"Thank you, Miyabi. You too, Aoi."

Hana gave Aoi a pat on the head and picked up her bag.

"Anyway, I have to get going, so don't cause any trouble while I'm out."

"Have a pleasant evening, Master."

"Have a nice time, Master."

Miyabi smiled softly, Azuha fluttered about, Aoi continued to pout, and Tsubaki clung tightly to her pouty darling with a grin as she waved Hana good-bye.

Sadly, Arashi wasn't in the room, so Hana couldn't see his reaction before she left. She didn't know what he'd been up to lately, but it

seemed like he'd been going out every so often. Hana could have located him if she really wanted to, since Arashi was bound to her powers as her shikigami. But she had no intention of telling him what he could and couldn't do, so she let him roam free.

Saku was already waiting at the front door. He was dressed rather formally as well, in black slacks with a blue blazer.

"Sorry for the wait."

"Took you long enough."

"Aoi was making a fuss."

"Knew it," Saku said. He'd seen this coming, which was why he had lent Tsubaki in the first place. "You'd better have told him not to cause any trouble."

"I did. We should be fine."

"Then, let's go."

"Yes, let's!"

Hana was ecstatic to finally eat her long-awaited high-class French cuisine. She was positively giddy as she stepped into the car.

The restaurant they went to was located in a five-star luxury hotel owned by the Ichinomiya Group. The two were guided to a private room and offered drinks. Saku's appeared to be champagne, but since Hana was still only eighteen, she was given sparkling apple cider. At least it *looked* the part next to the champagne Saku was sipping.

"All riiight, cheers!"

The mood for the evening was not set by Saku or Hana, but instead by the energetic voice and the raised glass of Yukizasa. Who was there for some reason.

"What are *you* doing here?!" Hana shouted. Her eyebrows shot up as she pointed at the uninvited guest.

"Whaaat? I heard this was an apology for what went down, so shouldn't I be here since I'm a little responsible?"

"No, you shouldn't! Go home!" Hana yelled. She now viewed Yukizasa's very presence as a threat, but the man himself just laughed it off like always. Hana pleaded, "Saku, you have to do

something about this guy. I didn't come all this way just to have him spoil my full-course dinner!"

"Hey, do you gotta put it like that? You're gonna hurt my feelings."

Or so Yukizasa claimed, but the indomitable grin on his face did little to convince anyone. If anything, he looked like he was enjoying the chaos.

"First, how did you even find out that we'd be coming here?" Saku asked, exasperated by the man drinking champagne with a grin.

"Hey, I'm not the future Sankourou lord for nothing. I've got my sources."

Saku capitulated and sighed deeply.

"I did all that work to get those nosy shikigami to stay home, only for an even bigger pest to tag along…"

"Whoa, isn't it kinda rude to call me a pest?!"

"It's what you are. A nuisance trying to butt his way into a married couple's date."

Their rapid-fire back-and-forth really spoke to the depth of their bond, but Hana couldn't care less about that right now.

"Saku, just kick him out already."

"He's not the kind of person who listens to words, so we'll just have to give up."

"Awww…"

Hana instantly let out a very disgruntled whine. Even her expression made it clear how incredibly disgusted she was. But reading social cues wasn't a skill of Yukizasa's, so he continued to down his champagne and even asked for a refill.

"C'mon, Saku, what's the big deal? She's your wife, so that basically makes me and her family! And hey, you can call me Big Bro anytime you want."

"Nooo thank you!" Hana spat.

"Quit pushing your luck, idiot," Saku growled.

The icy glares and venomous rebukes from Hana and Saku failed to make Yukizasa so much as flinch. He chuckled, to the point where the two started to worry that he was already drunk.

“Stop laughing and get lost! I’ve been looking forward to this, so I don’t want you ruining it!”

Hana wouldn’t be able to enjoy her dinner when just seeing Yukizasa’s face made her stomach churn. She hadn’t forgotten the incident with the shade; Hana was the type to hold a grudge.

But then Yukizasa pulled what appeared to be a ticket from the inner pocket of his jacket.

“Here, I’ll give you this, so cut me some slack.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a special ticket that gets you free meals pretty much for life at a café in one of our Sankourou-operated hotels. There’ll always be some seats left open for you, so you can go whenever you like and even bring a few friends. It’s a pretty popular place, too; there’ve been TV specials talking about its afternoon tea.”

“Wait…is that café…?”

Shock hit Hana like a bolt of lightning coursing through her veins.

Hana knew this café. Rumor had it that it was so popular, it was almost impossible to get a reservation. Their decor changed with the seasons, and she’d even talked with her friend Suzu before about wanting to go there to try their afternoon tea, which was supposed to taste as luxurious as it looked.

“You’re really giving this to me?”

“If you let me join you for dinner.”

“Why, you’re always welcome here!”

Hana smiled widely and switched to a high-pitched, honey-sweet tone. Saku was irritated by her quick change in tune.

“How self-serving can you be…?”

“Come on, Saku. This restaurant’s infamous for how hard it is to secure a reservation! If it means getting the chance to visit whenever I want, then of *course* I’m gonna start kissing up!”

“The Ichinomiya bride isn’t supposed to kiss up over nothing! Have some dignity!”

Saku’s sharp critique went in one ear and out the other. Hana was quite satisfied now that she had Yukizasa’s ticket in hand.

“Dignity doesn’t fill an empty stomach!”

“And hey, it’s also a bit of an apology about before,” Yukizasa admitted.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Well, these things happen, so it’s water under the bridge.”

On the inside, Hana felt like she could break out into song and dance. On the outside, she cackled as she carefully placed her precious ticket inside her bag.

She could use it to have a girls’ day out with Hazuki, Suzu, and Kikyou. It was sure to be a delight, and just imagining it made Hana smile.

Before they knew it, the food arrived. Saku’s promise had set some high standards, and sure enough, every dish was delicious.

“So good!”

“Glad to hear it.”

Saku was a bit irked by Hana’s focus on her food, but he still watched her eat with a gentle gaze. Meanwhile, Yukizasa watched Saku with amusement before grinning and stepping in.

“Hey, listen, don’t you wanna hear about Saku’s love life back in high school? The guy was a hit with the ladies, I tell ya.”

Hana’s exquisite cutlery stopped in their tracks.

“Wait… I totally wanna know.”

Her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“You stupid—! Yukizasa, don’t go saying stuff she doesn’t need to hear!”

Saku blew up at Yukizasa for some reason, but his scrambling only made Hana even more curious.

“So were Saku’s high school days wild enough to get worked up over?”

Hana had heard before that Saku’s time as a student was pretty rough-and-tumble, so she imagined he must’ve gotten up to no good with women, too. Saku winced at how icy her glare had become, and he turned his frustrations onto Yukizasa.

“Yukizasa, seriously, go home!”

"C'mooon, I'm saying nothing but the truth."

Hana could tell that Saku was really getting peeved about Yukizasa's playful jabs.

"Don't tell me your acts were downright *unspeakable*…"

"I wasn't that bad!"

Saku tried to deny the accusations since Hana was growing increasingly disgusted, but by the time he noticed his slip of the tongue, it was already too late.

"So if you weren't *that* bad…that means you were still pretty awful."

"Guh."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Saku was at a loss for words, but Yukizasa started howling with laughter and slamming the table.

"You guys are *too* funny. Oh man, I can't breathe…"

"Good, don't!" Saku growled at his friend, who was now suffering from a busted gut.

Now that she was getting hints about his history with women, a bit of anger flared up within Hana. She tried to explain it away—perhaps she'd gotten carried away and eaten too much—but she knew the real reason it was there. It would've pained her to admit it, because Hana hadn't accepted that she could feel jealousy over him just yet. And she knew that if those feelings showed on her face, Saku would never let her hear the end of it. That's why she decided to keep it in her heart for now, tie it down with firm chains many times over, and seal it with a heavy padlock.

As Hana wrestled with her thoughts, Saku and Yukizasa continued their banter. Saku was angry, but Yukizasa was having the time of his life.

"Wanna hear the story about how Saku almost got trapped in the infirmary with one of the lady teachers?"

"Absolutely."

Hana was leaning forward, on the edge of her seat, when Saku flicked her on the forehead. He then hurled a wet towel at Yukizasa.

It landed spectacularly on his face, but his grin remained in place.

"What's the big deal? I'm just trying to entertain your dear, precious bride with some old stories."

"Yeah, it's no big deal!" Hana chimed in to gleefully take Yukizasa's side.

She had some complicated feelings about Saku's love life, but she was still dying to know just how much of a disaster he had been.

"Nobody asked. And *you*, stop going along with him, you idiot!"

Saku reprimanded not just Yukizasa but Hana as well.

"What're you calling me an idiot for? Well, I'm rubber, and you're glue, so everything bounces off of me and sticks to you!" Hana retorted.

"Are you a toddler?"

"It's your fault for having such a potty mouth. I'm amazed women saw anything in you. You sure you weren't imagining it? You know, with how egotistical you are."

To Hana, Saku was an arrogant jerk. Sure, he was handsome, but his personality left a lot to be desired.

Saku winced at Hana's response.

"Poor thing, you can't even *comprehend* my charms. Maybe I ought to give you a physical demonstration?"

With that, he approached Hana, and with his hand cupping her jaw, he drew her face close to his. Hana's face instantly turned beet red. They were close enough to kiss, and Yukizasa was still right there. His over-the-top attempt to come off as sexy just made it creepier.

"Wh-wh-wha—? Wait a second!"

Seeming to sense the effect he was having as Hana stammered, Saku looked smug.

"Yukizasa, look away."

"Okey dokey."

"Don't 'okey dokey' that! And wait— Why are you *staring* at us?!"

Hana snapped back at Yukizasa, who not only didn't look away but in fact stared intently and smiled at them.

"Oh, you think you're in a position to care about him, do you?"

"Gyah! Waaah!"

At the absolute last possible moment, Hana's cranium moved faster than its contents. She fended off Saku with an impressive headbutt.

"Ooh…"

Saku let out a pained wail, which gave Hana the opening she needed to escape his vile clutches. Relieved, she pivoted to pour salt onto her shameless assailant's wounds.

"Idiot! Dirty old man! Zero conscience!"

"That's really the first thing out of your mouth, huh…? I thought my teeth were going to get knocked out."

"It's your fault anyway!"

Hana spat out insults with her face still flushed. The embarrassment of being nearly kissed was part of it, but the other was just how *hot* Saku was.

As much as it pained her to admit it, he had good looks, if absolutely nothing else. She couldn't deny it; his popularity with women back in his high school days was surely no joke. As terrible as his personality was, he was the legitimate heir to the Ichinomiya clan, a highly skilled practitioner, and quite the looker to boot, so of course the girls couldn't keep their hands off him.

And yet Saku had come to like Hana, which continued to strike her as more and more of a mystery. She didn't think she'd done anything special; if there was something about her that struck a chord in Saku's heart, only Saku knew what it was.

"I swear, having such a bashful wife sure is hard on a husband…"

Saku seemed mildly annoyed as he returned to his seat, but the wife he was mildly annoyed at stared daggers back at him.

"I'm the one who ought to be complaining!"

Suddenly, Yukizasa started laughing again after watching their antics. The sort of stifled chuckles that he could barely keep to himself. The other two looked at him, puzzled.

"You really have changed, Saku. I bet anyone who used to know you would say the same if they saw you now."

Saku scowled like he'd just tasted something bitter, but he couldn't say anything back.

Hana didn't know how Saku had changed since his student days. Had he changed for the better or for the worse? Well, Hana only had to look at how Yukizasa was cracking up to know, so she said nothing and continued with her meal.

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When she'd finished eating, Hana rubbed her full tummy with a look of satisfaction on her face.

"Whew, that was a lotta food. I couldn't eat another bite!"

"You overdid it. Show some restraint for once."

"I'm impressed you put all that away. Did I make a mistake by giving you that ticket? I'm worried you'll start living at that café…"

It was no wonder that Saku and Yukizasa were so fed up; after Hana cleaned up every crumb of her gourmet full-course meal, she ordered seconds of luxurious desserts three more times. Her stomach was filled to the brim.

"Okay, I'm happy. Let's go home."

"Hold on, now!"

Hana tried to leave, but Saku hurriedly stopped her.

"What?"

"You're leaving already?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"Why do you think I made you keep your shikigami at home? We're already out together, so let's stop by some other spots."

Hana already had a full stomach, so she had absolutely no problem with going straight home… If anything, she *wanted* to get out of there, but the look in Saku's eyes told her she had no such option.

"Ooh, count me in!"

"*You* go home."

Yukizasa playfully tried to tag along, but Saku just shot him a cold glare.

"C'mon, what's the harm?"

"You'd get in the way. I already told you, this is a date! I tolerated you at dinner, but for the rest of the night, we need some alone time as a couple."

"Awww…"

Yukizasa looked disappointed, though he was also clearly getting a kick out of the expressions on *Saku's* face. Hana could applaud how amicably these old friends bantered with each other, but she really wished she had the option of not being a part of it.

Just then a voice called out to the three.

"Lord Ichinomiya. Sankourou."

Hearing their names called, Saku and Yukizasa put their conversation on hold. They glanced over to see two girls walking toward them, their ages probably just around Hana's. Both of them had beautiful faces.

"Botan…"

"Oh, well, if it ain't the Yotsukado's Botan and Seiran!"

"It's been some time, you two."

The girl named Botan smiled pleasantly at Saku and Yukizasa. Her smile was refined, suggesting that she had a very high-society upbringing. Her long, halo-topped hair, which reached down to her hips, didn't appear to have the slightest hint of damage, and it was so smooth and shiny that she looked like she was on her way to film a shampoo commercial. Her mannerisms were beautiful from head to toe; she looked like a lady of wealth through and through. Her eyes were a tad sharp, but that just made her seem all the classier, so her expression was hardly out of place.

Following a step behind her was a girl who had the dignified air of a fairy-tale princess's loyal knight, with the long bangs of her otherwise short hair parted straight down the center. Refraining from

taking the spotlight away from her escort, she gave Saku and Yukizasa a deep, silent bow.

"Quite the coincidence for us to meet in a place such as this."

"Sure is. Have you been well?"

"Why yes, of course. A pleasure to see that you are as well, Lord Ichinomiya."

Hana could also feel the rich-girl energy pouring off Botan when she spoke. The other girl was definitely not the type of person Hana saw on a regular basis.

"I've been told that Sankourou has reached Obsidian rank, so I must offer my congratulations."

"Awww, thanks!"

She seemed pretty familiar with Saku and Yukizasa. If nothing else, her saying "Obsidian rank" confirmed that she came from a practitioner family. And she had to have some high status to so casually chat up a clan lord and a future clan lord, of all people.

Hana stared at Botan intently, until all of a sudden, their gazes happened to meet, and Botan switched to a spiteful glare.

"Huh?"

Hana was so confused as to what she'd done to warrant a glare that she was less shocked and more dumbfounded. Saku then patted Hana on the back and pushed her forward.

"Hana, this is Botan Yotsukado. As you can guess from her name, she's the daughter of one of the five clans, Yotsukado. She was about the same age as Nozomu last I saw, so she should be the same age as you now."

"Oh!"

Hana had thought she seemed high society, and it turned out that that was exactly where she came from. Being the daughter of a main family put her in the same position as Kikyou, but Hana had some mixed feelings as she compared how different two main clan well-to-do ladies could be. She felt bad about putting Kikyou down, but in terms of first impressions, this Botan girl seemed much more like what she expected a high-class daughter of a main clan to be.

Hana had a hard time imagining the fretful Kikyou as a girl belonging to such a celebrated clan, much less as a candidate to be that clan's next lord.

Before Hana could ask if Botan was also a candidate to be the next lord of her clan, Saku introduced the girl standing behind Botan.

"This other person is Seiran Shidou. She's the daughter of a branch family that has served the Yotsukado clan for generations. She's been with Botan since they were little."

Once her introduction had finished, Seiran bowed to Hana. Her gesture was beautiful—she'd obviously been very well trained to have good manners.

"I am Seiran Shidou. Please feel free to call me Seiran."

Hana scrambled to bow her own head.

"Oh, nice to meet you. I'm Hana."

Hana never learned etiquette, so lowering her head like this was the most she could do. Botan gave a small chuckle at her attempt, like she was taking Hana for a fool.

"Lord Ichinomiya, who might this commoner be?"

"Com…moner…"

Okay, it was true the Ichise family, which Hana was born into, might have been considered commoners when comparing them to the five clans, but they were definitely better off than the average household. And all that aside, calling someone you've only just met a "commoner" was an astounding show of rudeness. Hana was a bit irritated, but she couldn't exactly make a scene in front of the esteemed daughter of the Yotsukado clan, so she forced a smile instead.

"This is Hana. My bride."

"Oh my, is that so? I assumed that someone so homely and poor-mannered simply *had* to be yet another one of those unsightly insects that always seem to buzz about you. In that case, I do suggest you have her brush up on her etiquette."

It seemed like this girl was trying to pick a fight. Hana forced herself to smile even harder as she prepared to oblige with a two-for-one special on knuckle sandwiches, but Saku interjected with a sigh.

"Botan, that's not what I want from Hana."

"Oh, but that won't do for a bride of a clan lord. You must at least have her learn to carry herself with the dignity that Seiran here carries in a single finger."

At this point, Hana was less angry and more impressed by how committed this girl was to insulting her. If anything, Hana now questioned why she was so confrontational to begin with.

"But enough of that. Lord Ichinomiya, Father has said he'd very much like to celebrate your succession as clan lord."

"Yeah, fair enough."

"And you, Sankourou, have managed to reach Obsidian rank at such a young age, so he'd very much like to extend the celebration to you, as well."

"Nah, it's nothin' worth celebrating over."

"Oh, I do believe it's plenty worth celebrating."

Botan, who laughed with yet another high-class "Tee-hee-hee," was no longer even acknowledging Hana's presence, and she continued having a lively chat with Saku and Yukizasa. Seiran, like Hana, was not a part of the conversation, but something made Hana feel like she herself was being explicitly excluded and left in the dust. Hana wasn't dense; nobody had to tell her it was intentional—she could pick up on it from the atmosphere. And it was from someone she'd just met, too…

Hana didn't like wasting energy and so tended to avoid dwelling on things, so if they were planning to ignore her, she would've continued doing likewise without a second thought. But that didn't mean she had to like it. Still, since Saku didn't bother to say a word about it, maybe it wasn't worth Hana reacting to it at all.

If everyone else was going to catch up on old times, then Hana would have loved to let them and go home herself, but Saku held

her arm in a tight grip, as though telling her she wasn't going anywhere, so Hana was stuck listening to them. Annoyed at having gotten tangled up with this pain in the neck, Hana could only wait for their conversation to end.

Hana felt that no full-course French dinner was worth suffering through this, but it was too late for regrets.

"I do believe it's about time for us to leave. I'm afraid our chance encounter might have made me a bit too talkative, so I apologize for having taken up so much of your evening."

Hana barely kept her knee-jerk response of *Yeah, I'll say* from leaving her lips. The joy at having been freed from this agony took priority.

Botan looked at Hana one last time and snickered suspiciously.

"It appears that we of Campus Four will face little challenge to our dominance at the school festival."

Botan said those parting words and then left with Seiran.

"School festival?"

A question mark appeared in Hana's mind as she tilted her head. Saku then placed his hand atop her still-tilted head.

"What?"

"Oh, I was just impressed how maturely you handled that."

"Do you think I'm a grade schooler or just a toddler?"

Hana gave him a glance that was none too pleased, but Yukizasa soon interrupted by busting out laughing again.

"Guess Botan's still pretty green, eh?"

"What do you mean?" Hana asked Yukizasa with a look of curiosity —a look aimed upward, given Yukizasa's supermodel height.

"Botan's a candidate to be the next clan lord, just like Kikyou, but she stood right next to you and didn't show any sign of noticing your power. Even I could tell when we first met, too. Just goes to show that she might act like a know-it-all, but she's still a student. A greenhorn."

Yukizasa spoke with a bit of disappointment apparent on his face.

“Wait—isn’t it kinda unfair to compare her to Obsidian-rank practitioners like you two?”

She didn’t mean to toot her own horn, but Hana had stood alongside Obsidian-rank practitioners like Saku and Yukizasa to solve no small number of their problems. And what’s more, her daily routine involved fending off the many powerful shades that targeted her, so she had enough combat experience to make her nauseous. She was confident in both the strength of her powers and her skill in controlling them for all these years, so it wasn’t so easy for anyone to see through her.

Though, according to Saku, her older brother, Yanagi, had found out on the day after that fifteenth birthday when her powers suddenly sprang up out of nowhere, but she hadn’t known how to control them back then, so there wasn’t much she could do about that.

“No, Kikyou and the other Nijouins focus on the crafting of talismans, but the Yotsukado clan specializes in attacks. Someone who can’t sense the level of another’s power is far from having what it takes to serve as the clan lord.”

Saku criticized the girl quite harshly.

“She’s still a third-year in high school, right? Aren’t you being a little cruel?”

“*You* can measure people’s powers, right, Hana?”

Hana had to chuckle at how Saku asked this as if it were the most natural thing in the world. If the question was whether she could or couldn’t, then of course she’d say yes.

“Well, yeah.”

The powers Botan possessed were certainly strong, but Hana judged that they didn’t match her own.

“Still, doesn’t that sorta thing come with experience?”

What kind of level was he expecting from a girl in her teens? Besides, to two Obsidian-rank practitioners, even Hana probably counted as an immature greenhorn.

"Maybe. But Botan's got a ridiculous ego, so that's keeping her actual skills from growing. She won't be anywhere near ready for the seat of the next clan lord if she keeps that up."

"I'll say," said Yukizasa in agreement with Saku's critique. Hana was practically clueless about the five clans, so it was hard for her to judge one way or the other.

"Well, it's true there aren't many other candidates to be clan lord who can see through Hana's power. That's not happening without a lot of skill and experience."

"If anything, it'd be a rubber stamp for anyone who *could* see through her."

"Fair enough. It's a clear way to separate who's got power and who doesn't. We ought to toss Hana into a room full of the candidates to be clan lord and see what happens."

"Ooh, that idea ain't half bad. Sounds fun!"

With a wicked smile, Saku made a suggestion that didn't quite sound like a joke, and Yukizasa cackled along anyway.

"I'm not a toy for your amusement, you know."

The scary thing about the two men was that those plans could very well have been serious. Tossing her into a room filled with candidates to be clan lord was a plan that could come to fruition. And given her experiences with the other clan members whom she'd met, she couldn't imagine willingly choosing to involve herself with that crowd.

Kikyou and Nozomu were enough of a headache for her, thank you very much.

Chapter 2

Several days later, Hana's school held an assembly early in the morning.

"Boooring. Think I'll skip."

"Come on, Hana, don't be like that. This is supposed to be a really important announcement."

Hana looked like she was ready to escape at a moment's notice, but her best friend, Suzu, was holding her arm to keep her in place.

"It's just gonna be another of the vice principal's rambles, right? I wish *he* were the one having to listen to all the 'past glories' of his days in the field. Nobody wants to be here, for crying out loud. It's the same decades-old story over and over and over, and I'm sick of it."

"Hana, he can hear you!"

Not only were the students incredibly quiet for a school-wide assembly, but Hana and Suzu were relatively close to the front rows. As such, Hana assumed the vice principal heard their every word, given that he was in a state of shock despite standing at the podium and being fully prepared to speak.

"Wha…? Are my anecdotes that much of a bother?"

The vice principal turned to the other teachers, but none would look him in the eye. Some of the students averted their gazes, some nodded firmly in agreement with Hana's words, and some even applauded her bravery to say what nobody else dared. Nobody

voiced their agreement out loud, but the vice principal seemed to take the hint.

"And here I thought you all enjoyed my stories…"

The vice principal's shoulders slumped sadly, and since he was clearly down for the count, a replacement speaker was quickly called in. So the famous muscle head PE teacher stepped up to the podium.

"Er, the vice principal's feeling a bit down now, so I'll give the explanation… But, uh, yeah, the vice principal was a super-great practitioner back in his day, so let's all be just a liiittle nicer to him and open our hearts a liiittle more, or a whole lot more, to what he has to say."

Those words seemed to only pour more salt on the vice principal's wounds, but nobody mentioned it. A look in the man's direction showed him still sulking, but the principal was trying to cheer him up.

"See, Hana? You went and made the vice principal all sad."

"I, er, really didn't mean to…"

Even Hana felt some guilt over the wrong she'd done. A very, very small amount anyway.

Back at the podium, the PE teacher cleared his throat and changed the subject. He had the students' attention.

"For today's assembly, we'd like to talk a bit about the upcoming school festival."

Hana could tell that the words *school festival* piqued the curiosity of the rest of the crowd. Only Hana was left tilting her head.

"Hey, Suzu. What's this school festival thing about again?"

"Hana, you asked me the same thing *last* year. When you don't care about something, it might as well not exist to you, huh?"

Suzu had her pouty angry expression on, but that wasn't a very scary sight.

"Sorry, my bad."

Hana apologized, but it was plain for all to see that she didn't feel too torn up about it.

"The school festival is an event we hold every year where all five campuses of Obsidian High gather together and celebrate."

"We've been doing that?"

"Yeah, you just don't remember because you think everything's a pain, and you stayed home."

"Did I?"

When Hana thought back on it, she…couldn't find any trace of it in her memory.

"The school festival was held at Campus Five last year, and it was at Campus Four the year before that. Are you sure you don't remember saying how you didn't wanna bother going all the way to another school?"

"Hmm… Ah, I feel like I might have said something like that… possibly?"

She had the vague impression that the memory might have been stored in some deep corner of her mind palace, but it was *just* a vague impression.

"Oh, Hana, really…"

Suzu was angry, but that didn't stop her from calmly explaining everything in great detail.

"The host campus rotates every year. This year is our turn at Campus One, so all the students from the other schools will be gathering here. There were a bunch of food stalls and stage shows at the Campus Four and Five festivals, too; it was really cool."

"Huh, you don't say."

"I'm sure there's gonna be a ton of stalls and events this time, too."

Hana was starting to remember bits and pieces. Now that she thought about it, she did recall hearing Suzu talk excitedly about some other schools before. Hana had been interested in the food stalls, but not interested enough to drag herself to a whole other school, so she'd ended up staying home. Campus Four and Campus Five were both far away from the prefecture where Hana lived; she'd

heard that visiting these festivals required an overnight trip, and sure enough, Hana had thought it sounded like a pain.

If it were any other group operating the festival, it would be one heck of a challenge to accommodate every visiting student. And not just one campus's students, but *four* other campuses' worth of students, at that. However, Obsidian High was backed by the five clans who pulled the strings of the country behind the scenes; it was a trifling task for them to complete the paperwork and procure the funding to secure hotel rooms for all those students.

"So you'll go this year, right, Hana?"

"Hmm, maybe."

Since the festival was being held at Campus One, the trip would just be another commute to school. And since it was at a practitioner school, people could have their shikigami out with no problem at all. With Hana's true power now being common knowledge, she could enjoy the day with Aoi, Miyabi, and even Arashi.

"Yeah, sounds fun, so I may as well drop by."

"Hooray!"

Suzu gave Hana a big, overjoyed hug.

The PE teacher's speech finished while Hana and Suzu were talking, and then the student council president took to the podium.

At Obsidian High, the student council president was selected from Class B. Class A focused more on practical lessons, providing its students with plenty of real combat experience outside the campus; this kept those students busy and frequently off campus.

The student council president reached the podium and immediately clenched his hands into fists in frustration.

"As I'm sure you're all aware, nothing matters more than the Campus Cup! This year, I *swear* that Campus One will prove victorious and send Campus Four crying to their mommas!"

He then thrust his fist into the air, and the entire audience roared in support.

"Whoooooooooo!"

"We're gonna wiiiiiin!"

"Campus Four is going doooooown!"

The students raised an ear-aching cacophony along with their fists, and some were even in tears. Hana glanced to her side, and she saw that even Suzu was shouting "Let's goooooo!" as she powerfully pumped her fists in the air. Her peers were hitting a fever pitch for some reason, while Hana alone was left in the dust.

"What's…going on?"

When Hana had recovered from the shell shock, she saw Nozomu rush up to the podium and snatch the mic from the student council president. His eyes were glazed over, like he was moved to action by the fervor in the air.

"Listen up! Our enemy is Campus Four, and nobody else! There's no need to get distracted by the others. We're gonna be the ones winning the Campus Cup!"

He was exuding the sheer willpower of a hot-blooded manga hero, so at this point, Hana just had to ask.

"Hey, Suzu. What's this Campus Cup?"

"Figures you don't know that, either."

She was exasperated, but Suzu still explained it to Hana.

"The Campus Cup is just what it sounds like: a competition between the campuses. Each campus chooses a team of contestants who compete against one another using their practitioner skills. Campus One had a long history of taking first place, but for the past two years in a row, we've lost to Campus Four and gotten second. That's why everyone's so excited to take back the crown. Especially Ichinomiya up there. He's been on the team since he was a first-year, so it's a personal grudge for him."

"Ah, I get it."

Suzu explained it perfectly, so Hana got the picture.

The streak lasting for the past two years meant the losses started the year Hana enrolled. Nozomu and the rest of the third-years had seen victory snatched away by Campus Four since the year they enrolled, too.

"And those Campus Four people, they stood right in front of Ichinomiya and went, 'My, how far Campus One has fallen,' and then started laughing like they didn't care if we heard them! They're a rotten bunch, for real."

"I can already imagine Nozomu taking the bait."

No, on second thought, Nozomu would have been comparing himself to his brother back then, so he might have gotten sad instead. Even from Hana's far-removed perspective, she could understand Nozomu's reason for being so furiously fired up.

"Still, I'm impressed those students managed to say that about a direct Ichinomiya descendant and live to tell the tale."

If Hana didn't have Saku himself to back her up, even she wouldn't attempt to say anything rude to a direct clan descendant. The five clans had more than enough power to snuff out a single human life with the ease of squashing a tiny bug.

"You'd think, but they had the Yotsukado heiress with them, so nothing happened."

"The Yotsukado heiress?"

"A person named Botan Yotsukado."

"Hmm…? Ohhh."

Hana thought she'd heard that name somewhere before, so she paused, then remembered before long. It was that girl who came and talked to Saku and Yukizasa the other night when she went to eat her full-course dinner.

That girl was also a candidate to be the next Yotsukado clan lord, so the other students had likely let their victory go to their heads. Nozomu wouldn't have wanted to spark a dispute with the Yotsukado clan, so he must've turned the other cheek despite them daring to pick a fight.

Well, whatever the reason, absolutely none of it had anything to do with Hana. The memory of Botan's glare from when they first met had already vanished from her mind.

"The team members are typically picked from Class A. Let's cheer them all on, Hana!"

"Meh, I think I'd rather tour the food stalls."

Suzu had enough school spirit to go around, but Hana didn't care which school won. She was the polar opposite of her deeply invested peers and did not hold one iota of interest.

"Wonder what kinda food they'll serve."

"Hana, come ooon!"

Hana's mind was firmly fixed on food. Suzu called to her with a mix of exhaustion and disappointment, but Hana ignored her. During it all, from the podium, Nozomu was calling for Campus Four's downfall. And then…

"Here are the members we've chosen to grind the faces of those stuck-up Campus Four jerks into the dirt."

With that, a few students walked up to the podium. These were apparently the students who would be fighting in the Campus Cup. Hana still had zero interest, but seeing a familiar face in that group did catch her attention.

"Oh, it's Hazuki."

She saw Hazuki among the team members. Hazuki had a human-form shikigami named Hiiragi, and she had the best grades in Class A, so she was about as obvious a pick for a practitioner team as someone could get. Hana also saw Kikyou and Kiriya—their presence seemed to get the audience buzzing.

"Hey, the two Nijouin clan head candidates are on the team!"

"Weren't those two students from Campus Two? They were even on the Campus Two team last year. Are they sure about this?"

"It's like we're picking a fight with Campus Two."

"But hey, if it means beating Campus Four, I ain't complaining."

"Yeah, we've gotta take every chance we can get."

Some students sounded conflicted about having the twin transfer students on the team, but the majority welcomed them if it meant winning the competition.

"This could very well be our strongest roster in Campus One history. If anyone objects, raise your hand."

Nozomu declared to the audience. There wasn't a single voice of dissent, with everyone's silence taken as a sign of approval. That is, until one person piped up.

"Me!"

The speaker wasn't among the students before Nozomu; instead, they were behind him. The person who had so firmly raised their hand to make themself known was one of the Nijouin twins, Kikyou. Though typically quite timid, Kikyou had her eyes open wide that day, and she seemed uncharacteristically imperious.

"What is it?" Nozomu asked with a bit of surprise. Apparently, he hadn't expected a response from Kikyou, either.

"I have an objection!"

Nozomu grew irritated.

"Against *what*? The teachers already gave this roster the seal of approval."

"I nominate Hana to be on the team!"

Hana was watching the events unfold with her gaze off in space, but a shiver suddenly went down her spine when she heard her name.

"Huh? Kikyou, seriously, what are you talking about?!"

Hana scrambled to get a word in and beg to please, please, please keep her out of this hassle, but sadly, the debate among the crowd quickly drowned her out.

"Wait, nominate? Isn't she in Class C? The team's normally picked from Class A."

"Maybe that's just because they've never picked from Class C before?"

"It'd be a first for us to pick a Class C student for the team. The other schools would laugh us out of the festival."

The gazes of the chatting students started gathering on Hana, who now felt incredibly uncomfortable. Many of the voices were critical of Hana being in Class C. Hazuki wore a worried expression as she looked toward her sister.

"Hana is absolutely necessary! Her high level of practitioner skill is now common knowledge! What reason would one have to object?!"

"The team members are practically always selected from Class A," Nozomu interjected. Hana silently cheered for him, hoping he would try objecting a little more fiercely, but the look on Nozomu's face suggested he was far from committed.

Just then Kikyou hit the final nail in the coffin.

"Are you okay with *losing* to that phony princess?!"

Nozomu was taken aback, so Kikyou continued to lay on the pressure.

"Hana's strength is essential if we wish to make that stuck-up prima donna taste the bitterness of defeat! We must use any means accessible to us!"

With that, she pointed firmly at Nozomu. Kikyou had become assertive out of nowhere.

"You…have a point."

Just when Hana hoped he'd stick to his guns, Nozomu actually started leaning toward Kikyou's opinion. And it wasn't just him; the tide of the crowd was turning, too.

"If it means beating Campus Four, I'm open to it."

"We're in no place to start caring about what class someone's in."

"This year's gonna be my last school festival, so I really wanna see us win…"

The previously critical gazes directed at Hana were now becoming hopeful about their new lifeline.

"W-w-wait!" Hana stammered in a rush.

"As a practitioner with human-form shikigami, and even an inugami at her beck and call, Hana will prove to be our greatest weapon! We absolutely must make that woman's little face twist in anguish!"

Kikyou firmly clenched her hands. Nobody would stop her. Keeping her in check was typically Kiriya's job, but he just seemed to be in a daze.

"Kiriya! I beg you, stop Kikyou!" Hana shouted, but he didn't hear a thing.

Before she knew it, Hana was on the Campus Cup team.

"You've gotta be kidding me…"

Hana sat still, stunned.

◆

It was the lunch break following that roller coaster of a school assembly. Hana crossed her arms and exuded fury as she scolded Kikyou from the opposite side of a cafeteria table.

"What were you thinking with that stunt?"

"I'm sorry…"

Kikyou's shoulders slumped dejectedly; she sure didn't look much like the person who didn't hesitate to firmly assert herself in front of a massive audience during the assembly. *That* Kikyou was clearly the weird one; this timid nature was overwhelmingly the norm for her.

"And, Kiriya, why didn't you stop her? Times like these are what you're *here* for!"

Hana found herself pushing the blame onto the boy sitting next to Kikyou, and this was the one time she had to give him a piece of her mind.

"I was looking at the sky and didn't really notice. There was a cloud that looked like Hibari. I should've taken a picture…"

An enigma as always. Realizing that nothing she said would get through to him, Hana quickly gave up.

"I know I nominated you without your permission…but I had no choice! If we want to make that phony princess cry like a baby, we need you…"

Kikyou pleaded with puppy-dog eyes that were on the brink of tears. It was a stance meant to stir one's protective instincts, but it would take far more than that to touch Hana's heart.

"Enough of that. Just tell them to take me off the roster right now."

Joining the Campus Cup was not a joke that Hana found funny. There was no way she'd ever willingly choose to join such an obvious pain in the butt of an event.

And the specifics of that event did *not* help. A competition testing practitioners' powers was diametrically opposed to Hana's goal of hiding her powers so that she could live in peace and tranquility.

Sure, Hana had lowered the veil and shown her powers before, but that was for Hazuki's sake. Now that those rotten parents of hers were gone, she wanted to go back to blending into the crowd as much as possible.

The only ones who saw Hana exercise her power were the people here on Campus One. Hana wanted to believe that she still had the chance of lying low. She would graduate from school, work at an Ichinomiya Group company until retirement, then she'd cash out on her contractual marriage with Saku to the tune of one billion yen. Finally, she'd live out her golden years in the countryside with her shikigami, far removed from the hustle and bustle of the outside world, and on nobody's terms but her own. Hana had stayed committed to her goal from the get-go.

To preserve this dream, she had no reason to go around using her powers in front of a massive crowd hailing from all five campuses. She could no longer hide the existences of Aoi, Miyabi, or Arashi the inugami, but she still had no desire to take the spotlight on top of that.

"Oooh… Please, I beg you, Hanaaa!"

Even when Kikyou pleaded on the verge of tears, Hana shook her head.

"I am *not* joining the team."

"But I want to smash the bridge of that phony princess's nose in!"

"No. Way."

Not even Kikyou's most tearful appeals were enough to sway Hana.

"But I can think of nobody besides you who can stand up to that phony princess, Hana! I beg of you!"

Kikyou was long past the verge of tears and now had actual tears welling in her eyes. It gave Hana the unbearable sensation of being a bully, but nonetheless, she didn't want to do what she didn't want to do.

"I don't wanna."

Hana continued her firm refusal. But after watching this all unfold from Hana's side, Hazuki stepped in.

"Hana, I also want you to join. Having you there would be a great help."

"Oof…"

Hearing Hazuki beseech her with that unshakable gaze put Hana at a loss for words.

The old Hana might have turned her down immediately, the same way she'd just done with Kikyou. But recently, Hana learned that when she and Hazuki were young and her practitioner powers were still weak, her parents had actually planned to put her up for adoption. It was only because Hazuki had offered herself as a sacrifice that Hana was saved, a kindness that Hana had gone almost her whole life without knowing.

Now that Hana knew the truth, she couldn't bear to oppose her sister that much. Especially not when she was asking so desperately.

"Hmm…"

Hana didn't know what to do with the pincer attack of clinging gazes. Just then Nozomu came by.

"Hey, you're on the Campus Cup team, so you better fight like your life depends on it."

Nozomu was rarely the one to start conversations, but here he was, going out of his way to talk to Hana. He sure was taking this Campus Cup seriously. However, Hana couldn't have people getting their hopes up over nothing, so she shut him down quickly.

"Hold on—I never said I was gonna do it."

"You're not going to do it?!"

"But you must! The only person who can defeat that phony princess is you, Hana!"

Kikyou was starting to get fired up, with the tears in her eyes just moments ago now nowhere to be seen.

"Uh…Kikyou, what's this 'phony princess' stuff even about?"

"The 'phony princess' term refers to none other than Campus Four's ace, Botan Yotsukado."

"No, I mean, Yotsukado's not a phony at all, right?"

If anything, Hana thought Botan was as close to being a noble lady as someone got, but Kikyou pursed her lips at Hana's response.

"I met her not too long ago, and she seemed a lot more refined than you."

"How rude, Hana! How can you even think to compare me to that skin-deep phony princess?! I'm far more suited to being considered the princess of the five clans, am I not?!"

"No comment."

Hana kept her thoughts to herself since Kikyou had started to cry again.

"Kiriyaaa!"

"There, there."

With Kiriya bearing the responsibility of comforting his sister, Hana turned her questions to Hazuki.

"Is the Yotsukado girl really that strong? Come to think of it, I know the Campus Cup is about competing with practitioner powers, but what do you actually *do*?"

"There are a number of event categories. There are ones testing the strength of our barriers, the time it takes to defeat shades, and even the quality of the talismans we create. Kikyou here has won the talisman-crafting category for the past two years."

"Huh."

This was a surprise to Hana, but Kikyou and Kiriya were candidates to be clan lord for the Nijouin clan, which specialized in crafting talismans. They wouldn't be on the short list if they were losing a competition to fellow students.

"That's why we're really lucky to have taken Kikyou for our team this year, because the overall winner is decided by the sum of our

scores in each category. Campus Two might mourn the loss of their greatest asset, though."

"I heard from Suzu that you guys lost to Campus Four for the past two years. Is that right?"

Hana spoke as though she had zero connection to the Campus Cup, which now exasperated both Hazuki and Nozomu as well.

"How do you *not* know about it?"

"Because I didn't go to the school festivals for the last two years."

"What *did* you do?"

"Stayed home and played video games."

Hazuki and Nozomu heaved heavy sighs in response to Hana's sunny smile.

"I'll bring Hana up to speed," Hazuki said. "Campus One and Campus Four always end up neck and neck, but we just haven't been able to pull ahead in the end."

"Why's that?"

"The final event is a battle using our shikigami, but we haven't been able to beat Botan… The final category comes with a large-point bonus, so even if we're in the lead, Campus Four always stages a comeback against us."

Hazuki recited the Cup history with a gloomy expression—an expression Nozomu shared.

"Who typically gets sent out for the final event?"

"It's a tournament bracket with two students from each campus. Nozomu and I have entered since we were first-years."

"You lost even with you two on the team?"

Hazuki's shikigami, Hiiragi, had a human form. Those were the highest level of shikigami, so one would think Hiiragi would win the whole tournament with ease, but based on Hazuki's explanation, it sounded like that wasn't the case.

"Botan's shikigami in particular are hard for Hiiragi to fight. And to make matters worse, she has multiple shikigami, just like you."

"Huh."

Student practitioners with multiple shikigami were almost unheard of. It probably hadn't helped that Hazuki and Hiiragi were not used to that kind of fight.

"I'm giving up my spot to you this year, so you better make sure you take that woman out!" Nozomu said, pointing at Hana for emphasis. He sure was bossy. Knowing Saku, she determined it must run in the family.

"He's exactly right, Hana. Let us march to war!" Kikyou said, gripping Hana's hand.

"Why are you two getting so aggressive?"

Hana had been dying to know the whole time. Hazuki chuckled and provided an answer.

"Nozomu has never been able to win against Botan, and every time she won, she'd insult him by comparing him to the clan lord."

"Ahhh."

Hana now looked at Nozomu with a twinge of pity, to which Nozomu frustratingly clicked his tongue.

"If that wasn't enough, those Campus Four students heard her and joined in to talk trash. That woman was the *only* thing stopping us from winning, too!"

Nozomu stomped his foot. That loss must have cut deep. He looked like he did when Hana poked fun at him, but this was like a burst of some much stronger feelings.

"And Nozomu is far from the only victim. She always demeans me, too! She has the nerve to say that anyone can make talismans, that it's nothing to be proud of!"

Even Kikyou was slamming the table in frustration.

"Mind you, the Nijouin and Yotsukado clans have different specialties, yet she knowingly mocks the weakness of my powers. She said that if it were my powers that were strong and not my skill at making talismans, I could have become Lord Ichinomiya's wife."

That was back when Kikyou was still in love with Saku, so it must have been a critical hit.

"Curse that phony princess! Waaah!"

She seemed to be over her feelings for Saku, but that was a whole other issue than Hana's problems with this girl.

Kikyou now had her face buried in her arms atop the table, so Kiriya gently patted her shoulder from the next seat over. It didn't seem to accomplish much.

"I gotta say, the more I hear about this, the more I *don't* wanna do it."

This sounded like heavy, personal grudges were involved. Hana wished for nothing but peace and tranquility, so she had no desire to be dragged into this or even be involved at all.

"I beg you, Hana! You're our only hope!"

"Uhhh."

Hana looked revolted at the thought, but Kikyou wasn't going to let her escape.

"Hana!"

"Hana."

"Hey."

With the combined pressure of Kikyou, Hazuki, and Nozomu against her, Hana slumped her shoulders and gave in. Despite her act, Hana was weak when it came to these people she'd let into her life.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it."

Hana sighed deeply and admitted defeat.

◆

That evening, Saku returned home from work and entered Hana's room.

"Welcome baaack."

"Yeah, I'm home."

Hana was lounging on the sofa, and Saku entering didn't spur her to change her posture. Saku didn't mind; the two of them acting like this really spoke to how close they'd become. But who could say if Hana realized that herself?

"You've been comin' home late a lot."

Saku hadn't returned home in time for dinner, so Hana ate with Mio and Nozomu. And it wasn't just that night—it'd happened the past several nights, too.

As the lord of the clan, Saku led others from within the mansion relatively often, so it was rare for him to miss so many family dinners in a row. Hana practically never saw him at home when she first moved into the Ichinomiya mansion, but that was a different situation. He'd been preparing for their wedding and handling the mountain of work that came with being a newly appointed clan lord.

"The school festival is coming up, after all…," Saku said.

Something about him seemed odd for a moment, but Hana figured it must have been her imagination, and she dismissed it.

"You're involved with the school festival?"

"Of course. It's an event held under Ichinomiya jurisdiction, so I have to take the reins and direct everyone. There'll be plenty of powerful clan members and Association bigwigs coming to see the Campus Cup, after all."

"Are *that* many people coming to watch the Campus Cup?"

"Of course there are. It's the main event. Heck, you could say that the school festival exists just for the Campus Cup."

"Ugh."

Hana was already regretting giving in. She started wondering if it wasn't too late to quit.

"What's that groan for?"

"It's 'cause I got picked for the Campus Cup team…"

"I heard. Nozomu was glad to tell me all about it the second I got home. About how he'd been chosen for the team for another year and how he offered the final event to you."

"Why, that brother-loving…"

He just wanted to subtly hint that Saku should come see because he'd made the team. If I made a Venn diagram comparing Nozomu to a dog wagging his tail and begging to be called a good boy, I'd get a single circle.

"I never thought the Hana I knew would actually *agree* to it."

"Hey, I never wanted to be involved in any part of it. But come on, I had Kikyou and Hazuki asking me to do it. Ahhh, what do I do…? Those two probably want me to go all out in the fight, but that'd be such a pain…"

Hana puckered her lips in annoyance, to which Saku had to chuckle. His expression was relaxed, even playful.

"All that complaining, yet you still agreed to join. I never knew you were so kindhearted."

"What do you take me for?"

Hana pouted, but Saku approached her and gently patted her head as she lay on the couch.

"No, I was just thinking that you've really let yourself relax. You had such cold eyes when we first met, like you saw everyone else as your enemy."

"I did not…"

"Oh, you were quite the thorny rose. In fact, had this happened just a bit earlier, you wouldn't have agreed to use your powers in front of others no matter who begged you."

"I mean…"

Hana couldn't deny it, so she was at a loss for words. Saku was right. The old her never would have accepted a request that didn't benefit her in some way.

"Have I…really changed that much?"

Hana didn't think she'd changed, but it seemed Saku saw things differently.

"Compared to before, yeah. In a good way, I think. Go break a leg up there. I'll have your back for whatever comes after."

Saku patted her gently on the head a few more times. It made Hana feel fidgety all around; because if she really *had* changed, then the biggest catalyst was probably Saku. She felt that meeting Saku had prompted her and her surroundings to change.

"I wonder what I'd be doing if I never met you," Hana pondered aloud.

"That's a waste of energy to think about."

"How come?"

Curious, Hana looked up to see Saku's smug grin.

"Because it wasn't chance that brought me to you, but certainty. Even if I hadn't found you in that park, I guarantee you would've caught my eye somewhere down the road."

Hana was immediately embarrassed by Saku's confident, doubtless, and straight-to-the-heart expression of love.

"You jerk!"

Saku chuckled with glee at how Hana was too embarrassed to come back with any more insults to throw at him.

The eyes Hana saw looking back at her were gentle, brimming with endearment; she couldn't bear to look right at them, so she instead buried her face in a nearby cushion.

"Hana, just be honest already. You've fallen for my charms, no? I haven't forgotten how you said you loved me before."

"Sh-shut up!"

Hana walled herself off and shouted that she'd never say it in a million years, but the words didn't seem to do much convincing. They only made Saku even more delighted.

Saku lay down next to Hana, idly wrapping her hair around his finger, anticipating Hana's next reaction.

◆

Stuck on the Campus Cup team, Hana attended a team meeting after school. She'd been planning to skip like she would any other day, but Kikyou beat her to the punch and captured her just in time. Kikyou was as fired up as she could get.

Nozomu led the meeting, and his own fervor rivaled Kikyou's. The extraordinarily competitive spirit within him against Botan was painfully apparent, and Hana was already exhausted. She did *not* see herself working up the sort of energy that Nozomu and Kikyou had.

The other team members were catching their leaders' flame, and before long, the meeting was wholly focused on taking down Botan. The team was composed of first-years through third-years; the first-years had no experience with the previous festivals, but everyone else seemed to have some sort of chip on their shoulder against Campus Four, and the fervor they were working themselves into was a force to be reckoned with.

Hana, having never attended a festival, found herself closer to the rather baffled mood of the first-years.

"I wanna go home…"

"Nozomu wouldn't let you hear the end of it if you did that."

Hana lamented her lot in life, but Hazuki, sitting in the next seat over, kept her in place.

"You sure are calm, Hazuki."

Hazuki had been selected for the Campus Cup teams since she was a first-year, and she'd apparently fought Botan herself in the final category and lost each time.

"Did you avoid being a victim of that Yotsukado lady?"

"If I had to call it being a 'victim,' I suppose I have experienced her insults before. Such as how my human-form shikigami is wasted on such an incompetent practitioner and the like."

"Oof."

That girl had no filter. Hana had to respect Botan in a way. She must have had a lot of confidence in herself to drop such brutal insults. It sounded like she was undefeated, which explained it a bit.

"You didn't get mad?"

"Not at a direct descendant of the Yotsukado clan. I'm just the daughter of a mere branch family, so I'm in no position to complain. Not that I could have argued, as I *did* lose."

"Yeah, that's the five clans for ya. Can't ask for a stronger comeback than that."

Kikyou and Nozomu could let their anger show because both of them were *also* direct descendants of the five clans. The other students were plenty motivated, but they didn't say a word against

Botan; they were still taking her position among the five clans into account.

Hana was a bit relieved to see that everyone retained some sense.

"I've heard that she's earned the ire of the other campuses as well, so I'm always nervous that someone might blow up on her. Be careful that you don't let her pick a fight with you, Hana."

"I'm losing motivation by the second."

Hana would have liked to run away if she could, but while she and Hazuki were talking, the meeting's fervor had somehow turned up a notch.

"We have three human-form shikigami and an inugami. We can totally win! Heck, you'd better win like your life depends on it, Hana! The Ichinomiya mansion isn't gonna be your home anymore if you lose!"

"Nozomu's got zero restraint, I swear."

Hana's expression turned sour, but the rest of the students were just as fired up as their leader.

"We've got an inugami, so we can totally pull it off!"

"If we don't manage to win *this* time, we'll be a disgrace to every previous graduate who brought home a victory."

"I've had money on this Campus Cup for the past year! I'm begging ya, you've gotta win!"

Hana had people practically *worshipping* her. All she could do was clutch her temples in exhaustion.

"What am I gonna do if I actually lose…?"

"The students might make you bear the brunt of the responsibility and tear you to shreds the next time you set foot on campus…"

Hazuki gave her prediction and then fell silent.

"Hazuki, don't go saying stuff that'll *actually* scare me off!"

"I—I mean, it's just the easiest thing to imagine!"

Hazuki was shaken, while Hana was starting to shake even more.

"Crap. Now I *really* can't lose."

The final event's participants were Hana and Hazuki. If Campus One wanted to make first overall, both of them needed to make it to

the top.

"It's a tournament format, so let's just pray that neither of us gets matched against Botan early on."

"For real."

"Oh, but Campus Four has one other person to be careful of. It's a girl who's always by Botan's side, Seiran Shidou. She's quite strong, too, so be careful. She's from a family that's served the Yotsukados for ages."

"Seiran Shidou, huh…"

Hana remembered the girl who was also there when she met Botan. Botan left such a strong impression compared to Seiran, who had a subdued demeanor, that Hana struggled to recall what she looked like. But she still had the vague memory of a dignified and well-mannered girl.

"Also, her brother is said to be the most powerful of all Obsidian-rank practitioners. It certainly runs in the family. The Shidous are called the secret weapons of the Yotsukados for a reason."

"Bleh. The *strongest*? So that means he's stronger than Saku, right?"

"Yes, probably."

Hana sure was impressed.

"I wonder what he's like…"

Hana was curious about what it took for someone to be called the strongest of them all.

◆

While Hana and the team were attending their meeting, Saku was listening to a report at the mansion. The tension in the air was thick, and one could tell at a glance that the subject of this report was far from cheerful. Listening further would paint a picture no less solemn.

Across from the figure at the head seat, Saku, sat Yanagi. Yanagi, who ranked just below Obsidian as a Fourth Color, Lapis, sat on his knees with his back straightened. The lapis-colored pendant around

his neck further symbolized his strength as a Fourth Color practitioner. The record he set by obtaining the Lapis rank at the youngest age in practitioner history remained unbroken.

It was a feat impossible even for Saku. But while he couldn't overwrite Yanagi's record, Saku had managed to reach Obsidian rank first, while Yanagi remained at Lapis. That spoke to just how much weight the rank of Obsidian carried, and just how difficult it was to achieve.

Next to Yanagi sat a man of about similar age to him, with hair that looked a bit unruly. Unlike Yanagi, whose expressionless face sometimes made people mistake him for being ill-tempered, this man seemed kind and approachable. And his good looks rivaled Saku's to boot.

His name was Kazura Shidou. He was an Obsidian-rank practitioner, just like Saku; one could call him Saku's senior.

The subject that the three discussed with stern looks concerned the terrorist group called the Skull of Nirvana.

"So everyone from the Skull of Nirvana is done for?" Saku asked, to which Yanagi nodded, his expression not changing.

"Yes. The security guards immediately noticed the problem and acted accordingly, but everyone in custody died then and there."

Saku's expression grew grim. Every single one of the Skull of Nirvana members they had captured had died, which presented a problem.

"What caused it?"

"Our security was solid. If everyone died while under surveillance, I must assume it was some form of curse."

"Figures. I agree there."

Saku left Yanagi's theory at that and turned to Kazura.

"Kazura, what do you see this as?"

In age, experience, and practitioner skills, Kazura was above everyone else in the room. However, Saku held a higher social position as the lord of the Ichinomiya clan, so Kazura was mindful of his words and spoke only when necessary.

"I believe they still have accomplices. There's also the possibility that the members we captured were only the lower-ranking ones."

"Silencing them, huh…?"

"Yes."

"Curses are your forte, right? Are you sure you couldn't determine anything else about the cause of death?"

"I'm afraid not."

Kazura smiled wryly as he shook his head.

"You're letting that Strongest Obsidian Rank title go to waste, I tell ya," Saku complained, his attitude disrespectful.

In response to this tantrum, Kazura's brows drew together pitifully.

"Please don't ask the impossible. I'm not infallible, after all. And titles such as Strongest Obsidian-Rank Practitioner are unfit for me."

"There's a point where being too humble turns into an insult. If you think there's a practitioner out there better than you, bring them here and let me be the judge of that."

In rare form for an egotist with unshakable confidence in his own skills, Saku highly praised Kazura's abilities; the man left Saku no choice but to admit defeat in the face of a level of raw strength that he could not hope to reach. That was who Kazura was. Yet he never carried himself with the vanity that Saku did; Kazura was instead quite a reserved person.

"It's an honor to be so highly regarded by the Ichinomiya lord."

Kazura exuded an air that soothed the hearts of all around him. He was a gentle soul whom the unknowing onlooker would never associate with the term *strongest*. His affinity for curses was also far removed from the impression he gave. But the level of his power was the real deal; anyone who thought lightly of Kazura from their first impression quickly learned of their folly after they saw him fight.

"You can let at least a *little* bit of it go to your head. You've got more than enough strength to back it up."

"I do that plenty. Besides, I belong to the Shidou family, so my accomplishments are the Yotsukados'."

"Really, it's a shame you're not an Ichinomiya man."

"You have a fine Ichinomiya man in Yanagi, do you not?"

Yanagi winced when his name was brought up.

"Please don't compare me to yourself, Kazura. The gap between our skills is that of heaven and Earth."

"I'd like to pat you on the back and say that's not true, but that'd probably just hurt your pride even more, so I won't bother with any blatant lies." Saku spoke with the same sort of wince.

"There's no need for that. Now then, the Skull of Nirvana matter takes priority."

"Yes, that's right."

With Yanagi warning him of the digression, Saku refocused on the subject at hand, and his stern expression returned.

"We thought we had captured them all, since one of them claimed to be the boss, but something never seemed right about how weak they were."

Yanagi and Kazura nodded.

"Hana might be strong, but I can't imagine any group that would go down that easily could ever steal those talismans out from underneath the Association Headquarters' airtight security. Given this latest incident, it's safe to say this is someone higher up the chain trying to cover their tracks."

"The Skull of Nirvana never did admit how they infiltrated headquarters, correct?" Kazura asked, and Saku confirmed.

"Yeah, that was the one thing they all stayed tight-lipped about."

Saku clicked his tongue.

"Wasn't too long ago that I could've gotten my hands a little dirty to make them talk, but now the Association blowhards are going on about 'human rights' and whatnot. If I knew it'd end up like this, I would've gone through with it anyway…" If the Skull of Nirvana's boss had still been alive, the fearsome look on Saku's face alone would have made him beg for mercy. Yanagi and Kazura frowned. "Well, no use talking about it when what's done is done. Yanagi, Kazura, I want you to lead an investigation to find out if anyone was behind the Skull of Nirvana, and if they're connected with the deaths

of the Skull of Nirvana members. If curses were used, that'll be Kazura's specialty."

"Very well."

"Understood."

Yanagi and Kazura bowed their heads in response to Saku's order.

Chapter 3

It was morning, and Hana awoke to find herself wrapped in Saku's arms.

Hana had caused a commotion the first time it happened, but by now, it'd just become the usual start to her morning. The only emotion Hana could muster was resignation at him doing it yet again.

Every night when they went to sleep, Hana tried to ensure they slept apart. She would pull apart the futons that the servants had annoyingly laid out right next to each other. And every morning, she found them sleeping on the same futon. Truly a mystery.

Hana was the type who slept like a log until morning, so she wouldn't notice a thing if Saku ever slipped in with her during the night. Aoi's shouting would certainly wake her up if the shikigami ever barged in to stop him, but Saku used his ridiculous excess of power to set up a barrier to keep shikigami out every night, so Aoi had also given up. Making too much of a racket would bring Tsubaki out, too, and given how poorly he got along with her, Aoi learned his lesson pretty quickly.

Miyabi was none too pleased about being kicked out of the room, either, but she intended to stay on the sidelines for as long as Hana didn't seek her help. However, she always held her squeaky toy hammer at the ready so she could break in at a moment's notice. According to Azuha, she stood guard outside the barrier along with

Arashi the inugami, who was the only shikigami powerful enough to break Saku's barrier.

Hana felt bad about Arashi having to stick around, but Arashi was kind and never complained once.

As for Hana herself, she had stopped feeling any discomfort in how Saku would hug her so tightly that she couldn't move. In fact, she'd started to feel soothed by Saku's warmth, enough that she considered closing her eyes once again…before coming to her senses.

"No, no, no, I can't let him infect me!" While they were a married couple, that was just to fulfill a contract. What was she getting settled in for? "It's inappropriate for boys and girls to have all this physical contact!"

"It's plenty appropriate."

Hana looked up to find Saku, who turned out to be wide awake, flashing his indomitable smile. How long had he been awake for?

"If you're not sleeping, then let go of me!"

"Wait—just a bit more."

With that, he buried his face into the nape of Hana's neck. Feeling the ticklish sensation of Saku's breath on her shoulder, Hana let out a rather unladylike scream: "GYAAAUURRGH!!!" The she continued, ranting, "Why are we always sleeping together when I wake up?! I *know* we were on separate futons last night!"

"It's normal for a husband and wife to sleep together."

Saku was self-assured, as though Hana was clearly in the wrong.

"You don't get to decide what's normal!"

She flailed about and managed some light smacks, but sadly, the difference in strength between a grown man and a teenage girl wasn't easy to overcome.

"But, well, I suppose it's a *bit* inappropriate." Saku then changed his posture…and pinned Hana down. "How about I grant your wish and make this *more* appropriate?"

"Wh-what are you doing?"

Hana's instincts were sounding the alarm, but she at least had to ask.

"There's only one thing for a husband and wife to do when sharing a bed, right?"

Saku's sly grin and dubious implications sent Hana's instincts from a code yellow to a blaring red alert.

"Eeegyaaaaugh!!! Miyabi, Miyabi, Miyabi!!!"

Hana screamed, acutely sensing the danger her body was in at the hands of this beast.

Not a moment later, a clink sounded outside the room as Saku's barrier was broken. Miyabi forced her way inside with her giant toy hammer in hand.

"Master, are you all right?!"

"Miyabiii!"

Miyabi took one look at the situation and didn't hesitate to aim her hammer right for Saku. She swung at her target, but Saku casually dodged the blow. Hana wasn't quite in a position to be impressed by Saku's skills at evasion, which were befitting of someone at an Obsidian rank, but Miyabi's attack at least succeeded in getting Saku off her.

"Master, allow me to bring the hammer down upon this animal."

Miyabi held her squeaky toy hammer high, fully intending to strike with no mercy. Saku clicked his tongue and then turned his attention to the inugami, who had leisurely entered late—Arashi.

"Hey, Arashi! Don't go breaking my barriers!"

"I'm afraid that Hana requested we intervene at once. Should a shikigami not obey their master's orders?"

"Everyone keeps getting in the way of a husband loving his wife…"

Saku seemed annoyed, but Hana was relieved that she had been spared.

"It's only your just deserts after your many evil deeds against our master."

Miyabi approached Saku one step at a time, her squeaky toy hammer in hand. The air felt like a powder keg about to catch a

spark, but Saku appeared unconcerned.

"Mother banned you from using that in the mansion, remember? Don't want your dear master bearing the brunt of her anger, now, do you?"

"Ngh…"

Miyabi frowned when her one weakness was pointed out.

"Fair, I don't need Mom yelling at me first thing in the morning. Down, Miyabi," Hana said.

"But, Masteeer!" Pent up with all her unrelieved stress, Miyabi pleaded with Hana to reconsider, but Hana stayed firm. The shikigami had no choice but to make her hammer disappear and stand down. "Master, keep in mind that I'll be certain to protect you!"

Miyabi declared her loyalty and clung to Hana, who responded with a "Yeah, yeah" as she half-heartedly comforted her. Saku watched, scowling like he'd just tasted something bitter.

Afterward, he and Hana got ready for the day and stepped into the hallway leading to the dining room. Their discussion on the way to breakfast was about the morning's events.

"I swear, your shikigami have no sense of moderation."

"And whose fault is that?! Come on, who?!"

Hana was loudly snapping back first thing in the morning, while Saku was in the dumps over being interrupted.

"We're married. This sort of contact comes with the territory."

"Even married couples still need consent!"

"Ah, I see. So you're not objecting to us being married anymore?"

Saku's grin made Hana aware of her slip of the tongue.

"So now all I need is consent, right?"

"Th-that's not what… I was speaking generally!"

Hana got flustered and stopped in her tracks; Saku's grin grew even wider.

"Saku!"

Hana chased after Saku with a beet-red face, but Saku wasn't listening to a word she said.

She made a fuss all the way to the dining room table, at which point she quite naturally quieted down in front of Mio. Mio had a frigid air around her, and in fact, she was *exactly* as strict about manners as she appeared. She'd have some harsh words for anyone causing a fuss around the dining table. That went for Saku, too, so he also behaved himself in front of her.

All that said, Mio wasn't exactly a cold *person*; she was just a tsundere, and Hana knew she had a kind side to her. It just didn't surface that often.

Then again, maybe being the Ichinomiya matriarch required steeling oneself with that cold strictness. Her attitude was partly due to the fact that Hana was still a student and because Mio was essentially running the Ichinomiya household. But perhaps her mannerisms were the ideal that Hana, the wife of the current lord, was meant to follow.

Though, of course, Hana didn't think she could manage the household's affairs as smoothly as Mio did. She hadn't been educated in that, after all. Hana would have been fine with Mio continuing to handle that job, but it seemed Mio planned to teach her *thoroughly* upon Hana's graduation. Mio had said as much before, to which Hana tensed up in response.

Wanting to avoid that at all costs, Hana started sweating over whether she could manage to divorce Saku before graduation. Otherwise, her seat in Mio's one-on-one course was going to be a certainty.

Hana considered slamming Saku with the divorce papers right this moment, but she'd become fully accustomed to her life as an Ichinomiya, and was even starting to feel comfortable in the mansion, so she couldn't say absolutely *nothing* gave her pause.

Hana wanted to divorce Saku, work a normal job, and then enjoy a perfectly normal retirement. That goal of hers hadn't changed once this entire time. But while it hadn't changed…Hana could hear

a voice from deep within her heart telling her to hold on just a bit. Asking her if she was really okay with that. She had been longing for a life far removed from practitioners, but the longer she stayed with Saku, the harder it became to leave. She couldn't understand her own feelings anymore.

Hana was starting to notice how complex her emotions had become, and every time she did, she reminded herself of how much she wanted nothing to do with practitioners. *It isn't like me to be wishy-washy about my decisions*, she'd say, and then she'd sweep her misgivings and hesitation under the rug, out of the way of the delightful meal in front of her.

Hana typically erred on the side of optimism, so any food put in front of her occupied every corner of her mind. Now *this* was more like her.

Hana took her seat for this meal that the whole family gathered for, a custom that had died off in the Ichise home. During the meal, Saku sat up and made an announcement to the rest of the table.

"I have something I need to tell you three about."

His tone was serious; Hana, Mio, and Nozomu all stopped eating to focus on Saku.

"It hasn't been made public yet, but the Skull of Nirvana members we captured have died. Their deaths weren't natural. We think they were killed by someone else."

"Didn't you have them under surveillance?!"

Hana leaned forward in shock. She hadn't been told the specifics of how they were handled, but she got the idea that they were being watched by the Association of Practitioners. Mio and Nozomu had been told the same.

These were terrorists who operated under the claimed goal of freeing Japan from the clutches of the five clans, so there was a high probability that the current Ichinomiya lord's family—Hana, Mio, and Nozomu—were at the top of their list of targets. This was something they had to be warned about for their own safety.

"They all died? But…"

Of course, Hana hadn't anticipated that. Sure, they were criminals with dangerous goals in mind, so it was only to be expected that they were punished for their actions, but by no means was she glad to hear about their deaths. She was simply shocked, and her face was stunned stiff.

"They died one after another while the security guards watched."

Hana and Nozomu gasped. Mio, however, had a breadth of experience, so she asked Saku a question with no change in her expression.

"Is the cause of death known?"

"We assume it was by curse."

"I see."

Mio maintained her calm demeanor and blinked only after receiving an answer.

Realizing that Mio was done with her questioning, Saku turned to Hana and Nozomu.

"We're investigating to find the culprit. There were already a lot of unknowns with the Skull of Nirvana situation to begin with. We still don't know the locations of the Nijouin-affiliated practitioners who they bargained with to infiltrate the Association Headquarters, either. We'll be investigating whether they were killed, whether they were the infiltrators in question, whether they were accomplices, or whether they were just a third party. But if they were allies of the Skull of Nirvana, then they must have held some hostility toward the five clans. So just make sure you two are careful."

"Am I going to have to help again?"

After all the times that Saku had asked for her help already, Hana prepared for yet another request, but Saku unexpectedly turned her down immediately.

"No, if anything, I want you to stay far away from this."

Hana's eyes widened at his firm refusal.

"Why's that?"

"Hana, if these deaths were caused by curses, then there's no place for someone unaffiliated with the Association, such as yourself.

Nozomu, that goes for you as well, of course." Mio strictly admonished the two students.

"Mother's right. This isn't a case that people with no knowledge of curses should ever get involved with."

Curses were so dangerous that they were taught only to Third Color practitioners and above. Hana and Nozomu, being students, didn't know anything about curses. If Hana were to stick her nose in, she'd only succeed in weighing everyone else down and putting herself in danger. She could understand why they weren't going to call for her help in this particular incident.

"You better behave yourself."

"Yeah, got it. But be careful out there."

"I will."

Not understanding curses made Hana worry about Saku all the more. But this was Saku, a Fifth Color practitioner with an Obsidian rank, so he wasn't going to be done in that easily. Hana just hoped this incident wouldn't turn into a headache, but with the Skull of Nirvana subject finished, the family returned to their normal mealtime chat.

◆

Preparations for the school festival were steadily coming along, and with them came a welling of excitement from the students that one could feel on their skin.

Hana thought that it being a *school* festival meant that students would be the ones operating stalls and exhibits, but apparently, the Ichinomiya clan lord had ordered those to be handled by hired workers, so there was no need for them.

The Ichinomiya clan lord, meaning Saku. Hana had *also* thought that the Ichinomiyas wouldn't have anything to do with a school event, but it was the Ichinomiya clan who operated and funded Campus One, so the school festival was being carried out under Saku's leadership. It was the same case when other campuses held

the festival, with the school cooperating with that campus's respective clan lord to ensure that visitors were well taken care of.

This was to be a massive event that would test the mettle of the Ichinomiya clan lord, and it was Saku's first school festival since assuming the role. He was driven, refusing to let pass the slightest mistake that others might use to mock him for his inexperience, so he worked busily from dawn till dusk. Hana, however, knew little about the Ichinomiya clan and couldn't help him. It was Mio who filled in for anything Saku lacked.

Hana had some complex feelings on seeing this, and she happened to murmur something to herself.

"Hmm. I'm supposed to be the clan lord's wife, but am I just totally useless?"

Hana watched with concern as the industrial trucks poured onto the PE field and put up everything from food trucks to stalls to huge, flashy stages—for what purpose, she couldn't imagine. Her murmur was quiet, but her shikigami Azuha, who was perched on her head like an ornament, was within earshot. However, she did not respond.

"What's wrong, Hana?"

Suzu knew nothing of what Hana was worried about; she asked what was wrong with the honest expression one uses when concerned that a friend might need to use the bathroom.

"It's nothing."

That was the only answer Hana could give. Complaining to Suzu wouldn't change how useless Hana felt. Both as Saku's wife and as a practitioner.

If only she'd at least had some knowledge about curses, then she could've been useful. But being a student already took that off the table, so she had no luck there.

"Looks like the setup's going smoothly. I can't wait!"

Suzu grew excited as she watched the PE field transform into something new. Well, just about all the other students were thrilled, too, so she wasn't alone there.

Only Hana was in low spirits, given that she had been selected for the Campus Cup team. She wondered if Kikyou's intense talisman-crafting training could backfire hard enough to blow up the school, impossible as that clearly was. She didn't know exactly how skilled Kikyou was, but if she was high enough up there to be a candidate for the next Nijouin clan lord, then she was sadly too skilled to screw up that easily.

Hana heaved a sigh and tried to pep herself up. But after taking another look around the PE field, she voiced a concern that'd been bugging her.

"Still, is it a good idea to let all these outsiders into Obsidian High? This is a practitioner school, so we're kinda supposed to stay out of the spotlight, right?"

"Oh, Hana, don't be silly. All the workers are Obsidian High grads who are employed by companies belonging to the five clans. Of course people outside the practitioner community aren't going to be let into Obsidian High."

Suzu, with a beaming smile, explained what was apparently the obvious, which Hana had no clue about. She was a bit shocked to consider the possibility that Suzu might have *actually* been more knowledgeable than her.

"What, is this supposed to be my wake-up call?"

Hana had to poke fun at herself. Saku and everyone else had been warning her about this for a while, but this was the point when she finally started to feel a sense of concern over her overwhelming lack of practitioner-related knowledge.

"Maybe I ought to hit the books a bit more…"

For some reason, Hana suddenly felt sorry for what she'd put Saku through.

"Hana, what've you been going on about?"

"Just reflecting on my past mistakes."

"Hmm?"

Having no way of knowing what that was supposed to mean, Suzu tilted her head in confusion.

Just then something seemed to catch her attention.

"Oh, it's Hazuki. Heeey!"

Suzu waved excitedly, not just to Hazuki, but also to Hazuki and Hana's brother, Yanagi. The two followed Suzu's voice over to where she and Hana sat.

"Hazuki, who's the guy next to ya?"

Oh, Suzu, so innocent and so lacking in restraint. Hazuki had to introduce Yanagi before Hana even got the chance to wonder why he was here.

"This is my and Hana's older brother."

"Whaaa—?! Your brother? Meaning he set the amazing record for being the youngest person to make Lapis rank! That's something even the Ichinomiya lord had to hand it to him for!"

Suzu was surprised; it turned out that while she didn't know Yanagi's face, she *did* know of his achievements. Personally, Hana was surprised that Suzu knew Yanagi at all. Until recently, she didn't even know herself about his record in attaining Lapis rank or how he was favored enough by Saku to be a frequent guest at the mansion. But on second thought, the news of a practitioner being the youngest ever to achieve Lapis rank was sure to make waves throughout the practitioner world. It was another example of just how far removed Hana kept herself from both her family and practitioners.

"Are you a friend of Hazuki's and Hana's?"

"Yes! I'm Suzu Mitsui!"

Yanagi wasn't the type to let his emotions show, but Suzu's cheerful, all-smiles attitude seemed to loosen him up.

"I see. I'm Yanagi Ichise. Please continue to be a good friend to my sisters."

"You betcha!"

Suzu firmly grasped Yanagi's outstretched hand and shook it with vigor. Yanagi looked a bit puzzled by Suzu's enthusiasm.

"Yanagi, why are you here at school?" Hana asked.

Yanagi let go of Suzu's hand and turned his gaze to a corner of the PE field. A number of adults in suits just like Yanagi's were gathered there. One could immediately tell from their clothes and their demeanor that they weren't teachers.

"Who are those people?"

"They're practitioners sent by the Association for the festival. They'll be working security during the event, as Saku has ordered. Right now, they're scouting the area in advance."

"Practitioners are working security?"

"Yes. Anything going wrong would be a stain on Saku's reputation."

"Huh…"

A practitioner having to work security for a simple school gathering sounded pretty rough. Then again, Hana had heard that plenty of VIPs were coming to see the Campus Cup, so maybe this was normal. Still, having a Lapis rank like Yanagi on the security detail, too? It begged the question of whether the Association was low on recruits.

Amid Hana's pondering, Yanagi called out to her hesitantly.

"Er…Hana. Are you doing well at the Ichinomiya mansion?"

"Yeah. Well, I guess…"

"I see."

"……"

"……"

And so the two drifted into silence. An incredibly uncomfortable one.

Even though he was her brother, Hana had never been too involved with Yanagi. She had no memories of sharing friendly chats with him. She wondered if things had maybe been different when she was little, and she tried digging through her memories, but nothing came to mind.

He was close to her by blood as her brother, but his heart was distant, much farther away than Saku's. Even Suzu, someone she had no relation to, was much closer to Hana. With so little between

them, Hana had no idea what to talk about…and it was surely the same for Yanagi.

Thanks to Saku's intervention, Hana had learned just how much Yanagi treasured his sisters and why that had made him stay so distant, but that didn't mean their relationship would change overnight. It was an even greater hurdle for Hana, who had cut off her family long ago and went to great lengths to avoid speaking to them. The misunderstanding had been cleared up, but how were they supposed to interact going forward?

Watching Hana and Yanagi uncomfortably shift their eyes around the room, Hazuki felt compelled to chime in.

"Yanagi said he'd come see the Campus Cup, too."

"Y-yes, I did."

Hana had a look of undisguised relief on her face as she silently thanked her goddess of salvation for so mercifully changing the subject.

Hazuki had always respected Yanagi and wasn't as quick to burn bridges as her sister, which was probably why the two didn't seem to have trouble holding a conversation. Hana was jealous of that. Still, not wanting to let the chance her sister granted go to waste, Hana joined in on the subject as well.

"But will you have any time to watch if you're working security?"

"I intend to have that taken care of. So don't worry—I'll be there for your time on the stage."

"You sure? You're a Lapis-rank practitioner, so won't that mean you'll get stuck with the most responsibilities?"

"That won't be a problem. Other practitioners greater than me will be there."

There was only one rank above Lapis, and that was Obsidian.

"No way. You mean Saku?"

It was a natural assumption for Hana. Besides, there were few Obsidian-rank practitioners to begin with, and they were far from the type of person one would just stumble upon. Hana knew of two Obsidian-rank practitioners: Saku and Yukizasa. Knowing *two* people

of that rank was already impressive enough. But the name Yanagi provided was a different one.

"No, it will be someone called Kazura Shidou."

That name didn't do much for Hana, who was far removed from the world of practitioners and had no way of knowing its significance. In her stead, Suzu's eyes sparkled enough for the both of them.

"Kazura Shidou is coming?!"

"Suzu, you've heard of him?"

"The only person who wouldn't have is *you*, Hana! They call him the strongest of all the Obsidian ranks, after all."

Acting like this was news to her, Hana turned to Hazuki and found her sister laughing at her.

"He's the brother of Seiran Shidou, who we talked about before."

"Well, huh."

Hana still didn't have much of a reaction, as that discussion was already a vague memory to her. Suzu, however, was reaching a fever pitch.

"The few people who are Obsidian-rank practitioners are already on another level of power, so Kazura Shidou is a marvel among the Obsidian marvels! He has enough influence that even clan lords have to heed his words, and he's super-duper amazing enough that even *other* Obsidian-rank practitioners pay their respects to him!"

"Why, thank you very much, young lady."

Alerted by the unfamiliar voice, the group looked over to see a man with a mellow smile and an innocent vibe. His neck was adorned with an obsidian pendant, hung high enough that its presence was unmistakable.

"Being complimented so much without my doing anything kinda embarrasses me, though."

"C-could you be…Kazura Shidou himself?!"

Suzu's shock was so great that her voice rose into falsetto range.

"Yes."

“Whoa, whoa! What do we do, Hana?! It’s him, in the flesh! Think I should ask for an autograph?”

“It’s an honor to have someone so excited to see me.”

The sudden appearance of the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner in the business was exciting Suzu enough that she flailed around with glee, but Hana just calmly observed.

He seemed to be maybe a bit older than Saku. His looks certainly rivaled the clan lord’s, but this man’s gentle demeanor was the polar opposite of Saku’s hotheaded hubris. His style of speech was soothing, leading him to exude the self-assurance that came with maturity.

Noticing Hana’s focused gaze on him, Kazura turned his attention to her and gave her a warm smile. It was beautiful, the kind that could make any woman fall head over heels in a single flash. Any woman other than Hana, unfortunately, as she was unmoved by the gesture, but Hazuki and Suzu couldn’t take their eyes off him, as if he’d taken their breath away.

Suzu aside, Nozomu’s world would probably have fallen apart if he saw Hazuki swooning for a man, so it was a good thing he wasn’t nearby.

“Might you be Mrs. Hana, Lord Ichinomiya’s wife?”

He had a comforting, disarming air, and he appeared far too genial for anyone to think of him as the strongest of the Obsidian-rank practitioners; if anything, his demeanor made one worry as to whether he could even battle a shade. The title of “strongest” called to mind a man with bulging muscles, and it was safe to say that Kazura was the polar opposite.

But Hana could tell right away. His powers were terrifyingly strong. He seemed to be concealing them similarly to how Hana typically did, but Hana could still sense them plenty. This mismatch between cover and contents was exactly why Hana looked at Kazura with such suspicion.

“Yes, I am…”

Perhaps keenly sensing how cautious her master was, Azuha left her perch on Hana's head so that she could act at a moment's notice. Kazura turned his gaze to Azuha's fluttering, seeming impressed.

"I see. Hard to think of bugs as the lowest form of shikigami with yours here. You do indeed possess a surprising amount of power. Lord Ichinomiya chose you for a reason."

"May I take that as a compliment?"

Hana had heard that he was called the strongest, but this was her first time coming across someone whose powers she couldn't sense the full depth of. He was powerful… Even more than Saku, that was for certain.

"Yes, so please, there's no need to be so cautious. I meant that as nothing other than praise, of course."

"Much appreciated."

Hana's suspicions hadn't abated, and one could even call her a bit cold, but Kazura didn't take it personally. In fact, he started to chuckle.

"I've always wanted to meet you. I've heard so much from Lord Ichinomiya, after all."

"Heard…what, exactly? I just hope he didn't run his mouth too much…"

Though, knowing Saku, she figured he *absolutely* did.

"Oh no, almost all of it is just him doting on you. The kind that's so sweet, I worry about getting cavities."

Yep, he ran his mouth. Hana got absurdly embarrassed. Was Saku saying this stuff to anybody and everybody? Hana suddenly became worried as well. Maybe this was Saku's way of laying the groundwork for ensuring Hana could never leave him…

"I had heard you were a cute young lady, but you really are adorable. It's a shame we couldn't have met a few years earlier. I might have put myself in the running before Lord Ichinomiya had his chance."

And he was a womanizer, to boot…

Hana was unsure how to respond to this man who seemed to drop flatteries with every breath, but Kazura's expression suddenly turned serious as he stroked his chin and went deep into thought.

"Actually, it might not be too late. What do you say? I can't quite provide the life of luxury that you have as the clan lord's bride, but my salary as an Obsidian-rank practitioner *is* on the higher end, so I'd say I'm quite the catch."

His dazzling grin wasn't making this subject any less awkward. Hana's lips stretched as she looked toward Yanagi to throw her a lifeline. She figured that Kazura was just giving compliments to be nice to the clan lord's wife, but this was starting to come off as insulting.

"Kazura, any more, and I fear Lord Ichinomiya will kill you."

Yanagi seemed exasperated as he chided Kazura.

"Well, let's leave the jokes at that."

Just after making his expression the perfect picture of someone who wouldn't hurt a fly, Kazura suddenly asked Hana if she could answer something he wanted to know. Resisting the urge to sigh at having this conversation dragged on for even longer, Hana half-heartedly accepted.

"What is it?"

"Those around you have always mocked you for being weak. That's a pain I understand well."

"I'm sure you do."

An elite practitioner who managed to get his hands on an obsidian pendant couldn't possibly understand the feelings of a former washout like Hana.

"But now you've obtained power far beyond what the people who insulted you could ever dream of. Nobody would think of calling someone with an inugami at their command a washout. Are you not aggravated by the blatant mistreatment they put you through? Have you not considered getting payback or exacting revenge?"

His expression was genial, but his eyes were peering right into Hana's heart.

Hana took that gaze head-on.

"Well, I was pretty disgusted by how quickly everyone changed their tune; I'll give you that. But I couldn't care less what those people think of me." Hana lifted her chin. "Show off my powers, and they change their attitude. I knew that's how they'd be from the start, and that's *why* I hid my powers in the first place. It was my choice to hide them, and it was my choice to stop hiding them. That might make everyone else change, but that doesn't mean I'll change a bit. I can't hold a grudge or want revenge when I don't even care about what the peanut gallery's yapping about. They can piss off."

Hana crossed her arms and stuck out her chest. In her eyes shone a fortitude that wouldn't waver even before the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner on the planet.

That said, she would have been lying if she said she held absolutely *nothing* against the others. However, she really didn't have any interest in the crowd; if she had to hold a grudge, it would've been against her parents for causing all her problems. And even then, those parents had already been forced into hiding by Saku, so revenge was off the table even if she wanted it.

Which was a shame, because she really should've given them a whack when she had the chance, so that was one regret she still held… No, there might still be a chance, a thought Hana considered with a wicked grin, until she was interrupted by a loud, sudden cackle.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha!" came the roaring laughs from the one who posed the question, Kazura. Hana didn't know why he was laughing at her, but he at least didn't seem to be mocking her.

"You're a strong one. Not just in power, but in spirit. And you have such a firm sense of who you are. Really, quite interesting."

"Uhhh… Sure…"

Hana thanked him vaguely. It didn't seem like he had ill intentions, but Hana still sensed a hint of danger in Kazura's gaze. Perhaps the stare could be described as how a bird of prey would target a rabbit.

"Ahhh… If only we could have met sooner."

Fortunately, Kazura's murmur was quiet, too quiet to reach the ears of the others.

Afterward, Yanagi and Kazura returned to their duties. The girls saw them off, though Kazura turned around to flash one last grin on the way out. It was such a gentlemanly and kind smile, yet it sent a shiver down Hana's spine.

"Hey…Suzu. What do you think of that Kazura person?"

"Oooh? Hana, don't tell me, but is he more your type? I know he might be handsome, but you can't go cheating when you've got the clan lord!"

"No, I didn't mean it like that."

"Then what *did* you mean?"

Suzu seemed completely puzzled. Hana opened her mouth to say something, but stopped. She decided it was best to ignore that sensation she'd felt.

◆

After school, Hana returned home to the Ichinomiya mansion and plopped down on her bed.

Her thoughts turned to her earlier meeting with Kazura. He was the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner. And yet he gave the impression of something bottomless. She saw him, but she couldn't see *all* of him. Hana had confidence in her powers, but his were at a level she doubted could be overcome. All of that made his affable smile feel like a mask, so he seemed that much more bizarre.

"Hmm…"

Hana kept her relationships simple, save for a few, so it was rare for someone she'd just met to stay on her mind for this long. This Kazura person was just that strange to Hana.

"Master, I heard from Azuha that you met someone known as the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner."

Hana looked up from her bed and saw Miyabi. Only Azuha had come with her to school today, with Miyabi and Aoi left at home.

Arashi was out somewhere, and he still hadn't returned.

It sounded like Miyabi had heard about the day's events from Azuha.

"Yeah."

"What kind of person was he?"

"What kind, huh…?"

Hana was at a loss for words and didn't answer right away. After a pause, she put it this way…

"It's, like, you wouldn't know just by looking at him, but you can tell why they call him the strongest, all right."

"I'm afraid that doesn't explain a thing."

Miyabi giggled at Hana's paradoxical explanation.

"So is this guy strong?"

Aoi was sitting cross-legged next to Miyabi and appeared to be interested enough to ask questions.

"Probably more than Saku."

"Huh. Stronger than that dirty old man, you say?"

Aoi sounded impressed. He normally had nothing but insults to say about Saku, but he did respect the man's power as a practitioner.

That said, this was still just Hana's intuition. She couldn't tell just how wide the gap was between Saku and Kazura. She had completed jobs with Saku before, but only a handful. She had never seen Saku wield his powers while driven to his absolute limit, so she couldn't make a true comparison. And Saku was too much of a narcissist to ask directly; he'd say he was the more powerful one no matter the truth, so his word wouldn't mean much.

"I also heard this person tried to seduce you. Are you all right?"

"Azuha, did you need to mention *that*, too?"

Miyabi asked how Hana was with a bit of concern, but Hana just turned to Azuha.

"Well, it's the truth!"

Azuha fluttered around and landed on Miyabi's shoulder.

"It was nothing but lip service. It was just because I'm the Ichinomiya clan lord's wife. He didn't mean anything by it."

“Well, I would hope so. But, Master, I must say, you seem to attract the strange ones.”

Miyabi placed a palm to her cheek and appeared worried. Nobody in the room objected to what she’d said. In fact, Aoi was nodding deeply in agreement.

“You worry about the weirdest things…”

Hana was exasperated. Just then Arashi entered the room.

“Oh, Arashi, welcome back. Where’ve you been all this—?!”

Hana hadn’t seen Arashi for a bit. She understood that he was plenty powerful as a god, so she didn’t worry much, and when he finally did return, she took it as nothing more than a matter of fact. But when she looked at Arashi, she gasped.

His slow steps had a wobble to them and seemed just a bit sluggish. But the real problem was the malevolent presence enveloping him.

“What happened, Arashi?!”

Hana leaped up to approach him, but the malevolent presence sought to latch on to Hana’s hand as well. She had made contact with nothing more than the tips of her fingers, but the immediate sense of danger she felt was enough to make her pull her hand back in a hurry.

The sight made Miyabi and Aoi rush to her side.

“Master!”

“Master!”

Hana looked at the fingers she touched that presence with, but nothing seemed wrong. The only thing the dark, polluted presence left was the sickening sensation of its touch.

Hana took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She looked again at Arashi; he stared back apologetically.

“Arashi, explain exactly what happened.”

Hana lowered her tone, emphasizing each word. When Arashi’s shoulders drooped, Hana worried she was being too harsh on him, but times like these called for some tough love.

“I’m sorry, I just couldn’t leave the animals behind…”

“Animals…? What do you mean? No, taking care of whatever that creepy thing is comes first.”

The malevolent presence that clung to Arashi looked like thick black smoke, and it attacked him incessantly to cause him harm. An inugami like Arashi was, of course, fending off those attacks, but it was obvious that it was taking its toll. The exhaustion was clear on his face.

Hana felt an inconsolable anger that Arashi had let it get to this point before coming back. She was even angrier because of just how much she treasured him as part of her family.

“I swear, I go a few days without seeing you, and this is the state you come home in…”

“Ooh, I apologize… I tried to do something about it on my own, but…”

It seemed this was the result of him not wanting to cause trouble for Hana, but personally, she would have rather he consulted her sooner. Hana couldn’t tame her anger, making Arashi shrink back farther.

Hana scolded Arashi and checked on his condition, which quickly made her eyes open wide. This was a sensation she’d felt from Arashi before, one that she could never forget.

“You’re about to turn into a tatarigami again!”

In the past, the kindhearted Arashi had once taken the spiteful, vengeful souls left behind by slaughtered animals into his own body, which turned him into a tatarigami. And right now, Arashi looked pretty similar to what he was like back then.

But something didn’t fit.

“Though…I guess it feels a bit different from the tatarigami incident?”

If nothing else, the thing that enveloped Arashi back then didn’t *attack* him. Both did still cause him harm, though.

“Miyabi, start by purifying him.”

“R-right! Understood!”

Miyabi hurriedly took out her kagura bells and waved them at Arashi. An invigorating sound rang out as Miyabi gathered her purification power, purifying the thing clinging to Arashi.

Hana figured that since Arashi hadn't yet turned into a tatarigami, a simple purification would be enough to return him to normal. And sure enough, the malevolent energy polluting his body seemed like it was disappearing. But it couldn't be fully removed, meaning the dark cloud clinging to him didn't disappear.

Miyabi rang her kagura bells once more, but the dark cloud continued attacking Arashi undeterred. Hana had never seen anything like this before.

"What the heck *is* this? It's different from the remnants of a shade, and it's different from the malevolent energy of those animals from back when you turned into a tatarigami…"

She didn't know what this was, but she wasn't about to leave Arashi in this state.

Hana once again reached out to the thing clinging to Arashi. And sure enough, the alarm bells in Hana's head rang that this wasn't just sickening, it was *dangerous*. The urge to do anything to avoid touching it washed over Hana, and in the end, she couldn't go through with it.

"Master, are you all right?"

"I might not be…but I can tell that Arashi'll be in danger if we don't do something."

"It's attached to me through the vengeful wills I accepted into my body…"

"So the cloud won't go away until the vengeful wills do, and Miyabi's purification alone won't get rid of it because it's attached to those vengeful wills. What a pain!"

She had to deal with both at the same time.

"For now, I'll set up a protective barrier…"

She created an extra-strong barrier around her hand, then touched the cloud around Arashi with it.

The moment Hana laid a finger on it, she could instinctively tell this cloud wasn't some parasite that would infect Arashi little by little until he became a tatarigami—it was outright trying to kill him.

Hana touched the malevolent thing and searched through it. This was going to be a bit different from exorcising a shade; a new challenge for Hana, but not something that seemed hopelessly impossible.

It was going to be dangerous; that was for certain. But Hana's experience fighting against shades and saving Arashi from becoming a tatarigami told her she could handle this.

Hana prepared for the worst as she jammed her hand right into the thing harming Arashi and grabbed it tightly. The thing thrashed about like a cat that didn't want to go to the vet, but Hana was determined to drag it kicking and screaming. She poured power into the part of it she'd grasped, and slowly but surely, the thing enveloping Arashi started to peel off.

"Oooh…"

Arashi whimpered in pain for a moment, but Hana continued nonetheless.

Arashi was right about the thing being connected to the vengeful will within him; it clung hard to his insides, but enough raw power aimed at it got it to cooperate. However, this was no haphazard show of brute force; Hana performed this procedure with caution and precision.

"Graaagh!"

Hana pulled one last time, as though her hand were around a fishing rod that had just caught a big one, and then she fell over backward. Aoi wasted no time catching her.

"Miyabi, purify!"

"Right!"

Hana gave the order the instant she finished tearing out the root of the problem, and Miyabi rang her kagura bells to purify the vengeful wills from within Arashi.

This time, Hana checked to make sure they'd managed to exorcise the spirits before heaving a sigh of relief, but they weren't done yet. The thing that had harmed Arashi was still in Hana's hand.

With its host gone, the thing now changed its target to Hana, expanding from her hand to encroach upon the entirety of her arm. Hana furrowed her brow at the sickening sensation that came with it, but she had no intention of letting this thing take over. She used her other arm to peel it off, then rolled it tightly between her powered-up palms as though she were molding a piece of clay. Finally, she swiftly trapped it in a barrier and eliminated it the same way she would a shade.

"Eliminate!"

She could feel how dangerous this thing was, so she poured in as much power as she could to destroy it. Once she took another look and saw that it was gone without a trace, Hana and her shikigami finally breathed a heavy sigh.

Everyone was relieved to be past that ordeal. Hana, completely exhausted, collapsed on the floor.

"It's ooover!"

Being freed from all that tension made Hana's mind go blank.

"Arashi, are you okay?"

"Yes, no problems here."

She immediately checked on how Arashi was doing, but he seemed just fine.

"Well, in that case, good."

"I apologize. Thank you for saving me."

Arashi licked Hana's cheek to express his gratitude. Hana returned the favor by reassuringly petting his head before asking for answers.

"How in the *world* did you end up like that?"

Arashi looked troubled as he responded.

"Yes, about that…"

He seemed hesitant to talk, like a child expecting a parent to scold him over causing some mischief.

"Out with it. What did you do?"

"I was out on a walk when I heard the sad cries of some animals, so I headed over. When I arrived, I found an abandoned building that was teeming with the grieving hearts and souls of slain animals."

"Like the dog-slaughtering incident from a while back?"

That tragedy was one she couldn't forget, no matter how much she would have liked to. Hana's, Miyabi's, and Aoi's expressions all grew grim; just remembering it made them feel sick to their stomachs.

"It was similar, but just a tad different. This was calculated and performed with clear malice."

"What do you mean?"

"They were in the process of conjuring a curse by forcing the animals to fight and kill one another, with the last one left standing to be killed by a practitioner."

Hana had been lying down as she listened, but this made her shoot straight up.

"Huh?! A *curse*?!"

"Yes. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, that was a curse. But I took notice of it before it was completed and freed the surviving animals. There were some who had sadly lost their lives and left only their wills behind, which I took into my own body. Everything was fine up to this point."

"After the massive headache you dragged home? Doesn't sound too 'fine' to me."

Hana was exasperated.

"It wasn't a large enough amount to turn me into a tatarigami, so it should have been no problem. And I was cautious, as I had realized it was a form of curse the moment I noticed what was happening. However, the curse was more powerful than I'd anticipated, and I unwittingly allowed it into my body. It may have been incomplete, but it latched on to me by way of the vengeful wills of the animals and took on a life of its own."

Arashi's ears drooped as he mourned his mistake.

"I was so desperate to protect the souls within me from the curse that I couldn't move. I was hoping I could handle it myself and not bother you, but it was difficult to fend off the curse while protecting those poor animals… My apologies…"

Hana understood the order of events. This gentle god had once again tried to help those weak, defenseless little animals. It was hard to be mad at him when she knew the selflessness in his heart. Hana lived life by putting herself first, so Arashi's self-sacrificing nature was far from anything she could emulate. But that didn't mean she didn't understand him.

Hana sighed, feeling this couldn't have gone any other way.

"I swear, trying to save those animals even after knowing it's a curse? That's just like you…"

Hana ruffled Arashi's fur as she stroked his head. His fluffy coat was getting disheveled, but Arashi didn't complain and continued to sulk.

"You came out safe and sound, so everything's all right. I forgive you. But in the future, if this ever happens again, make sure you talk with me about it first. Okay?"

"I understand."

"Being an inugami doesn't mean you're all-powerful. Miyabi's more of an expert at purifying the wills left by negative emotions than you are."

"Yes, please allow me to handle those."

Miyabi flashed a soothing smile.

Arashi was a deity whose inhuman power sent shivers down the spine of even Obsidian-rank practitioners like Saku, but everyone had their strengths and weaknesses. It was the same when he nearly became a tatarigami; Arashi could take in the wills of those who died with spite, hatred, or other negative emotions in their hearts, but he couldn't purify them the way a practitioner or Miyabi could. Still, Arashi couldn't bear to look the other way, even with the knowledge that continuing to take them in would turn him into a tatarigami.

This god sure did make you worry. Hana was going to have to keep her eye on him so he wouldn't become a tatarigami during her lifetime.

"If anything, Arashi, I'm amazed you managed to survive all this time without me."

His habit of picking up trouble whenever he found the chance had to be bad for his health.

"I apologize…"

Arashi's shoulders were slumped from start to finish.

"I already told you, it's okay. Just make sure to ask me next time, all right?"

"Absolutely."

Reassured by Arashi's firm reply, Hana decided to leave the subject at that. But just then she gasped.

"Oh, crap…"

"Is something the matter?"

Miyabi seemed puzzled by Hana's sudden look of fear. She had just realized a truth that she'd much rather not have.

"You said that thing I just took out was a *curse*, right?"

"Yes. It might have been incomplete, but it was undoubtedly a curse."

Hana cradled her head upon hearing Arashi's confident confirmation.

"That curse stuff is info that only gets taught to Association-affiliated practitioners at Third Color or higher. If Saku finds out that I took one on, he's gonna be pissed!"

And not just Saku. Mio was certain to be incensed.

Curses were just *that* dangerous. The fact that an incomplete one was enough to harm an inugami like Arashi made that clear. And yet, despite having zero knowledge about them, Hana had just dispelled one by instinct alone. It was an otherwise unthinkable feat, but Hana had managed a hack job based on her past experience.

"Let's not tell Saku about this. I'll be in for much more than a lecture."

"That's fine by me." Miyabi chuckled.

"The rest of you keep quiet, too."

"But of course. This was my fault to begin with."

Arashi nodded, so Aoi and Azuha followed with their responses.

"Understood."

"Goootcha, Master."

It was a sickening sensation different from both shades and vengeful wills. Hana decided to at least take it optimistically; it never hurt to learn something new.

Chapter 4

It was finally the first day of the school festival.

The school's decor was changed from the norm, with plenty of draping banners celebrating the festival. The classrooms that the students normally took lessons in were renovated far beyond their initial floor plans into chic restaurants. So much work had been put in that one had to worry if the rooms could be returned to normal once the festival ended.

The PE field had food trucks and stalls neatly lined up, and a gigantic, flashy stage had been built upon the spot where the announcement stand used to be. Atop the eye-catching stage were musicians singing similarly ear-catching songs as they welcomed the attendees. Plenty of students were gathered in front of the stage, clearly excited for what could pass as a concert venue.

Which it apparently was.

"Hey, isn't that the super-famous band that went on TV a little while ago? Are they a cover band?"

"They're the real deal! Didn't you know they're Campus One graduates?"

Suzu explained this like it was common knowledge.

If the quality of the shops and decorations hadn't already gone way past the level of a mere school festival, then bringing celebrities whom even Hana had heard of would've made it clear. This was what it looked like when the Ichinomiyas got serious.

"Is this what the school festival is like? Suzu, were the ones from the past two years like this?"

"Yeah. The Campus Five one last year and the Campus Four one from the year before were just as big."

"So when the five clans get serious, they can turn a whole school into a theme park…"

And with all this commotion, one would think problems might arise due to attention from nearby residents, which would risk the existence of practitioners becoming public knowledge. But Kikyou told her that a massive barrier had been set up around the school to solve that issue; not only did it keep sound from leaking out, but it also veiled the school from view. This was done using a Nijouin talisman, so she knew quite a bit about it.

"Hanaaa!"

Kikyou came running over as she waved her hand in the air. Hana spotted Kiriya behind her; as usual, they were operating as a two-for-one set.

"I looked for you eeeverywhere!"

Kikyou then clung to Hana's arm, which Suzu didn't take kindly to.

"Stop that! You're bothering Hana!"

"Excuse me, how dare you!"

Suzu tried to tear Kikyou off by force, but that only made Kikyou put more strength into her grip to hold on, and they effectively dragged Hana in both directions at once.

"Ow, ouch!"

It didn't seem that the two heard Hana's cries of pain over their bickering. Hana heaved a heavy sigh.

"Kiriya, quit watching and do something!"

Hana asked for help from Kiriya since he was observing it all unfold from the sidelines, which finally prompted him to act.

"Kikyou, Hana said she's hungry."

"I didn't *remotely* say that, but sure."

There were some moments when Hana had to wonder if Kiriya was trying to say gluttony was her key personality trait. But

tragically, Hana couldn't deny the allegations. This was the same girl who had made a deal with Saku over a fancy full-course French dinner.

"Oh my, are you hungry? This is urgent. Let us go around the stalls!"

Kikyou pulled Hana's hand onward, clearly ready to go.

"Hey, don't leave me behind, Hanaaa!"

Suzu chased after them in a hurry, and soon enough, the four were sampling the stalls. There were festival staples like cotton candy, candied apples, *yakisoba*, *takoyaki*, and frankfurters, as well as a smorgasbord of kebabs, pizza, bagels, churros, and more.

Food wasn't the only attraction of the school festival, either. There were VR game demos, petting zoos, and plenty more, making seeing the whole festival a challenge in its own right.

Also, the bill was being footed by the Ichinomiya clan, so every bit of it was free for attendees.

"Getting to play and eat all you want for free is wild. The Ichinomiyas must have some crazy deep pockets."

Five campuses' worth of student bodies and faculty was an outrageous number of people, and the Ichinomiyas were financing food and lodging for every single one of them, which was scary to think about. And of course, they paid for the festival's setup and operation, too.

"Oh, Hana, always late to the party."

Hana had gotten Suzu laughing at her, but she was right; this really *was* a late realization. Saku had dropped a billion yen for their marriage contract like it was chump change, and Kikyou had offered three billion for them to divorce. The five clans had deeper pockets than any layperson could imagine.

To be clear, while the Ichise house, which Hana had grown up in, was a branch family, they could still be considered well-off, with money never being a concern for them. But when she realized that, from the perspective of the five clans, the branch families must have looked no different from the ordinary household, the clans' wealth

wasn’t just impressive; it was downright scary. Even reminding herself she was the bride of one of those clan lords didn’t make it feel very real.

As Hana and the others continued to enjoy the school festival, more and more staff poured into the school. It had become quite the bustling affair, with everyone seeming excited and happy. And among them, Hana stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Hahhh…”

The more time went on, the less enthusiastic she became, and now she was even sighing.

“Hana, what’s the matter? You’re starting to sigh.”

“Are you still hungry? Here, have a hot dog.”

“Wait—why would you think that sighing means I’m hungry? I mean, I’ll take it, but still.”

Hana chomped into the hot dog that Kikyou had handed her. But even though her stomach was full, her mood wasn’t getting out of the dumps.

“Can I take the last day off?”

“You cannot!”

“Yeah, Hana, no way!”

Kikyou and Suzu hurriedly jumped in to stop her.

“Awww, but this Campus Cup stuff just sounds like a drag…”

The reason for Hana’s dismay was the Campus Cup scheduled for the final day. As a member of the team, Hana absolutely had to take part in it. When she’d initially agreed to join, it was the result of giving in to the tenacity of Kikyou and Nozomu as well as Hazuki’s pleas, but now that the school festival had actually started, she was starting to dread participating a lot more.

“Can’t we just say I ate too much and got an upset stomach?”

“We cannot. I wouldn’t allow it even if we could! We’re going to show that phony princess what for! Don’t you want to win, Hana?”

“Nah, I’m cool with losing.”

“Where’s your fighting spirit?!”

Kikyou was trying to lecture Hana, but to begin with, Hana never really cared about winning or losing the way Kikyou or Nozomu did in the first place. Hana had met the prime target, Botan Yotsukado, only once before, so she didn't have much reason to see her as a mortal enemy.

"But hopping around the food stalls sounds more fun. And there's plenty of stuff to do around here, so let's have some fun."

"Oh my, running away with your tail between your legs, are you? So you *do* understand just how weak you are. How lovely."

When everyone turned around at the voice suddenly calling to them from behind, Kikyou instantly spewed a "Eugh!" that wasn't very befitting a lady of the five clans.

In that direction was the girl Kikyou had repeatedly called a phony princess, Botan Yotsukado, as well as a loyal servant of the Yotsukado clan, Seiran Shidou.

"It's been quite some time, Kikyou."

Botan was smiling from ear to ear, but there was a hint of hubris to it, like she was looking down on Kikyou. There was a clear difference between this and the sunny smiles she'd shown Saku and Yukizasa.

"Yes, it certainly has, Botan…"

The corners of Kikyou's lips were twitching up against her cheeks, yet she still gave her greetings. Maybe this was the pride of a five clans' member.

Botan shifted her gaze from Kikyou to Kiriya and sneered.

"I see you're still joined at the hip with Kiriya, your babysitter. Have you considered acting your age instead of being a constant nuisance to him? Or do you still need a grown-up to help you go potty? Poor thing."

"Th-that's not true! Kiriya and I are together because we get along! Not that someone like *you* could ever understand the strength of a bond between twins!"

"Are you certain you're *not* the only one who feels that way?"

"Of course I am! Don't speak such baseless nonsense when you know nothing about how well we get along!"

Despite always being so fretful, Kikyou was now leaning forward with every comeback. Seeing this new, hostile side to Kikyou was making Hana blank out.

"Kiriya, is Kikyou always like this in front of that girl?"

Hana asked Kiriya to confirm, and he nodded, his expression not changing at all.

"She's always like this with Botan."

"They get along like cats and dogs, huh?"

"Yep. They always start fighting on sight."

The way these two were at each other's throats went pretty far beyond not getting along. Kiriya probably wasn't kidding about "always," either; even Botan's follower, Seiran, just calmly watched in silence, with no sign of stepping in.

"So…these two are candidates to be clan lord, right?"

"Yep."

"If both of them happened to be chosen for their clans, they might escalate this into a full-on war between the Nijouins and the Yotsukados, right?"

"I think so, too."

Watching such a bitter relationship, Hana was concerned about the idea of giving either of these people authority. She silently wished for the current lords of their clans to take that into consideration when choosing their successors. Hana was well aware that she had no place to speak on the matter, but problems between the clans could end up sending shock waves throughout the whole country, so she was sincere in her wish as someone who would be directly impacted.

Without missing a beat during her spat with Kikyou, Botan turned to catch Hana out of the corner of her eye. Hana had a bad feeling.

"And you must be that new member selected for the Campus Cup team. Hana Ichise, was it?"

The marriage paperwork had long since been turned in, so Ichise was strictly Hana's maiden name. Right now, her family name was Ichinomiya. This girl knew that, of course, and choosing to call her by Ichise was a clear sign to Hana that she didn't accept her as the Ichinomiya bride.

But Hana was already far too used to that sort of disrespect for it to have any effect, so she brushed off the Ichise remark.

"Well, yeah, I guess."

"……"

When Botan didn't seem to get the rise out of Hana that she wanted, her eyebrows twitched for a moment in disgust, but she plastered a smile back on her face pretty quickly.

"It certainly is *something* for a Class C washout to be chosen for the Campus Cup team. Is this a new record? After being chosen as Lord Ichinomiya's partner, you must be quite skilled at winning lotteries!"

Hana had no idea what was making this girl act so hostile to her, so her only response was a lifeless "Gee, thanks…"

However, it seemed Botan took even more poorly to this, as her expression twisted more with anger. Suzu, who was sensitive to that sort of thing, started to slink back.

Hana couldn't do much about that, nor did she feel compelled to try. She only thought about how she'd really like this girl to go away, as her eyes were already locked on to the crepe stand behind her.

Not knowing that Hana was already plotting out her next destination on her food tour, Botan continued to lay it on.

"I believe I said as much already, but if you lack the confidence, you're always free to run off and hide. Really, why *did* Lord Ichinomiya accept such a bland boor as his wife? I struggle to understand the fellow."

Even now, Botan wasn't seeing Hana as anything more than a washout. It reminded Hana of how Yukizasa called her "green" before. Even when she was standing right next to Hana, Botan seemed to lack the skill needed to properly gauge Hana's power.

That made things easier for Hana, but listening to this girl's one-sided yapping was starting to get on her nerves.

"If it's such a big deal to you, cut me a check for three billion yen, and *maybe* I'll start thinkin' about divorce."

Hana flashed a wicked grin.

Three billion was the amount Kikyou had proposed in exchange for Hana to divorce Saku. Kikyou's eyes started to water at the embarrassment of remembering that incident, and she pathetically whined "Hanaaa!" to the person she considered her best friend.

Botan seemed to take it as being made fun of; her face went red, and she stared daggers at Hana.

"It seems that being plucked from the bottom of the barrel into becoming a clan lord's wife has given you some grave misunderstandings. Listen here. You are nothing more than—"

"Hey now, is that Botan and Seiran over there?"

The voice that interjected made Botan stop in her tracks. They were approached by none other than the man known as the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner, Kazura Shidou, whom Hana had met the other day.

"Oh, Hana and her friends are with ya, too! Hello there."

Kazura wore the same gentle, soothing smile as he did before, casually brushing away the thick tension that had been hanging in the air and replacing it with pure sunshine.

Hana had to wonder if his body released negative ions or some sort of aromatherapeutic stress reliever. Or maybe that was just another part of what the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner was capable of. Whatever he had, not an iota of it existed in the personifications of egotism, selfishness, and hubris that were Saku and Yukizasa.

"You all having a good time together?"

Hana tried to answer the question Kazura posed with his beaming smile, but Botan beat her to the punch and swiftly put herself front and center.

"Oh my, Kazura! It's been quite some time!"

Botan greeted him with rosy cheeks and starry eyes. Gone was the thorny attitude she'd had a moment ago; she was now putting up the facade of an adorable young girl. Even her voice sounded like it went up a pitch.

"It's been a while, Botan. You been holding up all right?"

"Yes! I made certain to mind my health, as I thought we might meet today. Your body is important, and I couldn't bear the thought of spreading any harmful germs to it."

"Ha-ha-ha. Come now, I don't catch colds that easily. But I deeply appreciate the consideration you show for me. You really are such a kindhearted girl, Botan."

"O-oh, you jest…"

Botan placed her hands to her cheeks, blushing, like a picture-perfect lovestruck maiden. Did that haughty, sneering attitude that she'd shown until now get chucked into a garbage can when they weren't looking?

Hana and Suzu had blanked out, the whiplash making them want to ask who this person even *was*. Kikyou seemed like she was ready to complain at a moment's notice. But Kiriya just patted her shoulder and said, "Easy, girl," to stop her.

"I see," Hana whispered. "She's easy to read…"

Their conversation before had made Hana think of Botan as impulsive, and this proved her read was on the mark. It was just *that* blatant from her attitude.

"I'm still on security duty, so I've gotta go. Seiran, make sure you take care of Botan without leaving her side."

"I will."

Kazura had that typical gentle smile on his face, but Seiran's expression was stony, her highs and lows of emotions hard to read. The same could be said about Kiriya, but he was just kind of an enigma, so he gave a different impression. Seiran seemed more like a knight who actively suppressed her emotions out of loyalty to her duty.

That said, it was only Hana's impression.

"Well then, Hana, Hana's friend, and the two Nijouins, until we meet again."

"Sure."

Kazura waved, and Hana waved back. She soon saw him vanish into the crowd of people. With no thought in her head beyond *Security must keep him pretty busy*, Hana continued to stare intently in the direction Kazura had left, until Botan interjected.

"How long do you intend to ogle Kazura?! D-don't tell me you've taken a fancy to him… Do you not have Lord Ichinomiya already?! What scandalous behavior from one who claims to be the Ichinomiya bride!"

"No, no, I didn't even say anything."

Seeing Botan jump to conclusions made Hana think she and Kikyou had something in common. No wonder they got along so poorly; people didn't always like what they saw in the mirror.

Hana didn't need these misunderstandings to give Botan any more ammunition, so she firmly denied it.

"Look, I think absolutely nothing of that guy, okay?"

"So you claim that Kazura has no charm?!"

"What a pain…"

Hana let her habitual grumble slip out. Did this girl want Hana to deny it or not?

"W-well, no matter what you may think of Kazura, you can rest assured that a man of his caliber would never be attracted to the likes of you."

Botan stuck up her nose to signal the return of her haughty princess attitude from earlier. It took a lot for Kikyou to do anything other than fret while hiding behind Kiriya, but at Botan's response, she took a step toward her with a sinister smile on her face.

"A shame that a certain *someone* isn't even on his radar. Kazura wouldn't want anything to do with some two-faced phony princess, I assure you."

In an instant, a gong rang out somewhere, signaling round two of the rich-girl rumble.

"Ah, speaking as an expert of not being on people's radar, I presume? How else could you have come on so strongly to Lord Ichinomiya, only for him to be swiped from under your nose by this homely, ho-hum commoner? I will only pity you more for any insults you make."

"Hana is neither homely nor ho-hum! She's a fitting partner for Lord Ichinomiya. If anything, there's nobody who could take her place!"

"Fitting for Lord Ichinomiya? Perhaps you should be *fitted* for a pair of glasses. Or maybe your skill as a practitioner has withered away just that much? Ah, right, you hardly had any to begin with, of course."

"Oooh, you just don't know how strong Hana iiis!"

The battle between the clan ladies continued, and Hana was already sick of it.

"Hey, can you quit bickering over nothing already? I wanna go back to checking out the food."

Hana wedged into their fight and immediately became the new target of Botan's glare. She wondered if maybe she shouldn't have done that, but it was too late for regrets. Botan was already locked on.

"You there. It appears you're participating in the final event, but are you certain you don't want to switch out before you humiliate yourself? I've heard those fanciful rumors of you having human-form shikigami or inugami or whatnot, but I can't feel a smidgen of the power needed to control more than one from you. Your measly insect of a shikigami suits you well."

Botan giggled mockingly at Hana, but despite being unfazed by everything until now, Hana finally twitched.

She didn't give so much as a passing thought to people making fun of her or calling her a washout. She'd grown numb to that after hearing it for so long.

But bringing her shikigami into it was a different story. All of Hana's shikigami, including Azuha, were like family to her.

It didn’t seem like Botan considered her human-form shikigami or her inugami to be anything more than rumors. That much was fine, since most people thought the same. But Botan had insulted Azuha. Azuha was Hana’s first shikigami, as precious to her as her own child, and she wasn’t going to take any mockery of her lying down. Letting *that* slide would *really* get Aoi and Miyabi mad at her.

An unreadable smile floated onto Hana’s face as she approached Botan. And then she whispered: “Hey, you like Kazura, don’t ya?”

“Wha—?!”

Botan’s face instantly turned red, as though her affection for Kazura hadn’t been incredibly obvious from their conversation a minute ago. Kikyou seemed to be well aware herself, so it shouldn’t have been a surprise for Hana to point it out, yet Botan was shivering from embarrassment.

“If you like him so much, you should just tell him. Y’know, Kikyou here managed to tell Saku…even though she got shot down on the spot.”

“Hanaaa! Why would you say that in front of that woman?!”

Kikyou cried out in agony, so that must have been the one thing she never wanted Botan to know.

Botan seemed to be brought back to her senses after seeing Kikyou scramble so much, and her pompous expression returned with a smile.

“Oh my, turned down, were you? That’s *such* a shame, poor thing… But perhaps it was for the best? It must have been a bother to Lord Ichinomiya to have you constantly buzzing around him. If anything, he must have been relieved to have another insect out of his sight!”

Botan dropped her gaze as a gesture of pity, but her sympathy was a bit unconvincing since her mouth was twisted into an overjoyed smile.

Kikyou had no comeback. The vein at her temple bulged as she bit her lip, looking like she might jump in to attack at any moment.

However, Hana's goal here wasn't to expose Kikyou's shameful past.

"What are you talking about? Even if she got rejected, Kikyou's still amazing for being brave enough to confess. Nobody's got the right to make fun of that. And speaking of buzzing around someone, isn't that just what *you're* doing?"

"What did you say?"

"Would you like *me* to give Kazura the message in your place? About how you're in L-O-V-E with him?"

Hana grinned, and it looked nothing less than sinister.

"Wh-wha…?"

Botan was stunned, so Hana put on the pressure.

"And after all those insults you've got for everyone else, it turns out you're too scared to take the first step yourself… Who's the poor thing around here? But not to worry, poor thing, as I'm more than happy to lend a hand."

Hana grabbed Kikyou's and Suzu's hands, declared that they were going to chase after Kazura, and then they began to *seriously* walk away.

Botan raised her voice in a hurry.

"W-w-wait right there!"

"You can thank me later!"

"What part of this is worth thanking you over?! I-i-it's not even like I think anything of Kazura, I'll have you know!"

With how obviously rattled she was, her attempts at playing it off were futile.

"Oh. Well, I'll go tell him how you said you don't have even the slightest speck of interest in him! I'd feel bad for Kazura on the one-in-a-million chance that he made the mistake of having feelings for you."

"Wait right there! There's no need to tell him that, I believe!"

"Ohhh, why's that? You just said you thought nothing of him, didn't you? Won't you feel bad for him if he gets his hopes up?"

"Oooh…"

"Come on, why not?"

If Saku saw Hana pressuring this girl, he'd make a crack about Hana having a rotten personality.

Even though her affection for Kazura was so obvious, Botan wouldn't confirm or deny it, leaving her with no way to win.

"Kazura is a busy man, so I suggest you not bother him with such nonsense! And I myself have far more important business to attend to than entertaining you lot. Seiran, we're leaving."

In the end, Botan chose to flee, and Hana saw her off with a smug grin.

"Bye-bye!"

Hana gave a fluttery wave to Botan, who walked away briskly.

Once Botan was out of sight, Kikyou hugged Hana's arm.

"Hana, you're amazing. You were able to fend off that phony princess! I knew it; there's nobody who can defeat that woman other than you!"

Kikyou's eyes were sparkling, as though Hana was her hero.

"That's my Hana! Nobody's got you beat in being a scumbag!" Suzu crowed.

"Suzu, is that supposed to be a compliment?" Hana asked, unamused.

Suzu had probably intended that to be praise, but the words themselves sounded like nothing short of an insult.

"Of course it's a compliment!"

"Well, whatever. The headache's gone, so let's get back to touring the stalls!" Hana cheered.

"Sure!"

"All right!"

Suzu and Kikyou gladly agreed, and Kiriya nodded, too.

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Hana and her friends continued touring the food stalls, until suddenly, Kikyou glanced around and asked Hana a question.

"Hana, did you not bring your shikigami with you? I recall you saying you were looking forward to having them along…"

"Ah, them. They came, yeah. They're just doing their own thing, but I'm sure they're all having fun. Well, 'fun' might not be the word I'd use for Aoi…"

Hana had a concerned look on her face, the cause of which was Aoi.

Saku was planning to check up on the festival, and Tsubaki started begging him to let her go on a date the moment she heard. As a result, Saku casually said what would prove to be a death sentence for Aoi: "Do whatever."

Tsubaki was ecstatic, but Aoi rejected it as strongly as he could.

Aoi had every intention of sticking with Hana, but when they reached the school, it turned out that Tsubaki was already lying in wait. When he took one look at those eyes of a hunter who'd found her prey, he gave up and proceeded to scurry away like a rodent. They were probably still at their cat-and-mouse chase somewhere around the school. Or, no, he might have gotten caught and taken on a lovey-dovey date…by force.

Because Tsubaki wasn't Hana's shikigami, Hana couldn't order her to stop, so there was nothing she could do except pity Aoi's poor soul. She wondered if she should suggest that he just give up and accept her.

Her other shikigami—Azuha, Miyabi, and Arashi—were all exploring the festival together. That is to say, Hana's prioritization of food didn't quite align with the interests of her shikigami, who didn't eat. Hana really did want to stay together, but she let them do as they wished.

The one thing Hana wanted the most out of this school festival was the chance to let her shikigami take part. Azuha was widely known as Hana's shikigami, so Hana could bring her out for company on the average school day, but she couldn't have her human-form shikigami, Aoi and Miyabi, walk with her in plain sight. However, their cover had been blown ever since the attack on the

school, so Hana wouldn't have had any problem walking with them fully materialized. Then again, not every single student had seen Aoi and Miyabi for themselves, so it probably would've shocked anyone making their first acquaintance, but they at least knew the shikigami existed. That went for Arashi the inugami as well.

A few days before the school festival began, the newspaper club asked if they could run an article on the team's shikigami for the Campus Cup and offered a *dorayaki* as a bribe. Hana asked Azuha, Aoi, Miyabi, and Arashi for their opinions, and they weren't opposed, so she accepted the newspaper club's offer. She didn't have to do much; the club was just going to capture photos of her shikigami and ask them a few questions.

Shikigami didn't show up on regular cameras, but the camera that the newspaper club had was apparently a specially made talisman that allowed them to take photos of shikigami, which was news to Hana. Though now that they'd mentioned it, Hana thought back to the battle between Nozomu and Kiriya, where the photos for the article had shikigami visible plain as day.

The paper that ran the interview was later distributed around the school, so people who hadn't seen her other shikigami until then got to see what they looked like. Hana was hesitant to thank the newspaper club for anything, but her shikigami could now walk around on their own without anyone finding it odd. Hana had been worrying for a while now that she'd kept Aoi and Miyabi cooped up too much.

Still, the only people who weren't going to be surprised by Aoi, Miyabi, and Arashi were people from Campus One. Sure, rumors were going around at the other campuses: that despite Hazuki being famous even among the other schools for having Hiiragi, a human-form shikigami, it was Hana, her shadow of a sister, who was famous in a bad way, who was actually incredibly strong and had two human-forms and an inugami as her shikigami. But because she attended a different campus, nobody could confirm it, so just about everyone considered it to be nothing more than a rumor.

The way Botan had sneered at her earlier demonstrated that pretty clearly. Even a wealthy daughter belonging to one of the five clans, someone who had the resources to gather all the information she wished, simply scoffed at the idea, so it was no surprise there were so few students who believed.

"I bet a bunch of students from the other campuses are gonna be shocked to see human-form shikigami and an inugami strolling around the school, though."

Hana could imagine it easily.

"Yes, you might be right. A human-form shikigami is surprising enough, but an inugami? There are hardly any practitioners who can tame a deity."

Kikyou reiterated the obvious.

"Though in Arashi's case, there was kinda no way around it. If it were any deity other than him, I could've been torn to shreds on the spot."

Hana laughed it off with an "Ah-ha-ha," but the reality of the danger she'd been in was no joke. She understood that full well and needed no reminders, which was why she was so thankful for Arashi's gentle nature. It really was just good luck on her part.

"You'll be having your inugami take part in the final event, correct?"

Kikyou's eyes flashed with hope.

"That category is a battle between *shikigami*, isn't it? It's kinda overkill, so are you sure? Either way, I think Arashi would be fine just watching."

"That won't do. You simply must have him participate!"

This battle between shikigami was by no means one-on-one. If an entrant had multiple shikigami, they were allowed to send in all of them. Having numerous shikigami tested a practitioner's power and judgment in their own right.

However, just about all students had only one, maybe two shikigami at most. Even if one of her shikigami was an insect, having four shikigami alone put Hana way, *way* out of their league.

"I was gonna have Aoi join since he's raring to go, but putting in an inugami like Arashi would just be bullying, right?"

The only future Hana could imagine was that of her opponents' shikigami being wiped out in an instant, which made her feel bad for them. Aoi alone provided plenty of firepower, and given how much he'd been pumping himself up for this since the day before, Hana intended to let him loose with no mercy. Adding Arashi to the mix would end the fights before they even began.

"It feels kinda underhanded to use a god…"

But Kikyou's insistence stayed firm.

"That's fine! There's no tactic too underhanded if it means defeating that phony princess! An inugami sounds fine by me! I shall allow it, so by all means, get her. Grind her so firmly into the dirt that she'll never stand again!"

She put a concerning amount of force into this demand. If she wanted to win *this* much, then Hana didn't know what to say.

"Yeah, fine, I get it. I'll ask Arashi just in case. But I'm not gonna force him if he doesn't feel like it."

To Hana, Arashi didn't seem like a fan of needless violence. Shades were one thing, but he might refuse to fight a shikigami who wasn't hurting anyone, so Hana wanted to make sure Kikyou understood that.

"If it comes to it, I will beg on my hands and knees."

"No, don't go that far!"

There wasn't a shred of hesitation in Kikyou's stare. Arashi was probably too kindhearted to refuse someone with their head on the ground.

As they discussed this…

"Um, you're…Nijouin, right?"

Kikyou and Kiriya turned toward the voice that called out to them. In that direction was a group of several boys and girls.

One could tell from their uniforms that they were Obsidian High students, but they weren't faces Hana was familiar with. She looked

at Kikyou to find her wearing a bitter expression. Still, she decided to ask.

"Kikyou, Kiriya, do you know them?"

"They're…former classmates."

Kikyou answered, her expression not easing at all.

"Gotcha."

Hana understood just by looking at the shirts of the group that had suddenly appeared.

Campus One's uniforms were the same as the uniforms of the other campuses of Obsidian High, so you wouldn't be able to tell who was who at a glance. So for the duration of the festival, everyone wore badges on their chests that displayed what campus they were from.

The badges on Hana's group all had the numeral 1 on them, while the other students all had badges with a numeral 2 on them. That meant they were from Campus Two, the same campus Kikyou and Kiriya transferred from. However, Kiriya had said that Kikyou's status as a candidate for the future clan lord made people from their old campus keep their distance, leaving her with no close friends to speak of. Sure enough, Hana couldn't feel a lot of friendliness for these people from Kikyou; if anything, her expression said that she *really* didn't want to see them.

"What is it?"

Hana was a bit surprised to hear Kikyou give such an icy reply. She said it in a tone Hana had never expected to hear from this emotional roller coaster.

One of the Campus Two students hesitantly asked a question.

"Why…did you transfer schools?"

"That has nothing to do with you."

"Yes, it does! Just like how Campus One has a lot of students related to the Ichinomiya clan, it's only natural for a Nijouin to go to Campus Two!"

Campus One was financed by the Ichinomiya clan, so many people related to them attended it. Similarly, Kikyou and Kiriya had attended

Campus Two, which was financed by the Nijouin clan. It was natural for these campuses to gather people related to the clans that supported them.

"It's not as though I absolutely *must* attend that campus, is it?"

Kikyou's gaze was firm. As she said, there were exceptions; Suzu attended Campus One despite being from a Sankourou branch family. Even Saku and Yukizasa themselves were classmates despite being direct descendants of different clans, so the precedent wasn't set in stone.

Hana had asked once, and it was apparently Campus One where the two were classmates. As such, nobody would object to Kikyou and Kiriya being here. At most, they might need their parents' permission.

However, the Campus Two students weren't standing down.

"That might be true, but you had to have known we'd suffer a huge loss in the Campus Cup without you two. Can you tell me that isn't irresponsible?"

Hana picked up that the girl wanted to lay the blame on Kikyou and Kiriya.

Campus Two had few students who specialized in combat, so their goal every year was to avoid last place. Still, they were able to just barely work something out because they had practitioners strong enough to be candidates for clan lord—Kikyou and Kiriya. With his grades, Kiriya was vying for Class A's top spot, and Kikyou was supposedly superb at crafting talismans. Not that either of them, particularly Kikyou, looked like they'd be adept at anything.

It was easy to imagine the Campus Two students clutching their temples as they went into the Campus Cup without them. That must have been one reason behind their discontent.

"Kikyou, you're a shoo-in to win the talisman-crafting category, so it's a huge blow to Campus Two."

"I can't believe you'd go so far as to join Campus One's team…"

"Campus One's our *enemy*! Are you really going to betray us?"

They faced Kikyou with resentment in their gazes. Kiriya stepped in front of her, as though to protect her from them.

"A little self-centered of you all, don't you think?"

Kiriya was always spaced out, chilled out, and hard to grasp emotionally, but right now, he was making his state of mind abundantly clear. Anger burned in his expression and eyes. He glared daggers at them, and the Campus Two students were taken aback.

"What we do is none of your business, so we'll do what we choose. There can't be any 'betrayal' going on because we'd need to have fond memories or friendly classmates back at Campus Two to feel any connection to it first. If you want to blame us, go look in a mirror."

"How can you say that? We're your own classmates…"

"That just means we sat in the same room. There is not a single moment I can recall when we were any friendlier than that."

Hana didn't interject and only watched from the sidelines, but she really got a sense of how tense Kikyou and Kiriya's school life must have been. She never thought she'd see Kiriya take such a confrontational stance. He evidently didn't let his guard down around these former classmates even for a second.

"If the gulf between them and their classmates is this big," Hana whispered to herself bitterly, "then it's no wonder they don't wanna go back…"

Hana had her own thoughts about how these Campus Two students were practically acting like they were the victims, and she intended to intervene if necessary, but Kikyou stepped forward before she could. Her stare was powerful as she sized up only those who stood in her way.

"In the past, Yukizasa Sankourou attended Campus One instead of Campus Three. And what's more, we received permission from our grandfather, the clan lord, to attend this campus. It's not a matter any of you have the right to fault. If you still object, then I suggest

you file a complaint to our grandfather using the official clan channels."

Hana was impressed with Kikyou's uncompromising attitude. She might have always acted fretful and weak-willed, but yeah, Kikyou was a lady of the five clans and a candidate to be clan lord for a reason.

The Campus Two students were instantly rattled by the mention of the clan lord, and they walked back their stance.

"A complaint to the clan lord? That's just…"

"We don't want to take things that far…right?"

"Y-yeah…"

The students all glanced at one another and, perhaps realizing they were fighting a losing battle, fearfully left the Nijouin twins in a hurry.

It seemed the situation didn't call for Hana's help. She had been prepared to bring out the big guns by dropping Saku's name and swatting them away, but there was no need. Hana realized that Kikyou wasn't the wimp she thought she was.

And then one moment later…

"Hanaaaaaa!"

Kikyou clung to Hana with tears in her eyes.

"I swear, who do they think they are? Hana, I think I might understand why you always call everything a pain! But don't you think I did a good job? I deserve some praise!"

"Ha-ha-ha…"

Kikyou was back to her usual self. The speed with which she changed gears threw Hana off and yet relieved her at the same time.

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The school festival was nothing if not eventful, but in the blink of an eye, the final day arrived. And with it came the Campus Cup.

In one corner of the PE field was a court where practical lessons using shikigami were typically held. On this day, it was encircled by rows of bleachers that created a bowl shape around it, with a small dome built overhead.

The bleachers were specifically set up so that every spectator would have a perfect view of the action. The structure was a rush job, but the bleachers were so solidly built that no one could tell. It was just impressive that the setup staff was able to put together such a fine structure so quickly. Never doubt the resources of the five clans.

The seats were packed, with the event drawing such a crowd that some people had to stand. The thought of having to fight in front of this many onlookers left Hana drained before the match even began. She wondered if it wasn't too late to go back to her food tour. If she did, though, Kikyou and Nozomu would nag her later. So she gave up on that idea in favor of entering the arena, but Hana really didn't have a shred of motivation.

Regardless, the first event category of the Campus Cup began: talisman-crafting.

The Campus One entrant was Kikyou.

Contestants were given a prompt and tasked with creating a suitable talisman for it; they could use only the tools provided by the staff.

Even from a distance, Hana could tell that Kikyou was pretty nervous. She was rattled from all the attention on her, and she looked as if she was going to cry at any moment. It seemed she still wasn't even remotely used to it, despite having been on that very stage both the year prior and the year before that. It was a mystery as to where that backbone she'd shown those Campus Two students had gone.

"Kikyou looks pretty nervous. Is she gonna be all right?"

As a Campus Cup team member, Hana watched with Hazuki, Nozomu, and Kiriya from behind the scenes rather than from the audience.

"She'll be fine. Kikyou gets tunnel vision when she gets in the zone."

Hana had to chuckle at Kiriya's response.

"Yeah, I've definitely seen her get tunnel vision, all right."

Like when she accosted Hana after finding out that Saku had married a washout, or whenever she locked horns with Botan. Sometimes you think she'll be a wimp, and then she does a one-eighty and asserts herself.

"Kikyou's concentration is something else when she's making talismans, so it's no problem."

"I guess I'll trust that if her own brother is saying it, but how skilled is she at actually making the things? I figure she has to be quite skilled to be a candidate for the position of clan lord, but that goes for you, too, right, Kiriya?"

Both of them were candidates to be the next Nijouin clan lord, and the Nijouin lord title was decided by talisman-crafting ability. It probably wasn't the *only* factor, given the clans had the duty of protecting the pillars that supported their nation, but it held a lot of sway in the final decision. Hana had never seen either of them craft talismans, so she couldn't say much.

"Kikyou's better at making them than me. She won this during the last Campus Cup, too. That's why we've got a target on our back."

Hana heard that Kikyou had been practicing in an empty classroom for this, but it had been off-limits to prevent other campuses from spying.

The thought of spies sounded laughable to Hana, but according to Hazuki and Nozomu, it wasn't uncommon. The lead-up to the school festival was a battle for intel between the campuses, and she'd heard this year was no exception, with a few suspicious intruders from other schools being spotted on Campus One. Nozomu threw a tantrum over failing to catch the suspects, but it was enough for Hana to realize this was no field day.

And now the day they had kept their cards so close to the chest for was finally here. The prompt for the first event category,

talisman-crafting, was to create a weapon.

Hana could do that, as she'd made that squeaky toy hammer she gave to Miyabi. It was originally a toy she'd bought online, but making it into a talisman turned it into a deadly weapon that was as harmful to shades as it was to drywall.

Incidentally, the great sword Aoi had was also an online purchase turned into a talisman. It was powerful enough to cleave even the strongest of shades in two, and Hana remembered Kikyou being quite fascinated by it.

Hana figured that if a novice like her could slap together talismans that powerful, then a highly knowledgeable candidate to be clan lord like Kikyou could make even more destructive weapons. She'd considered asking Kikyou if she could strengthen those talismans, but Aoi and Miyabi seemed to prefer the weapons their master had given them. Her own shikigami were so precious that they brought a tear to Hana's eye.

Contestants had thirty minutes to craft their talismans. When the signal to start was given, Kikyou's expression went from jittery to serious as she confidently picked out her tools and began working.

Turning these otherwise harmless bargain-bin toys into talismans required precise manipulation of one's power rather than raw power itself. The audience quieted down out of necessity, to avoid disturbing the silent contestants who were highly concentrating. However, there were a few adults talking among themselves in hushed tones. They were probably Association members, and they each gave their appraisal of the students at work.

"Yes, that Nijouin crafts like it's second nature."

"Indeed, she certainly does. Truly deserving of her frequent mentions in the conversation about the candidates to be clan lord."

"You wouldn't expect such smooth handiwork from a mere student."

"The sheer level of her skill is quite apparent, don't you agree?"

Everyone's eyes were drawn to Kikyou. She was widely known as a candidate to be a future clan lord, but her pouring of power into her

tools was extremely precise; it was a process that required the detail and focus of threading a needle. The other students weren't half bad, as they *were* selected for their campus's teams, but the halting, uncertain nature of their work stuck out when compared to Kikyou's.

"I can't help but pity the rest of those students. It's almost as though they were brought in just to show how she stands head and shoulders above the norm."

"Indeed, the poor kids."

Hana even heard some spectators give their condolences to the contestants. It made her understand why those Campus Two students went out of their way to gripe to their faces. The time wasn't halfway up, and Hana was already certain that Kikyou had this match in the bag.

Kikyou tended not to stick out, especially when put next to Hazuki, who had a human-form shikigami; Nozomu, whose practical grades were second only to Hazuki's; and Kiriya, her twin brother. That's why Hana was honestly surprised to see that she had *this* much power. This probably wasn't news to anyone who shared lessons with Kikyou in Class A, but talisman-crafting wasn't a skill that took the spotlight too often, and it certainly lacked the flashiness of other disciplines. Still, it was a power that was absolutely essential to battling shades and protecting the country.

Thirty minutes had passed, and everyone's talismans were completed. Kikyou held a cheap-looking children's BB gun. What's more, it didn't have any pellets loaded. The other talismans ranged from bamboo swords to boomerangs and more.

With such a wide assortment, one might wonder how judges would assess the quality of a talisman. That was when a battle broke out; the contestants from the other campuses all armed themselves with the talismans they'd crafted and started attacking one another.

Hana wasn't surprised, since she'd been told about this beforehand, but she did wonder if the Kikyou she knew was capable of fighting. What's more, the students from the other campuses

gave one another some kind of signal, and they all focused their attacks on Kikyou.

"Whoa, that's cheap!"

Hana clenched her hands into tight fists and found herself shouting. That the other campuses coordinated their attacks showed just how much of a threat they considered Kikyou. Hana watched with a lot of worry, but Kikyou was unfazed, as though she knew she'd have a target on her back from the very beginning.

She took aim at the other students and pulled the trigger. But of course, the gun was still unloaded; what launched instead was a concentration of Kikyou's own power. Hana used the same thing when defeating shades or jokingly giving Saku a piece of her mind. But the blast that came from this talisman had an impact you'd never expect from someone with powers as weak as Kikyou's, blowing back the student it made contact with by several meters.

Hana grimaced at the sight.

"Whoa, what's up with that force?!"

That gun was *not* something you pointed at people. The three other opponents stared blankly as the fallen student was removed from the field on a stretcher.

"What's the matter? If you won't make the first move, then I shall!"

With her warning given, Kikyou pulled the trigger three more times. Three pellets of energy were launched toward the remaining students, but the show of force from a moment ago put enough fear into them that they all quickly dodged.

They did so without incident, but an indomitable smile soon rose to Kikyou's face. Amazingly, those whiffed pellets of energy turned around to chase the students they'd first targeted.

The three students went pale as they scrambled to flee. They attempted to resist with their freshly made weapons, but the sheer force of Kikyou's concentrated power snapped those like twigs. With nothing left to defend themselves with, all they could do was run away.

"Wha—?! Waaaaargh!"

"Eeeeek!"

Hana gazed upon the frantic students with pity.

"Homing bullets? That's just *brutal*."

"I'm impressed she could make something like *that* in just thirty minutes…"

Hazuki looked on with the same expression as Hana, pitying the poor students just as much. This was supposed to be a reassuring result for their team, so it was impressive that they found themselves feeling sorry for the enemy.

"Hazuki, was Kikyou like this the last two years?"

After this, Hana was never going to look at Kikyou the same way again.

"I don't think she was quite so dominant before, but…"

This wasn't even a match anymore. This was a show, and Kikyou owned the stage.

"I think you being here motivated her, Hana."

Kiriya casually added his own take.

"Uh, there's being motivated, and then there's whatever this is…"

The homing projectiles eventually caught up with the students and effortlessly bowled them over, ending the match with Kikyou's overwhelming victory. Hana's impression of Kikyou being weak bowled over with them.

Kikyou returned with a satisfied smile and gave Hana a big hug.

"Hanaaa! How did I do? I tried reeeally hard!"

"Yeah, maybe a little too hard…"

This was probably when Hana was supposed to compliment the victor, but she felt so bad for the fallen students that she couldn't be quite so straightforward.

There were a lot of Association members visiting to see the Campus Cup. Part of their purpose was to scout practitioners with promising futures, like Hazuki. The majority of Obsidian High students went on to seek employment at the Association of Practitioners anyway, but being scouted beforehand made a big

difference. Being recognized as exceptional changed how the Association treated you, too. That's why entrants, particularly third-years, who were preparing for graduation, took the Campus Cup *very* seriously. And why getting whupped so badly must have been devastating beyond belief.

These students all had to be the cream of the crop, since they were chosen for their campus's team, so for them to be taken out before they could even demonstrate their abilities… If any of those students could see Kikyou's innocent joy right now, it might cement her as a demon in their minds. You had to hope they'd let it go; they happened to get thrown into the lion's den, that's all. Hana brought her hands together to pray for those tragic victims.

And so the first event was settled as Kikyou's victory, leading the Campus Cup to move on to one category after the next.

This was a school for practitioners, so a competition here wasn't going to involve the obstacle courses and beanbag tosses you'd see at regular schools. Though Hana would have preferred peaceful events like those…

The next category had entrants compete via time taken to defeat shades. For this event, each campus sent one student for each year. Representing Campus One's third-years was the most motivated member of the Campus Cup team, Nozomu. He showed no fear when standing before the shades, and he even had a confident, indomitable smile that looked just like Saku's. They were brothers, all right.

"They're really using shades, huh?" Hana mused. Her first Campus Cup was full of surprises. "Where'd they pick them up from?"

From what Hana could tell, these were way stronger than the cannon fodder shades the teachers rounded up for Class C's lessons. Well, both were weak from Hana's point of view, but still.

"They're captured by Association practitioners just for the Campus Cup. There are talismans that let you capture shades, you know. Nijouin-made, at that!"

Kikyou bragged and puffed out her chest as though those talismans were her own handiwork.

"Isn't that dangerous? We've got Class C students watching and all."

"The barriers trapping the shades are quite strong, and there's another similarly strong barrier set around the field. Those shades won't be getting anywhere near the audience. Even if they did, all the Association practitioners here would slay them in an instant."

"Ah, I see."

Indeed, there was a barrier encircling Nozomu and the shades that wasn't going to get broken too easily, and Hana could feel plenty of powerful practitioners among the crowd. Saku was in the front-row seats, and on the field where the match was taking place was Yukizasa, who had come to Campus One to serve as a teacher. And while Hana couldn't see him, the man who was known as the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner, Kazura, was surely in the area.

With three Obsidian-rank practitioners in peak condition at the ready, Hana concluded that a couple of shades that she herself could shrug off wouldn't cause much harm if they got out of control. Just like Kikyou said, they'd be slain in an instant; she had a hard time imagining them surviving a second longer.

Heck, the practitioners might not even need to lift a finger; Aoi was yawning with boredom now that he was free from his multiday shackling with Tsubaki, so he might take the chance for some action and clean any shades up himself. This situation wasn't even going to call for the assistance of the Obsidian-rank practitioners, the pinnacle of the practitioner world.

But just because Hana could shrug the shades off didn't mean regular students would have such an easy time. Right now, Nozomu and his shikigami, Guren, seemed like they were having a tough fight.

"After all that bluffing, Nozomu *still* hasn't beaten those things?"

Nozomu was the one pumping up the team with how they'd *absolutely* win, so if he managed to lose, Campus One's fighting

spirit wasn't going to be flying too high.

"You can't blame him. Those seem to be rather strong shades."

"Strong, huh? Right…"

"You can't judge them by *your* standards, Hana. You're the bizarre one here."

"Okay, 'bizarre' feels uncalled for."

What did Kikyou see Hana as? Even Hazuki and Kiriya gave her the side-eye as they silently nodded.

"*Normal* students don't have two human-form shikigami, and they certainly aren't going to have an inugami at their command, either."

"You're right about Aoi and Miyabi, but Arashi was just how things turned out. Arashi only stays as my shikigami because his heart is as wide as the ocean."

It was just a show of appreciation for Hana saving him from becoming a tatarigami. In any other situation, making a prideful god into one's shikigami was done only by those with a death wish, and it was far from simple, either.

"It's still amazing, though."

"Oh, thanks."

Hana felt uncomfortable since she wasn't used to praise, so she forcibly ended the conversation there by saying thanks. She got the feeling that they'd start giving compliments with no end if she didn't.

Hana had long since gotten used to insults and denigration, but it was only very recently that anyone started telling her the opposite. She stopped hiding her power for Hazuki's sake, but that didn't mean she wanted compliments. After all those years of being called useless or scraps, compliments rubbed her the wrong way. Hana was more comfortable being insulted…though Hazuki and Kikyou would give her some weird looks if she ever said that. There's no way they wouldn't.

"Once that phony princess sees your true power in the final event, Hana, there's no doubt she'll start quaking in her boots!"

"I mean, I don't need people to think I'm great or anything…"

What Hana desired was peace, tranquility, and normality. Being the star player in the Campus Cup didn't fit any of those goals.

"You know, Hana, the Association might scout you after seeing you fight."

Hazuki put into words the exact scenario Hana wanted to avoid the most. Hana made the most disgusted face she could to express that.

"Guess I gotta make Saku clean up whatever mess happens."

The shade hunt finished as they were talking, and with its end came roaring cheers.

Nozomu returned with an exhausted look on his face, so the team congratulated him.

"Nice goin'."

"Heh, did you see how valiantly I battled?"

"Oh, sorry, I wasn't watching."

Hana laughed it off with an innocent "Ah-ha-ha."

"What?!"

Nozomu started to howl, so Hana decided to deflect his attention to get him to sit still.

"But hey, it looks like your dear brother was watching you!"

Hana pointed in the direction of Saku. Nozomu's eyes lit up when he saw his own brother applauding his efforts.

"Saku, you really did watch!"

"Yeah, good for you!"

Hana had to shrug at how easily Nozomu's anger had vanished.

"Still, though…"

Hana had been wondering this whole time about who the person sitting next to Saku was.

"Who's that next to Saku? That dude looks mega scary."

Hana's winced because of the man's appearance. He was an old man with a black eye patch over one eye and white hair that reached his shoulders. His visible eye had a glare so sharp, it could send an enemy running for the hills. If this were a video game, he'd

be the final boss without a doubt. He exuded the kind of presence that told people loud and clear that he was something else.

Since he was sitting next to Saku, he must have had some kind of high status. Saku had his own aura beyond his age, but even that was getting blown with the wind compared to this guy's aura.

Just then Kikyou gave a shocking answer.

"That person is my and Kiriya's grandfather."

"Huh? Your grandfather?! So he's the Nijouin clan lord?!"

"Yes, that he is."

"That's…pretty scary, all right. Can't say it doesn't fit, 'cause he's on another level from the average person. He looks like he's even stricter than my mother-in-law."

"Oh, Grandfather is *just* as strict as he looks… Ha-ha-ha…"

Kikyou's laugh was dry and weak.

"What have you two gone through…?"

Kikyou didn't answer Hana's question, and Kiriya also averted his gaze.

The other students finished their battles as they chatted. Regardless of Nozomu's struggling earlier, the results put him cleanly in first place.

"Master, I know they're students, but I can't help wondering what will become of this nation if this is the level our next generation of practitioners are at…"

Miyabi stated her fears with drooped eyes and a concerned expression.

"You can't say that to Nozomu. It'll make him sad."

Nozomu was celebrating his first-place win with the rest of the Campus Cup team. There was no reason to rain on his parade.

"Very well…"

Miyabi was always with Hana, so she tended to compare others to her. However, her master was someone who saved a tatarigami even though she was a student; comparing an average student to her was just cruel.

Hana was also frequently targeted by shades due to her strong powers, so she had an abundance of experience beyond even Class A students, who had live combat as part of their curriculum. Plus, their "live combat" pitted them against only the weakest of shades, ones the Association deemed safe for students to handle. They were finally made to fight strong shades alongside active practitioners following the Skull of Nirvana's attack on the school, but that was still a very recent development. They were far from overtaking Hana's experience.

Still, Nozomu was undoubtedly a top performer among the students, so the applause continued for a while.

Next was Kiriya's match, a competition on barrier strength. For this category, just like Nozomu's, each campus had an entrant for each year. They would all set up barriers while a teacher used talismans to continually attack them.

They started with weaker talismans. The first wave was practically a warm-up that everyone successfully blocked, but the next talisman the teachers brought out had far greater firepower, and the audience could hear the cracking of several students' barriers being broken.

Those moments marked their respective losses in the competition. The students who managed to keep their barriers up appeared relieved, but the ones who couldn't looked disappointed as they withdrew from the field.

The talismans the teachers used grew stronger, one after another after another, with more and more students unable to keep their barriers standing after each ramp-up, dropping them out of the competition.

It seemed the difference in experience really did come into play, as the dropouts started with the first-and second-years.

Even Kiriya, who hadn't broken a sweat when the competition began, was starting to show signs of struggle. However, he kept going and really managed to withstand the hits.

"Hmm, he ain't holding up too bad, but it looks like Kiriya might need some more training."

Yukizasa, who had walked up to the team at some point, stroked his chin as he appraised the situation on the field.

"Well, yeah, of course he's not gonna have enough compared to you, Mr. Obsidian Rank. You're being too harsh on a student. Kiriya's only eighteen, too."

Hana rushed to Kiriya's defense, but Yukizasa was exasperated.

"For someone who's *also* a student, you're one to talk. I did my homework, so I know you. I know that back when the Skull of Nirvana attacked the school, there was some off-the-charts kid who put up a barrier around the school *and* the countless shades in it. That sorta feat would be tough even for the Association's practitioners, so you're *really* one to talk."

"Getting harassed by shades all the time just gives me more experience than I know what to do with."

Yukizasa jabbed back, but Hana just slumped her shoulders.

"You're probably gonna get scouts knocking on your door soon enough."

"I regret to inform you that my career plan is to work at an Ichinomiya Group company."

"The Association's bigwigs won't let a catch like you get away that easily."

"Saku'll do something about it."

Hana had told Saku about her goals back when he first brought up their marriage contract. The life Hana dreamed of was the most normal of normal.

"That's a waste, I tell ya. I dunno what Saku's thinkin', letting you go without using all that power you've got."

Yukizasa sighed, looking like he could never understand what went through either of their heads.

Soon enough, the current event met its conclusion. It came down to Kiriya and a Campus Four student who'd hung on with him, but Kiriya proved victorious.

Kiriya smoothly strolled back to his team, leaving the exhausted Campus Four student to kneel in the agony of defeat. While the

match had the appearance that this was a straightforward victory, Kiriya did look a bit worn out.

"Wonderfully done, Kiriya! I knew I could count on my brother!"

"Yep. I tried."

Kikyou was ecstatic as she hugged Kiriya tightly. These twins really were close.

Yet Hana and Hazuki, a fellow pair of twins, weren't anything like that. The disconnect between them had been cleared up, but it came after they spent far too long apart. On the bright side, they had plenty of time to rebuild those bridges going forward.

Most of the main competition categories were now completed, and the cumulative scores showed that Campus One had achieved quite a record. It appeared Kikyou and Kiriya's transfer from Campus Two was working to Campus One's advantage. That came at the cost of Campus Two's scores being unbearable to look at, so one had to feel a bit sorry for them. Not Kikyou, though; given how joyfully she was celebrating with Nozomu, she didn't seem to give Campus Two's placements so much as a passing thought.

"All right! If we keep going, we can win this!"

"Let's give that phony princess a punt to the posterior!"

Nozomu and Kikyou raised their fists to the skies, and the rest of the students caught their enthusiasm.

"What's gonna happen if we lose after all that?"

"Hana, please don't jinx it," Hazuki chided.

"I'm just saying, we've got good scores and all, but the gap's not so wide that we can't lose it all to a comeback. Just wondering if Nozomu and Kikyou get how much pressure they're putting on us."

"They probably haven't… Oh dear, what do we do…?"

Hazuki took a deep breath, hinting that she was feeling the pressure, too.

"Well, we've got Arashi on our side, so you can take it easy, Hazuki. Though it's kinda unfair to bring something as busted as an inugami to a student fight, don't ya think?"

"Yes, you might be right."

Hazuki's expression brightened.

Speaking of Arashi, Hana hadn't seen him for a while now. She'd told him about having him fight in the shikigami match, and while he'd seemed none too pleased about the idea at first, he agreed after Kikyou begged on her hands and knees for his help. He really was a far kinder god than one would expect, given how prideful deities often were.

It probably helped that Hana reassured him that Aoi and Miyabi would be doing most of the work. Those two alone were already overkill enough, so maybe he agreed because he figured his assistance wouldn't be called for.

"Master."

Azuha fluttered in while Hana wasn't looking.

"Azuha, where have you been?"

She'd been gone for a while, just like Arashi. Hana didn't worry too much, as she figured they were getting some fresh air, but the final event was going to start any minute now. Azuha had been looking forward to joining in, so Hana would've gone looking for them if they hadn't come back.

"Ummm, so Arashi, he found something weird. So he said to call you over, Master."

"Arashi did?"

A question floated into Hana's mind, so she told Hazuki that she'd be out for a moment and then followed Azuha's lead.

She was taken to a spot behind a building with nobody in sight. Not because everyone was gathered at the PE field instead, but because this was a spot nobody passed by in the first place. Hana found Arashi sitting patiently in wait for her.

"Arashi, what is it?"

"Hana, please look at this."

"Hmm?"

Arashi pointed his snout at a hole dug in the ground, as well as an oblong stone peeking out from it.

"What's this?"

Hana crouched and reached for the half-uncovered stone. It clearly wasn't some rock you'd find on the side of the road; it was milk white and had the shimmer and shine of a jewel.

"It's…not a jewel, I take it."

Hana's expression turned serious. The stone *looked* beautiful, but something about it gave her the creeps.

"I've felt a strange presence ever since I entered the school grounds, and I've been looking for it all this time. I eventually dug here and found this. I can tell it's nothing good. I believe it could be a human-made talisman, but since those aren't matters I'm well versed in, I had Azuha bring you over."

"So that's the story, huh? It does feel kinda weird…though it's way beyond anything *I'm* able to figure out. But if you're saying it's bad, then I'm not gonna ignore the instincts of a god. Azuha, can you call Saku over?"

"Goootcha."

Azuha heard Hana's request and fluttered away.

This school festival was being put on by the Ichinomiyas, so Hana wavered a bit on calling Saku away from entertaining the guests, but she could just say she was trusting her instincts.

A practitioner's instincts were not to be ignored; that was a lesson that anyone living in this world learned quickly. And the stronger the practitioner's powers, the likelier they were to hit the mark.

It wasn't long before Saku arrived, a good deal sooner than Hana had expected.

"Sorry to call you away when you're so busy, Saku."

"Nah, it's fine. I was just about to go looking for Tsubaki anyway."

"Huh?"

"I've had a bad feeling ever since I came to the school today, so I had Tsubaki look around to see if she could find anything odd. But so far, nothing. And just as I was wondering why I haven't been able to get a hold of Kazura, your message came in."

Hana was surprised to learn that Saku had already taken action. She had only noticed the oddity after coming to the spot where

Arashi called her.

"Well, guess that Obsidian rank isn't just for show."

"Of course it's not. I'm an Obsidian-rank practitioner and the Ichinomiya clan lord. I wouldn't be a barrier master tasked with protecting the pillar if I let *this* slip under my nose."

"How reassuring. Anyway, know what this is?"

Hana handed the stone she'd found to Saku. He inspected the milk-white stone closely, his brow furrowing the longer he looked.

"This…is a talisman imbued with a curse."

"A curse?! Why's something like that buried in this out-of-the-way corner of a school?"

"How should I know? Either way, this talisman's got some heavy concealment barriers set up around it, so that must be why not even Tsubaki could pinpoint its location."

"Well, hey, *Arashi* could find it. He dug it up out of the ground."

Hana puffed out her chest and chuckled, bragging as though she were the one who'd done anything. But she came back down to earth soon enough.

"Okay, no time for getting smug over this. It being buried under all that dirt means they wanted to keep this hidden, doesn't it?"

"I'd bet, yeah."

"Does the talisman have some kind of effect?"

"I can't tell anything beyond the fact that it's imbued with a curse."

"Even an Obsidian-rank practitioner like you can't tell?"

"Nope. I know my stuff, but I'm not a talisman expert like the Nijouins. There's a crapload of talismans I don't know about. But since the Nijouin clan lord happens to be here, maybe I'll have him take a look."

"Ah, that final boss–looking guy. Wouldn't it be easier to just ask Kikyou or Kiriya?"

Hana figured it wasn't worth bothering the Nijouin clan lord over, but Saku's expression was grim.

"No, this talisman's stumping *me*, the Obsidian-rank practitioner. Besides, this has a curse involved, and that alone means I can't

entrust it to two students."

"Ah, fair point there."

This was serious enough that Arashi had scoured the school to find the ill presence he felt. Neither knew what this talisman could do, and that it carried a curse meant it was no job for students lacking the knowledge.

"I swear, of all the times for Kazura to go missing…"

While he grumbled, Saku tried to set a barrier around the stone. Suddenly, the stone started shaking before emitting a blinding light. Sensing danger, Saku quickly tossed the stone away.

"Whoa, what?!"

"Hana!"

By the time she'd noticed how frantic Saku sounded, he was already grabbing her close. And the next instant, the stone exploded without a sound.

Hana couldn't see it due to Saku holding her, and since it didn't make a sound, she had no idea what happened. Even the dust that kicked up fell in silence.

"Koff! Whegh!"

Saku let go of Hana once she started coughing, and he looked deeply into her eyes.

"Hana, are you all right?"

"You, Saku?"

"No problems here. That was a close call."

As the dust settled, Hana noticed that Saku had enclosed them all in a barrier. What's more, Arashi was standing in front to protect Hana and Saku. It was thanks to their quick action that they narrowly avoided the worst coming to pass.

"Arashi, are you all right?"

"Yes, it's of no concern."

"I'm fine, too!"

Azuha had taken refuge at some point in Hana's hair, and with her and Arashi seeming all right, Hana was relieved. But she then saw

that the ground was scooped out in a crater around the spot where the stone had just been.

"That's *not* something I would have wanted to get hit by."

"Sure isn't. What's more, I know I put a barrier around that stone, but it managed to break it."

It seemed like that barrier was the reason the explosion hadn't made a sound. He might have put it up in a hurry, but the fact that the rock broke one of Saku's barriers made it clear just how dangerous it was.

Saku clicked his tongue.

"This just turned into a pain."

Saku raised his gaze to the sky, as though looking at something far away.

"How so?"

"That stone's gone, but I still have that bad feeling. Guess that means there's more of them out there."

"There's *more* of these deadly things?!"

Hana's eyes darted to Arashi, who nodded.

"Yes, I can still feel it myself."

"You've gotta be kidding…"

Hana failed to find the words to describe how bad this was.

"And on top of that, we've got more people here for the school festival, so we gotta find them fast. But you said even Tsubaki couldn't find them, right?"

Aoi and Miyabi had the same level of power as Tsubaki, so they wouldn't have much luck, either.

"Gah, dammit! Why do all these problems have to happen right when I become the clan lord?!"

Saku did not attempt to hide his irritation. He scratched his head furiously as he shouted.

"Not exactly the time for griping, though."

"Yeah, I'm aware."

Saku took a deep breath to calm himself down and soon regained his composure.

“Hana, can I borrow Arashi? Tsubaki couldn’t find them, but Arashi should be able to.”

“That’s fine if Arashi’s okay with it, but shouldn’t we evacuate the people on the campus?”

“No, not when we don’t know what the person who planted these has in mind. Causing a panic might just push them to take action, so —”

“Lord Ichinomiya?”

Saku and the others snapped toward the direction of the voice. There, Saku saw Kazura.

“Oh, it’s just Kazura.”

Hana was relieved, but Saku’s bright and sunny smile was dotted with a vein popping up on his temple.

Looked like he was pretty angry.

“Where have you *been* until now?! I’ve tried contacting you so many times!”

“My apologies. I seemed to have gotten so focused that I didn’t notice.”

“Let me guess… You were focused on that ill presence you can feel within the campus?”

When he heard those words, Kazura’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Oh, so you’ve noticed it as well.”

“Don’t insult me. I was the youngest man to ever reach Obsidian rank.”

“How rude of me.”

Kazura placed a hand on his chest and apologized, a beautiful motion befitting a seasoned butler.

“However, it seemed that Sankourou, a fellow Obsidian-rank practitioner and future clan lord, failed to notice, so I merely assumed.”

“Well, Yukizasa’s still a fresh Obsidian. I’d cut him some slack there.”

Saku looked displeased despite backing up his old friend; it seemed he had his own thoughts about Yukizasa missing this.

"Anyway, what brings you here?"

This spot was deserted; nobody would come here without a good reason.

"I felt a strong power coming from here, so I merely came to see what it was. It seems I was too late, however…"

Kazura dropped his gaze to the crater in the ground.

"Did something happen?"

Saku pressed a palm to his head at Kazura's question.

"It's hard to explain without the item in question, but there was a talisman imbued with a curse hidden here. Hana's inugami found it buried in the dirt. I was going to have the Nijouin clan lord take a look at it, but the damn thing exploded first. If Arashi hadn't been the one to find it, people could've gotten hurt."

"My, how impressive."

Kazura looked toward Hana as though to praise her, but Hana instead chose to hug Arashi and bring attention to him.

"I'm not the impressive one—Arashi is."

"But you really do have a god as a shikigami, no?"

Hana couldn't tell what intentions were hidden behind Kazura's intense stare. She chose to flee that gaze by calling out to Saku.

"Hey, Saku. If we're gonna act, the sooner the better, right?"

"Hmm. Yeah, you're right about that. Arashi, sorry, but I'll need your cooperation."

"Yes, understood."

Just when they were about to start their search, Kazura stopped them.

"Please wait. I'll perform the search, so you two should return to the stage where the Campus Cup is being held."

Saku objected to this proposal, which he never thought he'd hear.

"What are you talking about? If there are any more of those talismans, then we need to find them fast to keep people from getting hurt. The one we found was buried in the ground, so whoever planted it did so intentionally. I don't know what they're

planning, but we need to put a stop to it before they have a chance to pull it off."

"That's exactly why. If the culprit realizes Lord Ichinomiya is on to them, then they might perform something extreme. For now, it's best to pretend you know nothing and have me search from the shadows. We can't risk the culprit getting desperate and hurting someone."

Saku had just raised this concern a moment ago, so it struck a chord. Saku was at a loss for any objections to raise.

After some hesitation, Saku opened his mouth and said with a hint of frustration: "Yeah…got it. Kazura, can you handle it?"

"Consider it done. I'll search for the talismans while being cautious not to let the culprit notice."

"Oh, then, Arashi, could you tag along with Kazura?"

"Very well."

"No, there's no need."

"Huh? But without Arashi…"

Hana was confused by Kazura's rejection, but he just smiled.

"I learned what the power of that talisman felt like from that explosion earlier, so there's no problem."

"Is that possible?"

Perhaps it was the sort of stunt that she couldn't pull off but Obsidian-rank practitioners could, so Hana looked at Saku. He winced like he'd tasted something bitter; it must have been hard even for him.

"Ooh, that's Mr. Strongest Obsidian for you."

Hana gazed at him in awe and gave a little round of applause.

"It's an honor to receive your praise."

With his sunny smile and rock-solid composure, Kazura felt like the most reliable man for the job.

"I'll contact Yanagi, so the two of you can search together."

"I'm perfectly fine on my own, though."

"It's just in case. I'm *well* aware of just how strong you are, but you never know what could happen."

"Yes, that's true. Then I'll meet up with Yanagi and start the search from there."

"Yeah, I'm counting on you. Hana, let's get going, then."

"You sure about this? It seems quite dangerous."

Kazura's search for the talismans would definitely go smoother with Arashi's assistance, so she didn't understand why he turned down the offer.

"Kazura says it's no problem, so it's no problem."

"Well, if you're that confident, I'll leave it at that…"

It would've been stranger *not* to be worried about more talismans that could destroy Saku's barriers. Especially now that her own brother, Yanagi, was going to be part of the search.

"Is my brother going to be okay?"

"He's got Kazura with him."

Hana could feel from those words just how much faith Saku had in Kazura.

Chapter 5

"Hana, go wrap up that final event already."

With that, Saku returned to the spectator seats. After seeing him off, Hana returned to the rest of her team. Not a moment after she arrived, Nozomu glared at her and instantly opened his mouth to complain.

"What took you so long?! The event has already started. What were you gonna do if you got disqualified?!"

"Sorry, my bad. Something came up."

The final event category had already begun while Hana was away.

It was a battle between shikigami. Entrants were placed into a tournament bracket, and Hana's first round wasn't scheduled to take place until a little later on, so she managed to make it on time.

Hazuki's match was ongoing. Fortunately, Hana hadn't missed it, but Yanagi was likely going to join Kazura to deal with those talismans. Even though he'd said he'd come to watch, odds were he wouldn't have the time.

That news could make Hazuki sad, so Hana decided not to mention it.

Hazuki wasn't alone in the limelight, of course. She was joined by her shikigami, Hiiragi, who took the form of a ten-year-old boy.

Hiiragi's weapon was a folding fan. Human-forms were considered the highest level of shikigami, and sure enough, Hiiragi's strength was on another level compared to the other students' shikigami. Though even his power was far below that of Tsubaki, Saku's

shikigami, Tsubaki, to the point where Hana felt it cruel to compare them. Even between fellow human-form shikigami, some were just stronger than others.

A shikigami's strength was influenced by their master's power. As such, a shikigami became stronger or weaker following the growth of their master. Hiiragi, too, was much stronger now than he was when Hazuki was ten.

Hana didn't interact with Hiiragi too often, so she didn't know exactly how much he'd grown, but he sure seemed to be head and shoulders above his peers. Watching him claim victory in an instant with a mere swipe of his fan certainly supported that impression.

"Great!"

Nozomu clenched his hand in celebration of Hazuki's victory, clearly having the time of his life. But it was Botan, the person who'd gone undefeated even against Hazuki, whom Hana had her sights on. And it was for reasons unrelated to the match.

"Good job out there, Hazuki."

"Hana, thank goodness, you came back. Where have you been?"

Hana hesitated, but she decided to hide the truth. If Saku, the clan lord himself, was going to keep quiet, then Hana wasn't going to blab.

"Arashi called for me."

She left her excuse at that and patted Arashi's fluffy head.

"Okay."

Hazuki didn't seem to have any doubts about her answer.

The matches continued, and soon, Hana's turn came.

"I wanna get this done quickly…"

Hana couldn't stop worrying about where the talismans were, so she wasn't too interested in drawing out this match. She walked briskly out onto the field.

The eyes of all the spectators gathered on Hana. While she heard some cheers from her fellow Campus One students, their voices were drowned out by the sheer amount of mockery that came from the other campus's students.

"Whoa, c'mon, did they lose it? They're sendin' out the worthless one!"

"What's a Class C loser coming out here for?"

"Maybe they signed her up by accident?"

"That inugami stuff was such an obvious lie. I can't believe they're making her embarrass herself in public over it!"

The jeers and insults poured in from all sides. Anyone without skin as thick as Hana's would've been overwhelmed and probably in tears. Kikyou, knowing Hana's true strength, seemed furious—she was yelling something at the crowd, but Hana couldn't hear what over all the voices around her.

Once she was far enough away from her team, Hana saw that Botan was watching it all play out. Judging by the mean-spirited smile on her face, Hana could tell that she thought just as little of her as the rest of the crowd did.

Hana was getting irrationally angry remembering how Botan had insulted Azuha earlier. While it was a given that she wanted to end things quickly, Hana's malicious expression hinted that she had a greater desire to knock Botan's socks off.

While disregarding the endless deluge of insults, Hana happened to look toward the stands and see Saku…whose mouth was twisted into an indomitable smile. A smile that clearly conveyed his unshakable trust in Hana's victory. A smile that seemed to say, *Get this over with and shut this crowd up already*.

"Well, if you're gonna look at me like that, then I've got to meet your expectations."

After spotting his self-confident stare, Hana found herself smiling along with him.

And conveniently, her opponent just happened to be a female student from the same place as Botan, Campus Four. It was the perfect opportunity to throw down the gauntlet at Botan's feet.

"Both contestants, please call forth your shikigami."

Hearing the teacher serving as the referee set the stage, Hana's opponent called forth a snake shikigami, one as large as a human.

Hana had to give her points for an impactful impression. And they had a fair amount of power, befitting someone who managed to get selected for their team. Unfortunately, they had the bad luck of being pit against Hana.

"Let me start with an apology. Sorry for what I'm gonna do to you, 'kay?"

"Huh?"

"Aoi, Miyabi, Arashi, come on out."

With an expression that could only be described as purely villainous, Hana called the names of her dearly beloved shikigami. At that moment, Aoi and Miyabi materialized, and Arashi hopped over from outside the stage.

"Huh? Wha—?"

Hana's opponent couldn't hide her bewilderment, but she paled as soon as she saw all those shikigami.

And it wasn't just her. The peanut gallery from earlier went silent, letting everyone hear the cheers and rallies from all the Campus One students much more clearly.

"Yoooooo! Going all in on the first round!!!"

"Go on! Get 'em!"

"Awww, poor little Campus Four!"

"I'd cry, too, if someone pulled *that* out on me."

"Show 'em why you're Campus One's lethal weapon!"

They didn't seem to be restraining themselves at all, either.

"L-let the match begin!"

The teacher seemed to be shaken as well—Hana assumed, based on his stuttering—but he managed to do his job.

As soon as the signal to start was given, Aoi drew his sword, Miyabi readied her squeaky toy hammer, and Arashi bared his fangs for all to see.

"Everyone, have at it."

"Gotcha!"

"Very well!"

"Grrrr!"

The expressions on Aoi's and Miyabi's faces were wicked enough to make their master proud, and even Arashi was joining in to intimidate despite his previous hesitation. In the face of such pressure, the opponent's shikigami was shivering enough to make one feel sorry for it.

But not enough to stop Hana's shikigami from charging in all at once.

"N-noooooo!"

Wails of terror resounded throughout the arena. The match ended in what could quite accurately be described as the blink of an eye.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!" Hana made her triumphant return with a high-pitched laugh. Her teammates greeted her upon her return but seemed to have some complicated feelings about what they just saw. "What gives? What's with the weird looks?"

"Well…I know she's an enemy, but I kinda felt sorry for her…"

"Couldn't you have gone easier on her, just a little?"

Nozomu and Hazuki explained their thoughts with a bit of pity for Hana's opponent, and Kiriya nodded in agreement.

"What, so after all that talk about how I *had* to win, this is how you thank me?"

Hana had only done exactly what she was told. It wasn't fair.

"And, Kikyou, you're the one who fanned the flames the most! Weren't you telling me to grind her into the dirt?"

"That may be true, but a match that one-sided goes beyond anything I'd be happy to see. It's almost disturbing…"

"I can't win with you people."

Hana sighed, exasperated.

"Maaaster, I haven't had enough action yet!"

Aoi came over to grouchily complain.

"We've got more matches coming up, so just take turns for the next ones. Everyone's whining that we took it too far anyway."

"Oooh, in that case, I'll go next!"

"Then I shall go after."

Aoi immediately raised his hand, and Miyabi followed with her own show of excitement.

"Arashi, you don't have to come out until the final match. I know you don't like this stuff too much."

"Yes, thank you. I charged into battle earlier mainly to silence those who had mocked you, but I'm not too fond of such violence myself. I apologize for sitting out despite being your shikigami, but I very much appreciate it."

"You're fine just the way you are. The last thing I need is more violence-lovers around here…"

Hana gave Aoi and Miyabi the side-eye. They were warming up—Aoi with his sword and Miyabi swinging around her squeaky toy hammer. These two were plenty, so Arashi had nothing to worry about. In fact, Hana made a mental note to warn those two not to go overboard.

And so, after getting her remaining matches over and done with, Hana looked up from her winning streak to the tournament bracket.

"Looks like Hazuki's going to see Botan first in the semifinals."

"So it seems. I'll do my best to win this time! Though…it's strange. I could have sworn that Seiran Shidou would have entered as well, but she hasn't appeared in the final category or even in any others."

Hazuki's musings made Hana realize that, indeed, Seiran was nowhere to be seen. Hana remembered that Hazuki had talked about how strong Seiran was, and after meeting her herself, Hana sensed that her power rivaled Botan's. She was certainly stronger than anyone else on Campus Four's team. Just what one would expect from the younger sister of the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner, Kazura.

"She entered last year, right?"

"Yes. That's why I thought she'd appear this year, but perhaps something happened?"

Puzzled, Hazuki placed a palm to her cheek.

"Well, that's just fine for us, no? One more obstacle out of the way only makes them easier to crush! And crush that phony princess, we

shall! Indeed!”

Kikyou was so pumped up that one would think she were doing the fighting; Hana was at a loss for words.

Hana couldn’t guess who would win between Hazuki and Botan, but even if Botan won, Hana couldn’t imagine *herself* losing.

And so, as expected, Hana won her matches in short order and secured her spot in the finals. Following this would be the semifinals match between Hazuki and Botan. A previously unseen tension swept over the crowd.

Hazuki’s shikigami was Hiiragi, of course. But while Botan supposedly had multiple shikigami, she’d brought out only one of them during the whole tournament.

“Hakuro.”

A white tiger appeared in response to Botan’s call. Seeing its beautiful coat, Hana wondered aloud whether it was fluffier than Arashi’s fur. Nozomu shot her a cold glare.

“*That’s* your first thought?!”

“What do you want from me? Once you discover the wonders of Arashi’s exquisite fluff, it changes you!”

Hana gave Arashi a big hug as she defended herself. The question of whether his magnificent fluff was due to him being a god or whether other shikigami were on the same level weighed heavily on her mind.

Regardless of Hana’s dilemma, the battle was already beginning. Hiiragi’s movements were excellent, befitting of a human-form shikigami, and he seemed to be overwhelming the white tiger. That is, until the tiger’s master revealed the next trick up her sleeve.

“Kagura.”

A bird of blazing vermilion materialized, answering Botan’s call.

“Oooh, how pretty.”

Hana found herself charmed by this new opponent, which earned her another glare from Nozomu. He was the sweet-and-sour type who went *way* too hard on the sour.

Hiiragi had the edge until then, but with this vermilion bird entering the fray, he was put into positions where he couldn't defend himself. The bird and tiger combined still couldn't match Hiiragi in raw power, but in practice, there was a limit to what he could contend with. Hiiragi couldn't fend them off alone when attacks from the air were added into the mix. And what's more…

"Those shikigami sure seem used to combat. Same for their master."

Their teamwork was polished enough to catch even Hana's eye. Botan's commands were spot-on, as well. That must have made this fight even more of a struggle for Hiiragi.

"That's because the Yotsukado clan specializes in combat. That's partly why the main family, the branch families, and even the students have a wealth of combat experience. Their practitioners are often dispatched to other clans to support shade fights in emergencies. Like Kazura, for instance. He's assigned to the Yotsukado clan by default, but the changing of the clan lords led to an increase in shades, so he's under my brother's command for the time being," Nozomu explained.

"I see, so that's how it works."

Hana had thought it odd before that Kazura followed Saku's orders despite being called the secret weapon of the Yotsukados, but that summed it up quite nicely.

Now, back to the match…

"Oh, shoot!"

Hana unwittingly shouted at what was unfolding before her eyes; Hiiragi had just been hit by both shikigami at the same time before falling to the ground.

Hiiragi tried to pick himself up, but Hazuki raised her voice into what was almost a cry.

"Hiiragi, it's all right! Don't push yourself any further!"

Hiiragi saw Hazuki gaze upon him, her expression so pained that the injuries may as well have been hers. He let the strength vanish from his body, before vanishing himself.

He was a shikigami, so as long as his practitioner was safe, then he'd heal in time. But even knowing that, the majority of practitioners felt like their shikigami were practically family. That's why it was hard to see one's shikigami being hurt.

"Man, I know it's just a school event, but I don't think I'm ever gonna like doing stuff that hurts shikigami."

Hana sighed, and Kikyou had to agree, but…

"Fair enough, but it must be done. Coordination with one's shikigami is essential when fighting as a practitioner. This Campus Cup serves to teach the students that."

"I *know*, but still…"

Hazuki looked crestfallen; and it was surely her worries about Hiiragi that weighed on her rather than the loss.

"I feel bad for them," Hana added.

"Hana, I know what you're trying to say. But it sounds a bit out of character after I saw you mercilessly beat the living daylights out of your opponents' shikigami!"

"Good point."

"Absolutely, you are *not* one to talk."

Kikyou firmly objected, while Kiriya and Nozomu joined in on the dogpile.

"Oof…"

Even Hana had enough self-awareness to know she couldn't argue with that. To escape those vicious glares, she called out to Hazuki, who was just now returning.

"Hazuki, I'll avenge you—don't worry."

"Sure… Please do."

With the stage set, Hana ventured into the final match: a one-on-one against Botan.

Botan seemed self-assured as she stood waiting.

"Well now, I suppose I'll commend you for not running away in fear."

"I've got my other half to avenge, so that's that."

"Tee-hee."

Botan gave an odd giggle. She might have looked like a prim and proper lady, but at her core was the daughter of the clan that specialized in combat, the Yotsukados, and she very much delighted in it.

"Do you perhaps think you have any chance? Those shikigami of yours indeed seem imposing, but you know that human-form shikigami hardly guarantee you a win, don't you? That goes for your inugami as well. There's no blade that won't be wasted in the hands of an incompetent wielder. I don't know how you managed to bring an inugami under your command, but it was surely done by Lord Ichinomiya's power, no? You really *are* suited to that bug shikigami."

Yet again, Botan made light of Azuha.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh… Not once, but *twice* you've insulted Azuha." Hana let out a creepy chuckle. A switch flipped in her brain. "In that case, I'd be happy to put you down so thoroughly that you'll never let the word 'incompetent' pass your lips again."

With a sinister grin and the concept of "self-restraint" cleanly tossed out the window, Hana held out her index finger.

"Azuha, come."

With that, Azuha fluttered from her perch in Hana's hair to land on her fingertip.

"Aoi, Miyabi, Arashi. Sorry, but can I ask you to stay out of this?"

"Well, saw this coming."

"Yes, it's only natural. I suppose I must leave this to our elder sister."

"Indeed."

Hana had her golden tickets to victory stand down and instead restricted herself to a single insect shikigami. Botan was stunned.

"Surely you don't intend to fight me with that bug?"

"I do."

"Are you mad?!"

It was too shocking for Botan to believe it. Or anyone else…

"Whoa, c'mon, no way."

"Bugs are at the bottom of the barrel!"

"Noooo! I'm begging you, at least take the inugami!"

"Why are you throwing this fight?! It's first place if you win this!"

The peanut gallery was acting up again, and this time it was almost entirely the Campus One crowd, but Hana firmly ignored them.

"I'll show you what a so-called measly insect can do."

Hana's expression exuded unshakable confidence.

"Is that so? I find little joy in bullying the weak, but I suppose it is the duty of the strong to put you in your place. Hakuro, Kagura."

A white tiger and a vermilion bird appeared before Botan.

When the signal to start came, Botan's shikigami moved at once. They intended to mercilessly attack Azuha right from the start, but Azuha fluttered gracefully to dodge it all. It was as though she was merely toying with them.

Botan was certain that she could defeat a mere bug instantly, so it didn't take long for her blatant irritation to rise to the surface.

"Oh, *I* know that face. Li'l Nozomu had the *same* look the first time he picked a fight with me," Hana said, glancing at Nozomu and shooting him a mean-spirited smile. Her voice probably hadn't reached his ears, but given the way he scowled like he'd tasted something bitter, he must have had an idea of what she was thinking. "Azuhaaa, no need to spend time on the theatrics. Just get 'em already."

Azuha responded in her childlike tone and revealed the power she'd been suppressing. As her wings grew dazzlingly colorful, the massive power she unleashed was apparent to everyone around the arena. The spectators' eyes went wide in shock as they felt it for themselves, one by one. And of course, that included Botan. Azuha's power was massive, more than enough to shut up anyone who'd call her a "bottom-of-the-barrel bug."

While continuing to dodge the attacks from Botan's shikigami, Azuha spread shimmers of light from her wings. Botan's shikigami charged headfirst into these specks and then shook their heads to

brush them off. But the next moment, the two started fighting each other.

"Wh-what are you doing, Hakuro and Kagura?! Stop this at once!"

Botan was baffled to see her shikigami pay no heed to their master's orders and continue to fight; Azuha's graceful fluttering now seemed to make a mockery of her.

"Whew, Big Sis's brainwashing never stops being spooky. Even *I* wouldn't know right from left after a whiff of that. That's just what happens when you don't know what you're getting into."

"Absolutely. I suggest you learn from your mistake of insulting our elder sister."

"I think this should drastically change everyone's appraisal of her."

While Aoi, Miyabi, and Arashi were giving their impressions of the battle, Botan's shikigami delivered decisive strikes to each other, bringing the match to an abrupt end. Botan's jaw hung open at this anticlimactic conclusion, and the audience was no less stunned.

"Maaaster! I wooon!"

Azuha fluttered down and returned to Hana.

"You did amazing, Azuha. I'm so proud of you for taking down two shikigami at once."

"Tee-hee."

Hana dropped her defenses to commend her shikigami. But their good mood was soon interrupted by a shout from Botan.

"You cheated!"

Botan pointed directly at Azuha; her brow was furrowed in rage, and her body was shaking ever so slightly.

"An insect shikigami could never defeat my Hakuro or Kagura! You must have pulled some sort of trick!"

"I understand not wanting to accept it, but I'm afraid the facts are the facts. Aren't you *ashamed* to criticize your opponent just because you managed to lose without even putting up a fight? Then again, I suppose there's no limit to how much you can humiliate yourself after losing to the insect shikigami you so confidently insulted time and time again. Poor thing."

Hana intentionally used the "poor thing" phrase that Botan said so often. There was no doubt in the mind of anyone watching such malicious mockery that Hana had a rotten personality.

"If you *really* want to complain, why not ask any of the Obsidian-rank practitioners in attendance? As long as you don't mind them removing any shadow of a doubt from your loss."

"Guh…"

Hana turned her back on the arena, as though to say she had no more business with this crushed princess, who could only grind her teeth in anguish.

"Oh-ho-ho!"

And of course, Hana didn't forget the intentionally high-pitched cackle as she left the stage.

The murmurs among the audience continued as Hana returned to her team, where she was greeted not by celebrations of her victory but by a sullen mood. Nozomu, for instance, had a hand leaning against a wall as he groaned.

"Nozomu, what're you doing?"

"Shut up. Just got an old scar acting up."

"From when you insulted Azuha for being just a bug before getting your butt handed to you? Ah, good times, Nozo-kins."

"It's not 'Nozo-kins'! It's just 'Nozomu'!"

Whenever Hana called him Nozo-kins instead of Nozomu, it was usually to make fun of him. This knowledge was exactly why Nozomu snapped back so angrily. Not that it served any purpose, as Hana would never do something as silly as "being considerate" over that.

"Actually, what's the deal? I won, so aren't you all happy?"

Even Kikyou, the one who pleaded with Hana more desperately than anyone to defeat Botan, looked conflicted instead of happy.

"While I am pleased to see that phony princess beaten into the dirt…I can't help but think about the difference between how I struggled against her two shikigami and what a single insect shikigami could accomplish. It makes me wonder what I've been

doing all this time… I suppose it should be no surprise by now, but I'm reminded of just how strong you are, Hana."

"Yeah."

Kiriya agreed, and even Hazuki appeared to be a bit sullen.

"It's just like that Yotsukado lady said. Human-form shikigami aren't gonna guarantee you a win. Azuha won because her abilities are that much stronger. Nothin' to be surprised by."

"I know, but…"

"First off, the problem is that too many practitioners look down on bug shikigami. If Botan had been on her guard, things might've been different."

Hana had no shortage of grievances about this. But on the bright side, this match should have proved just how powerful insect shikigami—and Azuha in particular—could be.

"I'm never letting *anyone* call Azuha a 'mere bug' again."

Countless times, Hana had been mocked as a washout, but it was Azuha being mocked that she'd held a chip on her shoulder for. And now she felt relieved that she could make not just Botan but the entire audience eat their words.

◆

With all events of the Campus Cup now finished, Hana hurried to the rear of the arena building.

Thanks to Hana's victory in the final round, Campus One was sure to take first place by total points. However, she was gone before they were even tallied. It was only natural; the locations of those talismans were incomparably more important. She had planned to wrap that match up quickly, but she forgot about the talismans at some point and got a bit too invested.

Right now, Kazura and Yanagi were likely searching the campus. Saku had his duties as the Ichinomiya clan lord, so he probably couldn't take as much action as he'd like.

Frankly, Hana shouldn't have been taking action, either. These talismans were imbued with curses, which already meant it was no situation for a student like Hana to get involved with. But Arashi had been the first one to find a talisman, so his power would surely be helpful to the others.

Hanna was hurrying to meet up with them, her shikigami trailing after her, but a voice called out from behind them.

"Hana Ichise! Wait right there!"

Hana turned back for one instant and found that the voice belonged to Botan. She must have had more to complain about. Nothing that Hana had the time to worry about, so she ignored her entirely.

Seeing that Hana wasn't slowing down, Botan called out to her yet again.

"Wha—? Why are you not stopping?!"

"Master, is this a good idea?"

Miyabi looked conflicted about Hana's choice, but to Hana, ignoring Botan was the *only* choice.

"We can't waste time on her."

Hana continued and turned the corner to the rear of the arena, where she saw Yanagi sitting on the ground with his back resting against the wall.

"Wha—? Yanagi?!"

Hana stopped in her tracks. She then slowly approached her brother and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Shortly after, Botan finally caught up.

"Listen here, you… Hmm? Is something the matter?"

Botan was still angry and fully intended to continue complaining, but she changed her tune after seeing Yanagi.

"This person is Yanagi Ichise… Your brother, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Why is he sleeping in a place like this?"

"Because…he's not sleeping."

Botan looked at Hana's palm that had touched Yanagi. It was drenched with bright red blood.

"Eek!"

The deep, shocked gasp came from Botan.

Hana joined her in being surprised, but she remained more level-headed than she expected. After touching his shoulder, she'd already suspected he was injured; when Aoi and Miyabi helped her gently lay Yanagi down, blood rushed out from his head.

"Please use this."

Botan quickly whipped out a handkerchief from her pocket and handed it to Hana. Hana's eyes widened at the gesture, but she gratefully accepted it and pressed it to Yanagi's wounds.

"Yanagi! Yanagi!"

There was no response to Hana's calls and no sign that he'd regain consciousness.

"What in the world happened…?"

"Master, we must treat his wounds at once."

"I'll contact Saku. He'll send someone out."

Yanagi should have been searching for the talismans with Kazura, but some trouble must have cropped up along the way. Another concern Hana had was that she couldn't see Kazura anywhere.

But saving Yanagi took priority. Just as Hana was about to call Saku's phone, a loud explosion rang out with a *boom*, rattling even the ground beneath their feet.

"Oh, what *now*?!"

Botan was shocked, her eyes darting around.

It seemed for a moment that that would be the end of it, but the two heard multiple explosions shortly after, with each one seeming to get closer and closer to the Campus Cup's arena.

"No way, did the talismans activate? But Kazura was supposed to do something about them!"

Hana had tried to get Arashi to go along with them, but Kazura turned her down; he said that he learned the traces of the talismans' powers and didn't need Arashi. If an Obsidian-rank practitioner like

Kazura could be that confident, then Hana figured it must have been too trivial a task for Arashi to help with, if Kazura hadn't already disarmed a few already.

But now it looked like he was too late. Hana regretted her choice, instead wishing she had forced him to take Arashi.

But a voice spoke just as Hana started to panic.

"Ha…na…"

Hana and Botan turned at nearly the same time to see a battered and bruised Kazura.

"Goodness, Kazura!"

Botan rushed to his side.

"Whatever could have happened to you?!"

"Botan…"

Kazura's eyes widened ever so slightly in surprise, but he again turned to Hana.

"Seems we got a bit careless. We came across the masterminds behind the Skull of Nirvana and tried to take them on, but Yanagi got beaten first… I couldn't fight while also protecting him…"

"My goodness! To think someone could get the upper hand against you!"

Botan was shocked, as though she couldn't believe it.

"Where are these Skull of Nirvana people now?"

Hana, on the other hand, sounded perfectly calm.

"I barely managed to fend them off. But the talismans they planted are still in place. I can't seal them off with what's left of my power after that fight. Please, Hana, would you lend me your strength?"

Hana stared intently at Kazura, as though trying to pry into what exactly he was thinking. And so, after a pause, Hana stopped applying pressure to Yanagi's wound and stood up.

"Miyabi, call someone over to get my brother to safety. I can bet Saku's got his hands full with the commotion going on."

"Understood."

Miyabi vanished. Hana turned to face Kazura.

"Take me to them."

"Thank you very much, Hana…"

Kazura, covered in bruises, led the way. Hana could see Botan just behind them, which concerned her a bit.

"Why are *you* coming along, too?"

"I wouldn't dream of abandoning Kazura in his time of need. While I may be no match for an Obsidian-rank practitioner, I'm still a candidate to be the Yotsukado clan lord, and I can't look the other way knowing that the Skull of Nirvana are involved."

Hana quietly clicked her tongue at Botan's fiery sense of duty.

"So long as you don't slow me down…"

Hana muttered this too lowly for Botan to hear. After watching Kazura for a bit longer, she gave a hushed order to Azuha. Azuha then left her master's side without a sound.

The most heavily populated spot on the campus was undoubtedly the arena in which the Campus Cup had just been held, which was on the exact opposite side of the school grounds as this empty field where Kazura hurriedly led Hana. It was deserted, perhaps as a consequence of the explosions.

When Kazura stopped in this all-too-quiet spot, Botan called out to him out of concern.

"Kazura, are you all right?"

Her expression was pained as she sidled up to him and reached out to hold his arm, but Hana suddenly jerked her away.

"What is the meaning of this?! Let me go!"

"Hey… Did you really think I wouldn't notice?" Hana paid no mind to Botan's objections. She only sized Kazura up with an ice-cold glare. "If so, you must *really* take me for a fool."

Botan didn't seem to understand what she meant, but the kindhearted expression that Kazura wore until this moment now warped into something disturbing. Kazura wore a grin that stretched just a *bit* too widely as the blood and bruises on his body suddenly vanished, revealing that he didn't have a scratch on him.

"So you actually *did* notice, eh?"

Kazura's smile was the same as ever, but the impression it gave now was completely different. It was like watching the veneer of an angel being torn off to reveal a devil in disguise.

"Those techniques are Azuha's specialty. I've used her abilities before to change my appearance into Hazuki's, too. That's why I can spot a fake right away."

"How absolutely unexpected. To think you had *that* much power, eh?"

Hana made no attempt to hide her suspicion, and Kazura made no attempt to hide his delight.

"You've got potential, you know."

"Much appreciated."

The words between them were small talk, but Hana now stepped forward to cover Botan.

"You're the one who injured my brother, I take it?"

"Right you are. He was starting to be a bit of a bother."

"Ngh!" Despite inflicting such deep wounds on Yanagi, Kazura chuckled as though he'd merely swatted a fly. Hana's glare sharpened. "So should I take that to mean *you* planted the talisman Arashi found?"

Kazura didn't answer, but his grin grew wider. This was nothing short of an admission.

"I get it. No wonder you refused to have Arashi tag along."

"I put a lot of work into burying those talismans, so I couldn't have them getting dug up now."

Kazura had walked around the campus plenty of times under the pretense of "scouting the area" for the school festival. And with all the teachers and students knowing that he was working security, nobody suspected a thing. He had countless chances to plant who knows how many talismans.

Just then they heard the biggest explosion yet coming from the Campus Cup arena. Hana turned toward it on reflex, but she managed to keep her cool by reminding herself that Saku was there to handle it.

“Are you saying that Kazura caused these explosions? B-but why would he…?”

Botan asked this with a trembling voice from behind Hana. She likely didn’t know the details, but she must have inferred from their conversation that Kazura was the culprit behind the explosions and been in a state of shock.

“That’s a damn good question. So what *is* your reason?”

As Hana asked her question, Aoi and Arashi stood on the sidelines, ready to act at a moment’s notice.

“Because I can’t stand it. The country, the world of practitioners, and the state of affairs where the five clans control it all.”

“The same motive as the Skull of Nirvana. Hard to be surprised at such a blatant rehash.”

“Well, who do you think controlled the Skull of Nirvana from behind the scenes?”

Kazura’s disarmingly casual smile just made his expression all the creepier.

“Thanks to that Nijouin clan member…”

Now that the cat was that far out of the bag, Hana remembered what Saku had told her before. That there was a Nijouin practitioner who went missing after cutting a deal. That every single Skull of Nirvana member was killed by curse.

Hana looked at this man smiling before her and had an awful thought.

“You were the one who made that bargain?! And all those Skull of Nirvana members who were cursed to death…”

“Keh-keh. Ha-ha-ha-ha!” Kazura cackled loudly, as though this were a laughing matter. “Maybe, maybe not. What do you think?”

Hana felt like he was getting a kick out of her reactions, which really pissed her off.

“Don’t play dumb!”

“Come now, no need to be so angry. It’s just… When you come across just the right tool for the job, how can you resist using it? And when it stops working, you throw it away. Simple as that.

"Why, you…!"

He had no respect for human life.

"Isn't it funny? Being Obsidian rank is all it takes for everyone, even Saku, to trust me beyond a shadow of a doubt. He knew I was a specialist in curses, yet it never crossed his mind. Guess that Obsidian rank of his is just a fancy title. Doesn't it make you weep to think that's what's become of the clan lords?"

Kazura's shoulders slumped; one could tell that he saw even Saku as beneath him.

Kazura might have had a point, but that just spoke to how much faith Saku had in him.

"It's proof of how much Saku believed in you, right? You had all that trust from the Ichinomiya lord and were even called the strongest of all Obsidian-rank practitioners, so what're you stooping to this terrorist crap for? You don't need this to get all the status and fame you could want."

He wasn't on the level of those failed, grudge-holding practitioners who made up the Skull of Nirvana.

"See, that's just the problem." Kazura's smile suddenly vanished. "I have power and knowledge that far surpass anyone else. Power that not even a clan lord can rival. And yet just because I was born to a different family, I'm stuck being ordered around as their pawn. Just because I wasn't born to one of the five clans. That's it, nothing else!"

He kept his composure through most of his talk, but those last words came out rough, laying his irritation bare.

"Why is this allowed?! Why must I be ordered around by weaklings?!" The fire fueling him cooled, and Kazura continued calmly. "It's not right. So I'll simply destroy it. Then I'll start my *own* clan of barrier masters. After that, nobody can order me around ever again."

Kazura chuckled—"Keh-keh-keh"—but Hana simply stared coldly.

"You're a petty man."

Hana sneered at him; Kazura twitched in response and faced her.

"You don't wanna be ordered around? The five clans weren't built up just to be destroyed over something so pathetic! The barrier masters are pillars of our country. Sure, they might look like they've got power and fortune to spare, but that comes with bearing the heavy responsibility of protecting the pillars. Their work isn't nearly so trivial as you think it is!"

Hana knew. Saku had responsibility, determination, and a deep, profound love for the country and citizens he'd sworn to protect, to the point where he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice himself for the greater good.

There were many things that those who became clan lords had to give up. For example, a marriage based on love alone was out of the question. If the partner didn't provide the strength needed for the role, then a lord could never strengthen a pillar's barrier.

What's more, that person must dedicate their days to protecting the barrier, effectively offering their very lives to their nation.

"This country would fall apart in an instant if the likes of *you* ever became a barrier master."

"You sure talk like a know-it-all."

"Because I *do* know it all. I'm Saku's wife for a reason." Hana saw how desperately Saku poured his power into protecting that barrier. She could say this proudly. "If you're that fed up with hearing orders, you could just quit being a practitioner and flee the country. Nobody would stop you, trust me."

An individual this dangerous was going to cause more trouble inside the borders than outside them. Saku would surely agree, though he might get a bit depressed after learning that *these* were his trusted ally's true colors.

"So are we clear? Now tell me where the other talismans are already."

With a cocksure attitude that could rival Saku's, Hana demanded to know the locations of the bombs, but on the inside, she was getting a bit anxious.

The explosions weren't stopping. They could be heard all around, with the scale seeming to grow with each one. And what's more, there was no longer just silence between the explosions—there were shrieks, and they were starting to reach even here.

There was a sense of urgency here; the longer Hana did nothing, the more danger everyone would be in. However, she had little confidence that she could stop Kazura, the man called the strongest of the Obsidian-rank practitioners, all by herself.

"Do you know what *this* is?" Kazura suddenly pulled out something that looked like a six-sided die from his pocket and showed it to her. Hana looked at it suspiciously. "This little trinket has all the powerful shades I've come across sealed inside it."

Hana couldn't tell what Kazura was getting at, so she just listened quietly. But she took the hint that he was definitely up to no good.

"I scattered shade-packing talismans just like this all over the school, right next to each of the bigger talismans that your inugami found. Those stones are on a timer, so they'll explode once the time is up. Those explosions will break these talismans, so all the shades they send Obsidian-rank practitioners to fight will pour out onto the campus."

Shades that needed Obsidian-rank practitioners to be dealt with… In other words, he was saying there were almost no practitioners who could stand up to these things.

"This school is packed with students. Are you trying to kill them all?!"

"Right you are. This festival will mark the day I make my declaration of war against the five clans. After I wipe out the world of practitioners, there'll be a need to start over from scratch. Those incompetent excuses for so-called future practitioners will be sacrifices for my glorious first step forward. But of course, I won't let their deaths be for naught. They'll have the honor of contributing to my curses, which I'll wring them all dry for."

"This dude's *seriously* lost all connection to reality."

Hana clicked her tongue and furrowed her brow at the awful things she'd just heard.

"Those seals should be breaking from the explosions by now and making those incompetents fight for their lives."

"I struggle to understand you."

"Is that so? If anything, I thought you'd be the one person to understand."

"You thought *who* would?!"

"You've been mocked as a 'washout' all this time, yet the real washouts are those who surround you. Have you never considered smashing to bits this world of incompetent practitioners who sneer at you despite being weak themselves?"

"……"

Hana didn't answer.

She only watched Kazura with a gaze that belied a strong, unwavering will.

Seeing this response, Kazura offered a hand to her.

"Won't you join me?"

"I refuse."

Hana answered immediately.

Kazura laughed with glee, as though something was funny. Botan couldn't help but interject from behind Hana.

"It's all a lie, Kazura. Some form of joke, no? Though I must say, jokes in such poor taste are unlike you. Now, let's go save everyone. I'm sure we'll resolve this soon with your help, Kazura."

Botan still hadn't abandoned hope. No, her gaze said that she was averting her eyes from a truth she didn't want to believe; she looked to Kazura as though he were her last lifeline.

But reality was cruel.

Kazura looked at Botan as if she were a pest. It wasn't the gaze you gave to someone dear to you, someone you've surely known for years.

"Botan, you know, I've gotten really sick and tired of that part about you. It'd be one thing if your powers were anywhere near

Hana's level, but infatuation from a weakling just makes my stomach churn."

"Ka…zura…"

Botan froze at this entirely new level of shock.

She had never put her feelings into words, but Botan wore her heart on her sleeve, so it was hard to imagine that Kazura never noticed. This sort of response was just brutal, though.

"But that all ends today."

Kazura tossed the talisman with shades sealed inside it at Hana and Botan. When it hit the ground, countless shades appeared.

"Master!"

"Hana!"

Aoi and Arashi hurried to protect Hana; while they were all preoccupied with their new assailants, a barrier was put up enclosing both them *and* all the shades.

They glanced toward Kazura and saw that he now held a completely different talisman.

"It's a talisman that sets up a barrier. Ring any bells?"

It was the one used back when the school was attacked.

"Now then, I must be off."

Kazura left with a sunny smile. Hana tried to give chase, but the shades got in the way.

"Hold on! Wait right there!"

But such calls had no chance of stopping him. Kazura grew farther and farther away.

"Aaargh, geez! What is going *on*?!"

Her thoughts were a jumbled mess, but she had no time to think straight. The shades surrounding Hana clearly lived up to Kazura's standards of strength.

And just as Hana had feared, she had someone slowing her down —the girl who failed to accept reality and broke down, Botan. Protecting her while fighting was no easy task. Even if Botan couldn't defeat any shades, it would have made things a lot easier if she could at least defend herself.

"It can't be… Kazura…"

Her mind was stuck on Kazura despite it clearly not being the time for it, so Hana grabbed her by the collar and gave her a completely unrestrained open-palm slap to the cheek. The full-bodied *smack* that came from it sounded painful, but it finally got Botan focused on the person before her eyes.

"What're you doing?! If you wanna mope, save it for later! You call yourself a Yotsukado?! This is no time to drop your dignity as a member of one of the five clans. People are in danger as we speak! Practitioners have a duty to protect people, to protect our nation, do we not?!"

"Ah…"

"Keep it together!"

Hana's scolding slowly prompted Botan back into action.

"H-Hakuro, Kagura."

If this was the same barrier talisman that was used back during the attack on the school, then Hana could break it with ease, but she risked unleashing these shades as well. That said, Hana couldn't imagine leaving so many strong shades to Botan alone. Hana had no choice but to defeat the shades with Arashi and Aoi, but by the time they cleared them out and broke the barrier, Kazura was long gone.

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Meanwhile, back at the arena, Saku was tasked with keeping the panicked crowd under control while also dealing with the waves of shades appearing. They were more powerful than he'd anticipated, and some were slipping through the cracks. Yukizasa was taking the lead to slay them, but they just didn't have enough hands.

"Dammit!"

While Saku failed to hide his irritation at things not going as planned, he was approached by the Nijouin clan lord.

"Lord Ichinomiya, leave this to me."

"But…"

"Stopping the root of the problem comes first. Whoever caused this ruckus should still be around. Prioritize that before they cause even more damage."

Saku met the Nijouin clan lord's gaze. After a pause, Saku thanked him and ran off. He headed outside the arena, giving commands to any practitioners and defeating any shades he met along the way.

Saku made it outside to the festival grounds, but he still didn't know what was causing the attacks. He had felt somewhat reassured before, thinking that the talismans wouldn't pose any problems with Kazura on the case, but he now began to feel furious at his own naïveté.

"M-Masteeeeeer!"

Tsubaki rushed to Saku, waving her arms. She'd been trailing Hana the whole time; thinking that Hana was sure to have more freedom to act, Saku had sent Tsubaki to protect her.

"It's bad, reeeal bad!"

"What happened?"

"It's Kazuraaa! He's the bad guuuy!"

"Kazura?" Saku couldn't understand. But after listening to Tsubaki explain everything she saw, he was aghast. "No way, *he's* behind everything? The murders of the Skull of Nirvana members? And this attack?"

"Yeah, he is! We gotta stop him. That guy is super messed up!"

Saku realized from Tsubaki's frantic actions that this was no joke. The cruel reality cut like a knife through his chest.

But this was no time to be stunned stiff. If they were up against an Obsidian-rank practitioner, then Saku had to act even more urgently to prevent any needless casualties.

"Where's Kazura?"

"I don't know *that* much!"

Tsubaki looked apologetic; even knowing that it wasn't necessarily her fault, Saku still unconsciously clicked his tongue.

"C'mooon, you know I'm bad at searching!"

That Saku did, more than anyone else.

“Dammit. I should’ve made a shikigami who’s better at searching, like Arashi.”

“Rude! That’s saying you’re gonna cheat on me! What, am I not enough to satisfy you?!”

“You’ve already got your darling, right?”

“That’s a whole different thing!”

While attempting to brush off his fuming shikigami, Saku thought about his next steps. Just then he looked up to see Azuha fluttering overhead.

“Azuha…?”

The sight snapped Saku out of his thoughts, and he hurried after Azuha.

“Tsubaki, this way!”

“Ah, Maaasteeer!”

Tsubaki trailed after Saku.

Before long, they found Kazura standing atop a tree, gazing upon the chaos he’d wrought.

“Kazura…”

“Well now, if it isn’t Saku.”

Kazura hopped down from the tree and landed with ease. He seemed no different from usual.

Saku held a lot of respect for Kazura; he was a fellow Obsidian-rank practitioner and a peer Saku had worked with countless times. He didn’t want to believe that the man he knew was capable of anything that risked another person’s life. But Kazura saw the same students and practitioners battling shades that Saku had, and far from lifting a finger to help, he just watched and smiled. Seeing this, Saku had to accept that the man before him was plenty capable of that.

“So it was you?”

“I’m impressed you found me.”

Kazura thought it strange, but then he noticed Azuha coming into view.

"I see, so she had her shikigami watch me from the start. That girl really knows how to exceed my expectations. And here I thought my acting was good enough to keep anyone from becoming suspicious."

Saku couldn't hear even a shred of guilt in the way Kazura chuckled.

"Kazura, turn yourself in. I don't want this getting any messier than it is already."

"Whatever might you be talking about?" Kazura tilted his head slightly. "You're too late. I have no intention of stopping."

"You hate the five clans that much?"

"Yes. Including you, of course. Despite being younger than me, you were hailed by all as the next clan lord, rising to your throne as though it were only natural, and *goodness*, do I despise you for it."

Saku was used to being envied, but hearing this from someone he trusted so deeply took its toll.

"Is there no going back?"

"Oh, how naïve you are. Truly astounding how you call yourself a clan leader. Yes, the five clans really *are* better off destroyed."

Finding an opening, Tsubaki attacked. However, she was blocked with ease by the barrier Kazura had already set up. She continued to fight, but none of her attacks left so much as a scratch. This barrier was too strong for even Tsubaki to break it, which spoke to just how powerful Kazura was.

But despite Kazura seeming to focus on his fight with Tsubaki, he casually moved to the side all of a sudden. The spot where he'd been standing was then slammed with an attack that didn't come from Tsubaki.

"Awww, I really thought I had a shot with that one."

Yukizasa entered the fray.

"Hey, Saku. Don't go holdin' back just because he's a familiar face. This man's a hardened criminal."

Yukizasa gave Saku a firm scolding, like he saw exactly what was on his mind. It made Saku finally resolve to do what he must.

"Who do you think you're talking to?"

With a snort, Saku returned to the cocksure hubris he was known for. Saku's response made Yukizasa relieved enough to let out a laugh.

Their opponent was the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner. Honestly, they didn't know if they could win even with the two of them.

"We're taking him alive, so don't kill him."

"You got it."

Saku and Yukizasa went forth at the same time.

They had no shortage of questions for Kazura about the case—everything from the Skull of Nirvana incident to the missing Nijouin practitioner—so capturing him alive was a necessity. However, Kazura took the two on with every intent to kill.

Kazura extended his hand as though to grab Yukizasa, who smelled imminent danger and immediately dodged. Kazura's whiffed hand landed on a tree trunk, which instantly rotted on the spot.

Yukizasa furrowed his brow and muttered, "Holy shit," under his breath.

"Kazura specializes in curses. Don't slip up."

"Yeah, I get it already."

He did get it; a practitioner who'd been an Obsidian rank longer than Saku wasn't gonna go out that easily. Holding back to capture him alive was starting to feel like a big handicap to Saku and Yukizasa compared to Kazura's willingness to go for the kill.

The not-quite-decisive attacks continued for some time, and the exhaustion was starting to catch up to the two, until…

"Hiyaaaaaaah!"

With a fired-up shout, Hana joined the fight by way of a flying kick.

"My, oh my, well done in defeating all those shades."

Kazura kept his self-assured smile as he attempted to dodge, but for some reason, his feet didn't move. When he looked down, he found that they were rooted to the ground by a barrier that he hadn't even noticed.

"Gah!"

For the first time, Kazura changed his tune, and Saku flashed a grin.

Hana's flying kick continued its trajectory and hit its target; Kazura took a clean hit, slamming back into a tree, which left him crumpled on the ground. They all heard Kazura gasp as he collided with the tree, so it must have been a heavy blow.

Not letting Kazura's momentary inaction go to waste, Yukizasa bound his hands behind his back. By the time Kazura could lift his face out of the dirt, he saw Hana and Saku high-fiving each other, which made him laugh.

"I see, so you were waiting for Hana's arrival. But I wonder, how did I fail to notice the barriers set up around my feet?"

"I told you before, that's Azuha's specialty. Azuha gave you an illusion while you weren't looking, so you didn't notice when Saku set it up."

"So that was the plan. I think we've all learned a valuable lesson today about not underestimating insect shikigami."

Hana looked down at him coldly, as though unimpressed that it took him this long, but Saku just smiled at her.

"We had some perfect timing there, huh?" Hana said proudly.

"Just goes to show the power of our love, Hana."

Saku placed a hand on Hana's shoulder, which Hana quickly slapped off.

"Don't get distracted here!"

"That's right, Saku. Dealing with this guy comes first."

Kazura was still pinned down by Yukizasa, but he seemed… concerningly compliant.

Shortly after the explosions that began around the time when Hana and Botan found Yanagi, reinforcements from the Association arrived in droves, so the situation seemed to be coming under control.

Aoi and Arashi being sent on shade-extermination duty certainly helped; especially Arashi, who was apparently accomplishing more

than Hana had expected. The shades Kazura had gathered were all strong ones; even the practitioners assigned to security struggled to fend them off. Arashi, however, swept the campus clean of their presence. The practitioners lauded his efforts, happy to have an inugami's strength on their side.

But then, when they handed Kazura off to the Association Headquarters staff, it happened. As though he were waiting for this moment, Kazura broke free of Yukizasa's binds and made a break for it. He extended an arm to Hana and grabbed her from behind. Hana had let her guard down and failed to resist, allowing Kazura to capture her.

"Hana!"

Saku let his panic show.

"Leeet meee gooo!"

Hana tried to break free, but she couldn't match this man's strength. As she flailed around, a small spider appeared before her eyes.

"A spider?"

The spider attached itself to the back of Hana's hand and bit.

"Ouch!"

The pain was sharp, but it was followed by something far more unnerving rushing through her veins.

"Ah… Guh, agh…" Her hand was shaking, and not by her own control. "What did you…?"

Hana turned her pained expression toward Kazura; she was met with a dark, twisted gaze.

"Kazura! What did you do to Hana?!"

"Saku, you recall what it is that I specialize in, do you not?"

"Curses…"

"Why, yes, and this is the kind that can only be dispelled by the victim or the practitioner who cast it…not that a student like Hana could ever hope to do so."

An angelic warmth emanated from the devilish smile on Kazura's face. Saku aimed a level of fury at him that Hana had never seen

before.

"Kazuraaa!!!"

But it didn't change Kazura's happy-go-lucky mood.

"Ooh, how scary. Anyway, if you allow me to leave, I'll be so kind as to dispel the curse. Though I'll need to keep Hana with me until I feel I've made it to safety. If Hana can survive that long, that is."

"You bastard!"

"Saku, calm down!"

Yukizasa stepped in, but he barely kept Saku from lunging at this monster. Hana couldn't see much of it; the awful feeling infesting her was stifling her breath and blurring her vision.

"Cur…se…"

Yes, that was the word she'd heard. And there was some familiarity to the sensation of this power. Hana racked her brain, desperate to remember where.

It was that time when Arashi returned home after a brief absence. When he'd tried to save those animals who were being used for a curse and wound up receiving the curse itself; yes, this was the same dangerous feeling as when she'd saved him back then.

Hana recalled that pressure, that disgust, as she steadied her breath and concentrated. It was nothing complicated; she'd gone through this before. She only had to deal with it the same way she'd done with Arashi.

Slowly, slowly, Hana began to peel off the curse from within her. She was overcome with agony as she proceeded, enough to nearly make her faint, but she clenched her hands hard enough that her nails dug into her skin, and she hung on.

And then, once she had torn it all off, she forced it outside of her. The instantaneous rush of fresh air filling her lungs made Hana cough.

Kazura watched with great amazement and interest as Hana wheezed.

"Impossible… You dispelled it by yourself…?"

"Don't you…try that crap on me…"

Even while gasping for air, Hana still glared daggers right through her captor.

"Ha-ha… Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

Kazura placed a palm to his forehead and laughed. Nobody could tell what he was thinking; even with his curse dispelled, he appeared positively ecstatic. And then he looked at Hana with a sickly sweet gaze of adoration.

"Oh, you're *good*. I want you." He ran a finger across Hana's chin. "You're sick of this practitioner world, aren't you? You must know the indignity of being used by the incompetent. With you by my side, I feel like I could have the world in the palm of my hands. So won't you be mine?"

"With all due *disrespect*, I decline."

"Hana's *mine*!"

Saku shouted this as though to drown out Hana's low-volume refusal.

"Saku, let me have this sweetheart. I'll take good care of her."

"Don't go smooth-talking Hana. I'm not giving her to you!"

Saku felt like he wanted to go for this guy's throat for a whole different reason now.

"Lemme go already!"

The way Hana's glare showed no fear or hesitation, the way she refused to back down even while captured, it all stirred Kazura's fascination to greater heights.

"Doesn't that resistance make you want her all the more?"

"I can agree with that, but I already told you, Hana's *my* wife!"

"Don't *agree* with him!"

Saku shouted valiantly, and Hana took issue with how valiant he thought he was.

It was hard to tell if the tension in the air was thick or thin, but it was easy to see that Yukizasa was fed up with it.

"Hey, Saku. You've got better things to do than argue, don't you?"

Saku finally came to his senses and launched a mass of concentrated power at Kazura an instant later. However, Hana

quickly sensed that Kazura would set up a barrier to block it with ease, so she pulled out a party popper from her pocket, aimed it at Kazura, and tugged the string.

With the roar of a thunder crack, the popper blasted Kazura with a power many times stronger than what Saku had sent his way.

"Guh!"

Kazura reflexively covered his face with his hands, letting Hana go for just a moment. Saku didn't miss that chance to take Hana back into his arms.

"Hana, are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Glad this came in handy."

"What the heck *is* that?"

"It's something Kikyou gave me, saying to use it whenever you try assaulting me. I think she made it while practicing for the Campus Cup."

"You were gonna point that sorta lethal weapon at me…?"

The corner of Saku's lip twitched after he saw its power firsthand, but Hana laughed it off.

"But hey, it worked out pretty well for self-defense, so all's well that ends well."

"You only had *one* of those, right?"

Hana averted her gaze.

"Don't *ever* use them on me."

"Sure…probably."

She had no intention of using them as long as Saku kept his hands to himself.

Hana looked toward Kazura. After getting a face full of Kikyou's specially made talisman, he was quickly bound up again. And not just by Yukizasa's power, but by that of the multiple practitioners on the scene. He wasn't getting out *this* time.

Lastly, they wrapped some sort of paper slips around Kazura's neck and wrists.

"Saku, what are those?"

"They're talismans that nullify a practitioner's power. They're used for practitioners who commit some sort of crime. You can't call your shikigami with those on, either."

"Didn't know they had those…"

It looked like there were still plenty of talismans Hana didn't know about.

While they were fairly certain Kazura wasn't getting away at this point, everyone still kept their guard up as they carried Kazura away. But at the end…

"Let us meet again, sweetheart."

Kazura looked back at Hana with the flame of obsession in his eyes and left them with an ominous good-bye as he was carried off.

Once he had vanished completely in the distance, Hana finally let out a sigh of relief, and Saku hugged her close.

"You're sure there's nothing wrong?"

"I said, I'm fine."

"Well, I was worried *sick*. No normal person could dispel one of *Kazura's* curses. But somehow, you…"

Saku stopped himself and turned his gaze toward Hana.

"You've dispelled a curse before, haven't you?"

"Wh-wh-what are you talking about? Of course I've never done that. I'm just a student and all."

"Then why did you just stutter?"

"You imagined it. Ah, I've gotta get back to my classmates. There might still be shades around, so we gotta take out any we find, yeah."

Hana changed the subject and headed toward the arena to escape Saku's questioning.

"Hey, Hana!"

She covered her ears, refusing to listen to any more lectures.

◆

It was hard to call everyone *safe*, but even with this case solved and put behind them, the commotion it caused didn't leave anyone in the mood to continue a school festival, so the remainder of the event was canceled.

Campus One was supposed to finally have that Campus Cup victory that they'd worked so hard for, so a lot of students were disappointed to hear it wouldn't be recorded. Nozomu and Kikyou in particular were on another level of devastated. However, while the incident didn't incur any casualties, it certainly did cause a lot of damage, so nobody felt compelled to complain.

With so many school buildings partially destroyed by the explosions, classes were canceled for the time being, leaving Hana with plenty of time to lounge around at the mansion.

She was happy that she had come out of an incident injury-free for once, but Mio shot her down by shouting, "Being uninjured should be the norm!"

And to be sure, she was right. Hana had gotten injured too many times since marrying Saku. She wondered if this could serve as grounds for divorce, but she wavered on whether to discuss it with a lawyer.

Plus, while she didn't get injured, she *was* exposed to something far more dangerous in the form of that curse, so Saku and Mio were even more worried about her than usual. As such, she was told to stay within the mansion to fully recover. Being stuck inside was inconvenient, but a life of eating and sleeping wasn't half bad, so Hana regressed into an even greater slob as the days went by.

During that time, Yanagi and Hazuki came over to visit.

Back when Hana had found Yanagi, the large amount of blood made it look like he'd been heavily injured, but his wounds were lighter than they first appeared. The amount of blood lost was just because it was a head wound. Hana was relieved that it hadn't been anything serious.

Since he'd been attacked from behind, Yanagi never thought that his assailant would have been Kazura, so he said it was quite a

shock once he heard the details after waking up.

Speaking of Kazura, he would be placed under Association watch. The deaths of the Skull of Nirvana members, the missing Nijouin practitioner, whether he really even cut a deal to sneak into the Association Headquarters—the Association had a mountain of questions they wanted to ask him. Besides, the very existence of practitioners was top secret, so they couldn't let him be judged by government laws or let him catch the death penalty. He'd have those power-suppressing talismans stuck on him and stay in confinement to the grave.

Hana had some complex feelings about that when she heard it from Saku. By no means were any of them sympathy or pity, of course; Hana wasn't such a bleeding heart that she'd spare those feelings for someone who'd caused the chaos he had.

But when she thought of all the people he'd been close to, she found it a bit hard to reconcile. Kazura betrayed all those people. Did Kazura maybe have nobody he held dear?

It was a visit from Botan a few days prior that first gave her those thoughts. She hadn't come to give more excuses to Hana, but instead to apologize for the trouble that a Yotsukado associate had caused. Of course, the Yotsukado clan lord had already stopped by to apologize to Saku directly, but this was a personal apology Botan wanted to make to Hana separately.

Along with her apology, Botan said, "Thank you for stopping Kazura."

Botan lowered her head to Hana with sadness in her eyes. Hana accepted the apology; she didn't think Botan was at fault to begin with.

"That hit of yours really did work wonders."

As she said that, Botan rubbed the cheek that Hana had slapped during the festival and smiled.

"As you said, I will strive to retain my dignity as a Yotsukado."

Sadness still dwelled within her eyes, but so did a powerful light. Hana couldn't help but smile as she saw Botan off. She had a feeling

their relationship would be a bit more laid-back the next time they met, which she was now starting to look forward to.

◆

Hana sat in her room and got lost in thought; frequently, her thoughts circled around Kazura. The situation felt like it was over, and yet somehow not. For whatever reason, Hana couldn't quite put it behind her.

Just then Saku entered her room and sat shoulder to shoulder with her.

"So Kazura… Do you think he had anyone he cared about? Like, Botan loved him so much, and being the strongest Obsidian-rank practitioner meant he must have had plenty of people look up to him, right? But he didn't bat an eye as he watched people nearly die, and it felt like he only thought of other people as tools, even Botan. Was there really not a single person connected to him who he kept in his thoughts?"

"Beats me. Only Kazura himself knows what's in his own heart."

"Fair enough…"

Hana glanced gently at Saku.

"Saku, are you okay? You trusted him, right?"

"Good question… True, I certainly trusted him. He was someone I respected and was a goal I wanted to overcome. That's why this incident really has made me feel betrayed. But at the same time, I'm the Ichinomiya clan lord. I slacked off on my duty to be an impartial leader and instead relied on my feelings, so this incident has been a wake-up call as well."

Hana could hear the regret and frustration in Saku's sullen voice.

"I'm a failure as a clan lord."

Saku sneered at himself, his expression lifeless. He was surely beating himself up over the damage that'd been incurred as a result of his own poor judgment.

To comfort Saku and ease his burden, Hana rested her head atop his shoulder.

"Sure, you might be the Ichinomiya clan lord, but you're a human being first. Humans make mistakes. As long as you don't make the same one twice, you're fine."

"This whole ordeal has made me rethink whether I have any right being a clan lord."

"That's not the Saku I know. If nothing else, you're way more suited to the job than that guy who only thinks about himself."

Just remembering how Kazura only thought of others as tools irritated Hana.

"I know you're always taking your responsibility head-on. Watching you makes me realize that's the spirit a barrier master needs to serve their country. That's why I believe in you as a clan lord."

"Is that so?"

Saku finally gave a small smile, though he turned serious again soon after.

"Anyway, Hana. You were a huge help this time. Well, not just *this* time. You're always stepping in to save me."

"What, *now* you notice?"

Hana giggled, but Saku's expression seemed calm, with a hint of loneliness. He then held Hana's head close.

"If you stay my wife, you'll surely be exposed to more danger. I wish I could say I'll always be by your side to rescue you from whoever would do you harm, but I'm the Ichinomiya clan lord. My number one priority always has to be my duty as a barrier master. That might end up putting you in even more danger."

"Okay…"

Hana knew all of that full well. And she was fine with Saku making that choice; there was nobody more dashing to her than Saku when he fully embraced his duty as the Ichinomiya clan lord.

"If the time comes when I have to choose between you and the country, I may choose to abandon you. But I still want to be with you, Hana. So please stay by my side."

Hana had to laugh at seeing Saku plead with a vulnerability she rarely saw from him.

"Don't be silly. I'm not some princess who needs to be protected. I'm not that weak. If I were trapped atop a tower and you never came to my rescue, I'd bust out on my own, so don't worry."

"You sure are reliable."

"Damn right I am. That's why you don't need to bother keeping me in mind. Just think about how to live up to your role as clan lord."

Hana refused to let anyone say she was holding them back.

"You don't come across partners as forgiving as me every day. If it weren't for me, you might not have found anyone who could've handled being your bride."

Hana smiled half-jokingly. When she did, Saku leaned forward and pinned her down. Hana quickly saw something that made her wince —Saku's old, indomitable smile. Into what garbage can had he tossed that vulnerability from a moment ago?

"I'm so glad to see how seriously you take this, Hana. It's like you're begging me to take you right now."

"It isn't at all!"

"Come now, don't be shy. I know *exactly* how you feel."

"I get the feeling you dooon't!!!"

Saku's face closed in, and he kissed Hana on the cheek. After watching her go beet red, he went for the lips next.

That much was just barely tolerable, but Saku suddenly had a glint in his eyes like he was a beast staring down his prey, and Hana felt she was in imminent danger. So she screamed loud enough to be heard throughout the mansion.

Not long after, her shikigami scampered in to save her.

"What do you think you're doing to Master?! Hands off, dammit!"

"Master, are you all right?!"

There were still unanswered questions and unresolved concerns, but Hana had to chuckle at having her life at the mansion back to normal.

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