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NOVEL
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Though I Am an Inept Villainess
Tale of the Butterfly-Rat Body Swap in the Maiden Court

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Kin Seika
Maiden of the Kin clan
Gen Gousetsu
Worthy Consort
"Do not violate the taboo. Keep your head down and stay where I can see you."
Ran Houshun
Maiden of the Ran clan
"Do something for your clan, you useless brat."
Kin Reiga
Pure Consort
"I know plenty of ways to deal with a bigheaded brat."
Gen Kasui
Maiden of the Gen clan
Ran Hourin
Virtuous Consort
DOUBT. INDECISION. DETERMINATION...
EACH BATTLING HER OWN INNER DEMONS. THE MAIDENS HEAD INTO THE RITE OF REVERENCE!


"Calm down, Lady Keigetsu...
Please don't cry."
"It's your fault!"
Keigetsu yelled, scrubbing the tears from her eyes as soon as they were pointed out to her.
"You're the one making me cry!
You're the one making me miserable!"
"Huh?"
Just as Reirin had leaned forward to wipe her friend's tears, she froze.
"You're all nuts!
I've had enough!
I hate you. I don't even want to see your face!"

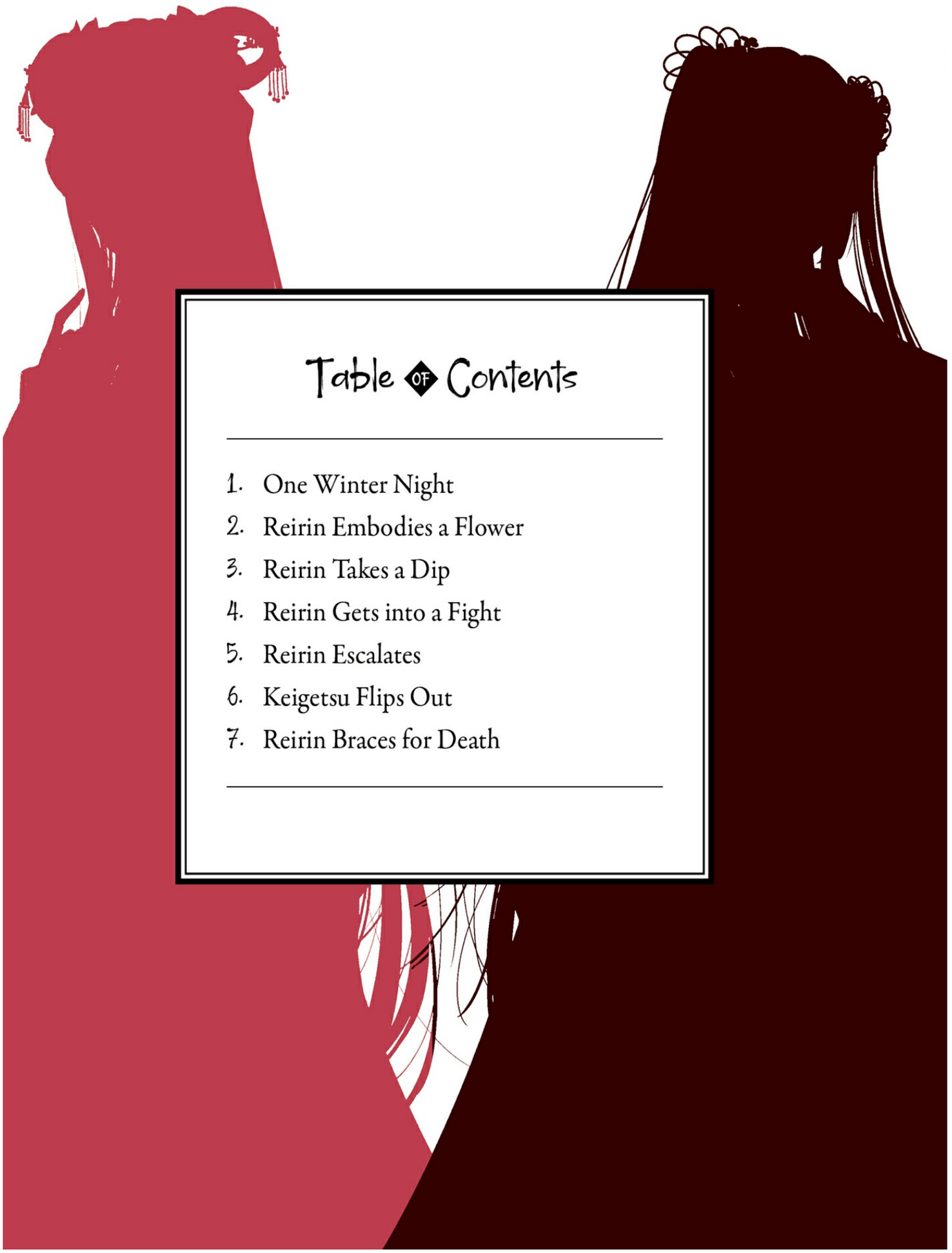


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Though I Am an Inept Villainess

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5

NOVEL

WRITTEN BY

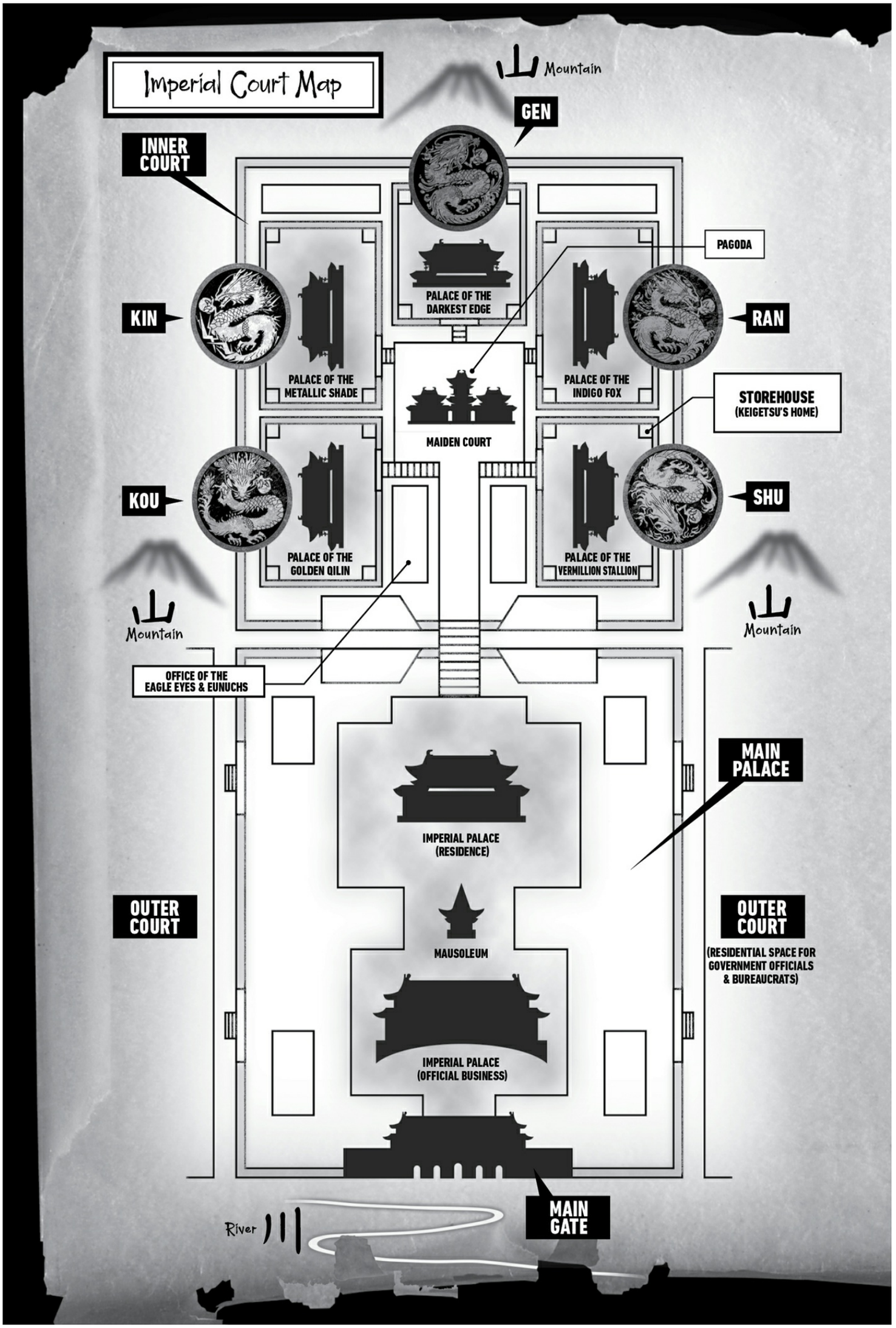
Satsuki Nakamura

ILLUSTRATED BY

Kana Yuki

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment


Imperial Court Map
Mountain
GEN
INNER COURT
PAGODA
PALACE OF THE DARKEST EDGE
KIN
RAN
PALACE OF THE METALLIC SHADE
PALACE OF THE INDIGO FOX
STOREHOUSE
(KEIGETSU'S HOME)
MAIDEN COURT
KOU
SHU
PALACE OF THE GOLDEN QILIN
PALACE OF THE VERMILLION STALLION
Mountain
Mountain
OFFICE OF THE EAGLE EYES & EUNUCHS
MAIN PALACE
IMPERIAL PALACE (RESIDENCE)
OUTER COURT
OUTER COURT
(RESIDENTIAL SPACE FOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS & BUREAUCRATS)
MAUSOLEUM
IMPERIAL PALACE (OFFICIAL BUSINESS)
MAIN GATE
River

Relationship Chart



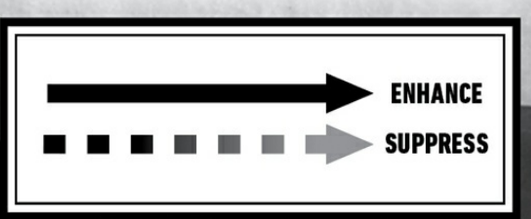
The clan that governs the lands to the west and rules over metal. Their signature season is autumn, signature direction is west, and signature color is white. Chops wood and collects water. Divided into two factions of pragmatic merchants and artists. Mainline descendants tend to be artsy types who prize aesthetic and philosophy. People who can make a profit from extolling beauty.

The clan that governs the lands to the north and rules over water. Their signature season is winter, signature direction is north, and signature color is black. Dampens (suppresses) fire and nourishes (enhances) wood. Aloof and unfazed by carrying out the most inhumane of acts. On the other hand, can latch on hard to the right target. Many are proficient in the military arts.

The clan that governs the lands to the east and rules over wood. Their signature season is spring, signature direction is east, and signature color is blue. Parts earth and feeds fire. Passive and mild mannered, the majority tend to be gentle scholars, but some have a scheming and sinister side to them.

The clan that governs the central territory and rules over earth. Their signature season is the four cusps, signature direction is the center, and signature color is yellow. Obstructs water and bears metal. Straightforward, unpretentious, and full of natural-born caretakers. Mainline descendants tend to have a pioneering spirit and be as steadfast as the earth itself. People who can make it through the biggest of catastrophes with nothing but a "dearie me."

The clan that governs the lands to the south and rules over fire. Their signature season is summer, signature direction is south, and signature color is red. Melts metal and produces earth. Full of intense personalities and show-offs. Prone to wild mood swings and value emotion over reason. People who hate and love with equal intensity.





CAST

Kou Reirin



The Kou Maiden. Beautiful and benevolent. Beloved by all, which has earned her the nickname of the prince's "butterfly." Frail and often sick.

BODY SWAP

Shu Keigetsu



The Shu Maiden. Has a freckled face and wears thick makeup. Reviled by all, which has earned her the nickname of the court "sewer rat." Used to be jealous of Reirin.

Ei Gyoumei



The crown prince. Reirin's cousin.

Shin-u



Captain of the Eagle Eyes, the enforcers of discipline in the inner court.

Leelee



A high-ranking court lady who serves Keigetsu.

Kou Tousetsu



Reirin's head court lady.

Kou Kenshuu



The empress. Reirin's aunt.

Kin Seika



The Kin Maiden.

Gen Kasui



The Gen Maiden.

Ran Houshun



The Ran Maiden.

Kou Keikou

Reirin's oldest brother. A Kou clan military officer.

Kou Keishou

Reirin's second older brother. A Kou clan military officer.

Kin Reiga



The Pure Consort.

Gen Gousetsu



The Worthy Consort.

Ran Hourin



The Virtuous Consort.

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Chapter 1:
One Winter Night

ARE YOU FARING WELL?

Today I arrived at the imperial capital and said my hellos to Lady Gousetsu. Well, in light of my imminent appointment, perhaps it's time I start following the rules of the inner court and refer to her as "the Worthy Consort."

Both the Worthy Consort and I are brusque and bad with words, so the long stretches of silence during our meeting made the court ladies sweat. But I had a nice time, for my part.

As I've gleaned from our correspondence over the years, the Worthy Consort is a taciturn yet kind woman. I'm truly delighted for the opportunity to serve as her Maiden. Though it will be a brief endeavor, I look forward to receiving my initiation from her prior to joining the court. My stay in the Gen estate in the capital has likewise been a pleasant one.

My only worry is that I've left the lonely little sister who so loved to follow me around like a duckling back at home. I only wish we could have come to the court together.

Are you crying because you no longer have a bed to sneak into on stormy nights? Just teasing.

I'll send another letter soon. Be good. I promise to bring back plenty of souvenirs.

Love,

***

Opening one of the luxurious glass windows let a rush of cold air into the Maiden Court. The skies stretching out over the pagoda had begun their descent into twilight. Three months had passed since the Harvest Festival. Winter had come, and the days were getting shorter.

“Oh, there’s the first star of the night. We’ve been at this for quite a while.”

The one exhaling puffs of white breath as she gazed half-lidded at the stars was the Maiden of the Kou clan, who boasted the beauty of a butterfly—Kou Reirin. Clad in a mellow golden robe suited to the winter season, she was looking gracefully toward the sky.

“Hee hee, it’s gotten quite cold,” she said, bringing a hand to her mouth as though charmed by the wisps of white air escaping her lips.

A listless voice called out to her from behind. “This goes past a little cold… I-It’s freezing out there… Shut the window, would you?”

The one forcing out those words as if wringing the last drops from her dried-out rag of stamina was the Maiden of the Shu clan—Shu Keigetsu. Clad in a dark red robe befitting of the clan of fire, she had been lying on her back for some time now. For whatever reason, there was a court lady dressed in blazing scarlet—Leelee—holding down both of her ankles. Keigetsu’s hair was disheveled, her entire body was slick with sweat, and her legs and abdomen were trembling like mad.

“My sweat is freezing over. I-I’m going to catch a cold,” she protested.

“Oh dear…” Reirin spun around in a gorgeous motion. Brimming with delicate beauty down to the tips of her fingers, she knelt beside Keigetsu and, with all the tenderness of a celestial maiden, swept aside the bangs that clung to her forehead. “Feeling the cold is a sign that your body needs more discipline. Once you’ve given your muscles a proper workout, the chill of the night breeze will start to feel pleasant. Let’s try adding a diagonal twist into the routine.”

Her voice was as quiet and fragile as a work of gold swaying in the wind. Yet

the words she spoke were the epitome of muscle-brained.

“Absolutely not! W-we’ve spent enough time training my abdominal muscles. I can’t lift myself up even one more—augh!” Keigetsu attempted to sit up in protest, only to find herself groaning the next moment. “Th-this is impossible… I can’t do it. Let’s take a break. I-I need a drink of water.”

“You’ll manage. If you keep this up for another hour, you’ll start to see a gorgeous riverbank in your mind’s eye. Just imagine yourself taking a sip of that water, and voilà! You’ll feel so much better. Let’s get you to that point as soon as possible, shall we?”

“That sounds like a river you’re definitely not supposed to cross over!”

Leelee watched this exchange with a smile equal parts resigned and affectionate. “Give it up, Lady Keigetsu. She’s not going to let you stop short of passing out.”

“Moreover, *you’re* the one who asked Lady Reirin to stay in the Maiden Court past the hour of the rooster to aid you with training. It would be beyond shameless to complain about the regimen she’s chosen,” groused Tousetsu, who was hovering around Reirin with a brazier.

Most days, the Maidens would have finished their daytime functions and lectures in the court, and it would be time for them to return to their respective palaces. It seemed Tousetsu was concerned about putting off dinner.

Still sprawled on her back, Keigetsu awkwardly looked aside. “Okay, fine… I *did* ask for help, but I *wanted* you to train me for the Rite of Reverence. Why am I acting the part of a military officer?”

“Stamina and backbone are the bedrock of all human endeavors. There’s no harm in developing them. Besides, the Rite of Reverence might include a task that tests our brawn, no?” Reirin attempted to placate her with a rueful smile.

“Not a chance,” Keigetsu muttered darkly. “The Rite of Reverence is a ritual meant to assess our aptitude as Maidens. As if you didn’t already know that.”

With the Ghost Festival and Harvest Festival behind them, the Rite of Reverence was the next ritual that awaited the Maidens. The “Reverence” in its name connoted the study and veneration of the ancestors’ and saints’ virtues.

By that token, the original purpose of the rite was for the Maidens to revere their predecessors within their clan—that is, the previous consorts—as they strove for self-improvement. It was held every other year during winter, the season of preparations, making this the first instance for the current crop of Maidens.

In the past, the event had been a day of laid-back dance training and poetry recitations, but given the Maiden Court's preoccupation with hierarchy, it had evolved into more and more of a competition over time. Nowadays, the rite was spread out over three days—the first, second, and final trial—and the tasks were even kept secret prior to the event.

To ensure the integrity of the competition, the Maidens were left unattended by their court ladies for the duration of the rite. The evaluations themselves were carried out in person by the lords and dignitaries of Ei, including the emperor, shaman, and ministers. Needless to say, the results would have a major bearing on the Maidens' rankings when they were locked into their role as consorts.

In practice, the Rite of Reverence was a midterm examination that determined the Maidens' hierarchy. There was no rule that a bad showing meant instant banishment from the court, but coming in last place increased one's chances of ending up the lowest-ranked consort, which would be enough to make any girl feel inadequate. What's more, a look back in history showed that particularly poor performances had seen some Maidens switched out for another candidate at the "discretion" of her consort.

The rank a consort was locked into determined the stipend she received and how much sway she held over the emperor. Given the impact this had on their wealth and influence, all five clans considered the results of this rite a matter of great import.

"The tasks might turn out a little unconventional with the *empress* in charge of picking them, sure, but there won't be any contests of brawn. You should be teaching me how to apply makeup and dress myself. Or how to write verses and embroider! Or how to sing and dance, just like you did before the Harvest Festival," Keigetsu insisted, clawing at the floor in frustration.

According to records of past Rites of Reverence, the majority of tasks involved things like beauty contests, song and dance, poetry, or question and answer sessions—all of which were equally difficult for Keigetsu.

In the three months since the Harvest Festival, the Shu clan had sent Keigetsu nothing more than the occasional perfunctory correspondence, clearly uninterested in doing the bare minimum of dispatching an instructor. Though she'd seen the previous ceremony through without incident, between getting herself kidnapped, getting caught in the middle of an epidemic, and uncovering a case of embezzlement, the clan had likely decided she was more trouble than she was worth. One might even suspect that their goal was to let her botch the Rite of Reverence and resign from her position as Maiden.

Thus, once again, Keigetsu had no choice but to turn to Reirin for tutoring in advance of the important rite. The Kou Maiden's talent was the real deal, and she made for an attentive teacher. Keigetsu figured she could relax and leave things to Reirin, just as she had done in the lead-up to the Harvest Festival. A grave mistake on her part.

"Perhaps so…but I still think it's better to build up the basics this time."

Reirin had altered her teaching style since the last time around.

"When we were preparing for the Harvest Festival, we settled for working on superficial subjects like ceremony etiquette, dance, and music so we could focus on the various arrangements to be made. However, I believe your greatest weakness is your tendency to get upset and freeze up." Reirin gave quite the accurate assessment of Keigetsu's character as she demurely placed a hand to her cheek. "The Shu clan's emotional nature is one of its charms, but it becomes a problem when that manifests as nervousness. You've already put in the work, yet you get too upset to demonstrate your full potential. That makes drilling you on the basics more crucial than polishing your surface-level skills."

"Y-you…might have a point there?"

The astuteness of the observation made Keigetsu blink where she lay. Here she'd taken the girl for a mere meathead, but she was surprisingly rational. It was easy to forget, but she was known as the prince's well-behaved, flawless "butterfly," not his "boar."

Her long eyelashes swaying and a demure smile on her face, Kou Reirin looked as gorgeous as a celestial maiden. Her faintly rosy lips parted, and she went on in a soft voice, “That’s where muscles come in.”

Keigetsu stared blankly, needing a moment to connect the girl’s words to her delicate manner. “Excuse me?”

“There’s nothing muscles can’t do. So too are they faithful. Whatever else falls through, muscles alone will never betray you. You can bungle a demonstration of your surface-level skills, but well-honed muscles will always stand steadfast. Those will become the key to giving you confidence. So let’s get training.”

Reirin extended a hand to Keigetsu with a gorgeous smile, and the Shu Maiden reflexively smacked it away. She was no butterfly, after all. There was something seriously wrong with this girl.

Oh, come on! She’s such a weirdo, but her good looks and elegant air keep everyone else from catching on to what she’s really like!

Keigetsu’s face twitched as she considered the absurdity of it all. From a distance, no one would ever expect such a fragile-looking girl to be such an exuberant muscle-brain. She wasn’t sure if she ought to feel disgruntled or bashful that she’d gotten close enough to Reirin to discern her true nature.

“Give me a break! I don’t have that kind of time! The Rite of Reverence is only ten days away. Why should I spend my valuable time toning my abdominal muscles? Hurry up and teach me about dances or cosmetics. That’s the whole reason I brought all those tools!”

She couldn’t be fooled by her friend’s pleasant tone. Determined to argue her case, Keigetsu managed to pull herself upright and pointed to a corner of the floor as she massaged her aching stomach. There, an assortment of cosmetics and accessories formed a flood of color within a suitably fancy lacquered box.

There was white powder, rouge, lipstick, nail polish, eyebrow paint, razors, braided cords, hair ornaments—you name it. The box was crammed full of rouges in particular. Keigetsu had always been fond of makeup, so she’d bought up quite the collection since becoming a Maiden. Due to her country girl origins, however, she didn’t have much of a knack for applying it. Each time she laid

eyes on Kou Reirin's natural beauty, which almost seemed to ooze from the inside out, she felt ashamed of her own garish style. Thus, she'd decided to take this chance to learn the ropes. Based on past trends, the Rite of Reverence was bound to include some form of beauty contest.

"Since when did you own so much makeup, Lady Keigetsu? You bought more on the down-low, didn't you?"

"That's nearly as much as all the court ladies of Golden Qilin own combined. I'm amazed that you managed to amass such a collection from within the inner court."

"Yes, there's quite a lot. By the way, Leelee, what does 'the down-low' mean?"

All three women piped up the moment Keigetsu lifted the lid from the box, the sight of which brought a prideful smirk to her face. It was comforting to know that she had Kou Reirin beat when it came to the size of their makeup collections, if nothing else.

"I've got news if you think I'm always one step behind you, Kou Reirin. I have connections of my own."

She had personally made the call to purchase these cosmetics from the peddlers who often came by the inner court. The other palaces never seemed to give them the time of day, so she'd taken advantage of the merchants' discouragement to drive down the prices.

"I bought a good helping of rouge and white powder, so I can practice with those all I want. Would you like a few of them to keep? You always seem to go light on the rouge—"

"Hmm… I wouldn't recommend using any of these, Lady Keigetsu."

Keigetsu trailed off mid-brag upon seeing the apprehensive frown on Reirin's face. "I beg your pardon?"

"Judging by the color, these rouges were made with cinnabar."

"Cinnabar?"

"Would it show up in Daoist texts under the name 'mercury,' perhaps? The

mercury used to coat sacred implements looks gold and silver because it's mixed with other metals, but it has this exact vivid vermillion hue in powdered form." Reirin scooped some rouge onto a slender finger and rubbed it together to ascertain its texture and color. After inspecting the white powder as well, she gave an awkward shake of her head. "The white powder seems to be made mainly from lead. Both substances are toxic, and your health will suffer if you repeatedly apply it to your skin. With how strict the standards are here in the inner court, the empress banned the use of these products several years ago."

"Huh?"

"Alas, that rule drove down the price of cinnabar rouges, thus encouraging the less scrupulous merchants to distribute their wares to the downtown areas. It's made quite the headache for Her Majesty…"

Keigetsu was aghast. So there was the truth of the story. She thought she'd found a hidden gem at a bargain, but she'd really been saddled with someone else's junk. Once the initial shock had passed, it wasn't long before her cheeks were tinged with shame. She'd been taken for a fool. Not just by the Maidens or court ladies either—even the peddlers were getting in on it. Had they sneered behind her back over how smugly she'd handed them her money? Had they mocked her as a brainless Maiden?

"Hah. What a sleazy bunch of merchants. Next time I see them, I'm going to send them up in flames along with this stupid rouge."

"Please don't. Mercury is most deadly as a vapor, so you mustn't burn it."

Reirin thwarted her friend's vengeful mutterings from a surprising angle. Denied even her attempt to play things off with a bad joke, Keigetsu was deprived of an outlet for her emotions.

Give me a break…

Before she knew it, she'd clenched her hands into fists. Why did this always happen to her? She was always forced to rely on Kou Reirin, and the few times she tried to find success on her own terms, all she managed to do was run in pathetic circles.

When she caught Leelee glancing her way with a hint of pity in her eyes,

Keigetsu nearly forgot to breathe. She was the Maiden pitied by even the working-class court lady. How pathetic, stupid, and miserable she was.

"Ah, erm, there's no need to be so discouraged, Lady Keigetsu! It wouldn't count as a crime to use it in moderation, and besides, it's fun to experiment with mercury. I always love a good chance to experiment. It's a difficult material to come by in the inner court, so I'm sure plenty of people would envy—"

"As if!" Keigetsu shouted, her final thread of patience snapping when Reirin scrambled to her defense. The misguided consolation grated on her nerves. To make matters worse, it was a genuine attempt to cheer her up and not a sly dig or a taunt. It was so humiliating.

"Oh. Oh… Come on…"

Tears blurred Keigetsu's vision. If this were her room in the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion, she'd be wailing at the top of her lungs. All she'd done was buy a faulty product, yet it felt like the whole world was mocking her ignorance and incompetence.

I hate this. Why am I crying over something so trivial?

Her greatest weakness was her tendency to get upset. That was exactly right. Keigetsu couldn't stand the overpowering intensity of her own emotions or her complete inability to keep her cool. Especially as of late.

I want…to be…

Even in the privacy of her own mind, she momentarily struggled with how to finish that sentence. She immediately rephrased it thus:

I want to beat her.

That's right. She wanted to beat her. Competitiveness lay at the root of it all.

She'd gotten a taste of "something only she could do" when she helped the people of Unso during the Harvest Festival. Keigetsu's pride in her growth made her all the more frustrated that things still weren't going her way. Her irritation mounted until it exploded into an urge to claw at her own skin.

"Oh, speaking of which. You wanted some makeup tips, right?"

Just as Keigetsu was about to scrub her eyes, Reirin smoothly reached out a

hand to stop her. The sudden change of subject prompted Keigetsu to lift her face, upon which Reirin traced the lines of her eyes with her lithe fingertips.

“Do you feel this spot that gets wet when you tear up? Your eyes will look bigger if you lightly line their contours with smut ink right around here.”

“Wha…” Keigetsu fought back her tears on instinct, and Reirin smiled at her like a ray of sunshine.



“It’s all right, Lady Keigetsu.” Her beautiful voice sounded as steadfast as the earth itself. “I should have been more tactful in making my point. My apologies. There’s no need to panic, though. You’ve been working hard. Besides, you look plenty attractive without all this fancy makeup.”

Keigetsu felt a sizzle in her chest. The heat leapt up her throat, made her nose sting, and manifested as tears in the corners of her eyes for the umpteenth time. Even the girl herself couldn’t tell if those were tears of relief or despair. “Must be nice…”

Kou Reirin was such a wonderful girl. She always lavished Keigetsu with the words she most wanted to hear. Each time she got a glimpse of that kindness, Keigetsu felt like she’d be forgiven for anything she did, and it struck her with the urge to break down crying like a little girl. At the same time, it made her want to avert her eyes. The girl’s soul was almost too dazzling to behold.

“You don’t have to scramble even with an examination looming. Of course not, since you *are* His Highness’s butterfly. You’re an unparalleled beauty, and there’s nothing you can’t do, be it embroidering or dancing. I bet you don’t even know what it feels like to panic. Since you’re not some beady-eyed, hulking, freckled girl without a guardian or a scrap of talent!”

This wasn’t good. The moment the words left her mouth, Keigetsu realized her mistake. She was acting no differently from when her Daoist powers had spiraled out of control during the pre-celebration.

Reirin was indeed the object of everyone’s envy, but Keigetsu knew of the blood, sweat, and tears it had taken her to get to where she was. She *knew* that, behind that tranquil smile, her friend was battling illness and despair. Nevertheless, she couldn’t stop the words rushing from her mouth in the heat of the moment.

“That’s not true, Lady Keigetsu.”

“Right, of course not. You could be homely and everyone would *still* love you. Whether you’ve switched places with a sewer rat or been kidnapped by untouchables, you always manage to shine in the face of adversity. You’re brilliant down to your very soul. Well, being told not to panic by a girl like that doesn’t sit well with someone truly hopeless!”

That's not it, she thought as she screamed. This wasn't what she wanted to say—at the very least, it wasn't right of her to say it. She didn't mean to berate the person who had taken the time out of her busy schedule to impart her with etiquette and know-how, without even asking for anything in return. She truly did appreciate Reirin, so why was it so hard to express that as anything other than jealousy?

Reirin pressed her hands to her cheeks and hung her head. "Lady Keigetsu, you…"

Her voice was trembling ever so slightly. She had to be angry. Or, knowing her, maybe she was sad. Whatever the case, this was sure to be the last straw even for one as kind as Kou Reirin.

"You're making me blush! Flattery won't get you anywhere, you know!"

And yet, the moment Reirin straightened up again, she flung herself at Keigetsu in a hug.

"I'm sorry, what?!" Keigetsu objected from the bottom of her heart.

"I mean, you've been going on and on about how beautiful I am, or how I'm skilled at dancing and embroidery, or how I shine… I must say, it's the first time anyone's ever told me I have a brilliant *soul*. Why, you have me feeling downright bashful!"

Reirin nuzzled her forehead against Keigetsu's shoulder hard enough to count as an act of aggression. Evidently, she'd been staring at the floor out of embarrassment.

"L-Let go! The other half was the important part! My point was that I don't want encouragement from the girl who has it all!"

"Oh… Well, I've come to view your barbs as a sort of love bite, see."

"A what?!"

"Besides, your fits of jealousy are always so off base that the insults don't quite hit home. Thus, I've taken the path of ignoring the criticism and taking only the praise at face value," said Reirin, punctuated by a demure, dainty giggle.

Keigetsu tried to shake her off with all her might. “I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“I mean that you’re not a very good judge of character. Oh, I’ll still gladly accept the compliments,” Reirin nonchalantly replied before fishing a thin brush from the makeup box. She dexterously dabbed a bit of eyebrow paint onto its bristles, then turned back to Keigetsu. “Something tells me your eyes work like a distorted mirror, one that reflects your own figure as hideous and others as breathtakingly beautiful.”

Holding down her eyelid with one hand and instructing her to stay still, Reirin let the brush glide along the corner of one of Keigetsu’s eyes.

“Yet *my* eyes see you as a hardworking, expressive, and dutiful girl. You’re reflected as who you truly are—someone dazzlingly full of life.”

Undeterred by Keigetsu’s startled blink, Reirin swept the brush back and forth with an expert hand, filling out a line before moving on to the other side of the girl’s face.

“Meanwhile, your image of me is beyond exaggerated. You think I’m beautiful? Thank you, but it’s all the work of makeup. My embroidery and dance skills are merely the fruits of my training. And I only managed to overcome those challenges because I occupied *your* robust vessel at the time. If I were in my own body, I’m certain I would have died on the spot,” she said, casually dropping an alarming remark. “You’ve provided me the chance to experience life in good health, plus I’m always given a brief respite after you inhabit my body. Perhaps it’s your fire qi bolstering my earthen properties? Whatever the case, I’m truly grateful.”

Reirin set the brush aside, then cupped Keigetsu’s face in her hands.

“Listen here, Lady Keigetsu. At the end of the day, I’m just an ailing girl. Any talent or prestige I possess is as fleeting as a tower built on sand. The only reason I’m still alive today is because I switched places with you.” She smiled, not a cloud to be found in her gaze. “If I look brilliant, it’s only because *you* shone a light on me, my dear comet.”

“That’s not—”

Before Keigetsu could argue back, Reirin pushed a mirror into her hands. “What do you think? Doesn’t that make your eyes look much softer? This is the sort of look you like to go for, isn’t it?”

“Oh!”

Keigetsu gawked at her own reflection. Her small, sharp-cornered eyes had taken on a gentle, obsidian gleam. When she glanced back at Reirin in surprise, her friend shot back a triumphant nod.

Beside her, Leelee murmured in awe, “There’s Lady Reirin’s otherworldly makeup skills in action.”

Even Tousetsu appeared impressed, remarking, “Splendid work.”

The mirror still gripped in her hands, Keigetsu spent a good, long while admiring her own features.

“While self-criticism can be a virtue, please remember to look at yourself in an undistorted mirror every now and then. See how beautiful you truly are? You ought to have a little more faith in yourself.”

This time, the bell-like tinkle of Reirin’s voice managed to sink in. Keigetsu reflected on her advice as she watched her pack up the brush in an elegant motion.

Have more faith in myself, hm? I guess it’s true that she only had herself to rely on each time she was trapped in that excruciating darkness.

Her body would break out in a fever the moment she let her guard down. With no one else to shoulder her pain, Kou Reirin had been forced to face her anguish alone time and time again. Her only path forward was to fight, armed with nothing but her own strength of will. The words “believe in yourself” held an unmatched persuasiveness coming from someone like her. It was almost enough to make Keigetsu wonder if she really *should* have a little more faith in herself.

She’d managed to summon just a smidgen of confidence. Drawing on that strength, Keigetsu apologized for her earlier outburst. “Sorry…for yelling at you just now.”

“Don’t be.” It had no doubt been too muffled to hear, but Reirin replied with a faint, gentle smile all the same. “It’s nothing I’m not used to. Besides, I adore your feisty spirit.”

It was a magnanimous response. There was a certain peace of mind in befriending someone who never got mad no matter how many times she lashed out.

Yet something about Reirin’s passing comment stuck like a thorn in Keigetsu’s chest. *It’s nothing she’s not used to…?*

A look of exasperation crossed Leelee’s face. “Oh, for crying out loud. I’m sorry you have to deal with my lady’s constant tantrums, Lady Reirin.”

“It doesn’t bother me in the slightest. I’m just glad to see she’s in better spirits.”

Her constant tantrums?

That wasn’t wrong. Her blowups were never anything but passing fits of emotion—sudden outbursts that would subside as fast as they had come. Keigetsu was only shouting insults in the heat of the moment, so no matter how fiercely the fires of rage flared in her heart, Kou Reirin could snuff them out in an instant just by gently holding a hand over the flames.

Am I sure about that?

In that moment, Keigetsu felt a heat sear the depths of her heart. It was a surreptitious sort of fire, like coals that continued to smolder even after they’d been smothered with ashes.

“Well then!” While Keigetsu stared at the brazier in a daze, Reirin clapped her hands together to break the silence. “Now that your mood seems to have improved, let’s get back to training. First, we need to work on correcting your posture. Let’s start by training your core.”

“Uh, sure.” Keigetsu snapped out of her reverie. Her face was easy enough to fix with a touch of makeup, apparently, so Kou Reirin was right that she ought to be working on the basics. “Fine, we can start with the fundamentals. I just need to keep doing these crunches, right?”

“Correct. About five hundred more to go.”

Keigetsu stared long and hard at Reirin, struggling to process the number she had so casually dropped. “Excuse me?”

“Next comes the same number of back extensions. After that, you should do push-ups and one-legged stands for thirty minutes each. That ought to do it for the first day.”

“*Excuse* me?!”

Was she joking? Probably not, given that a glance in Tousetsu’s direction showed her nodding back with a look of utter nonchalance. Leelee, for her part, had gone white as a sheet and averted her gaze, like this was digging up memories from her past she’d rather not remember.

“Wha… Hold on, you’ve got to be kid—”

“Come.” Keigetsu tried to back away, only for Reirin to swiftly snatch up her hands. Though as daintily gorgeous as ever, her face exuded the threat of *I won’t let you escape* as she declared, “Let’s do this with a bang.”

That night, the stars in the sky would shine their quiet light upon Keigetsu until she passed out from training.

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She had to extend her arms down the tips of her fingers, like she was reaching out to caress the stars in the night sky.

Seika always kept that in mind as she danced. When her shawl billowed, it became one with the wind. As she moved across the stage, she envisioned it as a vast expanse of land. A dance was more than just a series of movements, and the stage was more than just a rectangle cropped out of a larger space.

She could express the whole of creation through her dance. The stage was a universe. Standing at its center, Seika felt a connection to all things in nature.

Even in the dead of night, she could dance. Without even lighting a candle, without even looking, she could glide freely around the practice room in the Palace of the Metallic Shade.

It was a chilly winter night, yet sweat beaded on her forehead as she danced

with both eyes closed. Her moves had to be more natural. More beautiful. More fluid.

Lady Reirin's dances would put me to shame.

The dances she had seen Reirin perform at ceremonies past floated to mind. The girl's ethereal movements were as free and easy as the earth itself. Though no doubt the product of an extraordinary amount of practice, the motions didn't feel calculated. Her dance was like the pinnacle of nature, and Seika had long dreamed of soaring to those same heights.

Curiously enough, there was another girl whose dances often stuck in her mind as of late, stirring her emotions to a fever pitch. Her dances were as fierce as a flame. Each time her shawl fluttered in the wind, the gazes—no, the very *souls* of the audience were glued to the performer, chasing her form all across the stage.

Shu Keigetsu…

Frankly, she still couldn't believe that the girl derided as a sewer rat, who always carried herself with her towering form hunched meekly in on itself, had put on such a splendid dance. It was enough to make her wonder if Shu Keigetsu had inherited her father's penchant for the shady Daoist arts and secretly summoned the god of the arts to the stage.

Ever the pragmatist, Kin Seika shook that ridiculous notion from her mind in the next moment. The arts could only be honed through tireless efforts and an abundance of time. If Shu Keigetsu had managed to perform a stunning dance, it just meant she'd put in the work without Seika's knowledge.

It was innate talent that most determined one's skill, but Shu Keigetsu most certainly didn't have *that*.

Fine by me.

The presence of a dark horse only filled Seika with glee. The Maiden Court—this place where the next generation of consorts was nurtured—was a gathering of the finest women in all of Ei. These were brilliant women with the talent to lead a nation. She was ecstatic for the opportunity to compete with girls like that, hone her skills, vie in beauty, and grow into the best possible

version of herself.

I can't wait for the Rite of Reverence.

The rite that would assess their qualifications as Maidens was only ten days away. Initially, she had assumed it would be a one-on-one battle between herself and Kou Reirin, but if one of the tasks involved dancing, it had the potential to become a more exciting event than she'd anticipated.

Seika smiled knowingly as her shawl unfurled in the air. It was thanks to Kou Reirin and Shu Keigetsu's influence that it had recently overtaken the fan as her preferred prop.

Those two had shown her the dance of a celestial maiden.

She had to become more beautiful yet. She had to soar to even greater heights. She had to make it to that far-off, shining paradise where the filth of the secular world could never hope to reach…

"My, such talent."

Clap, clap, clap.

Seika stopped mid-step when she heard an insincere round of applause accompanied by the ingratiating purr of a voice. Upon turning around, she found a woman whose voluptuous curves were swathed in a flamboyant robe standing in the entrance to the practice room. It was Kin Reiga, the Pure Consort who was all but bursting with allure.

"What are you doing here, Aunt Reiga?"

"I beg your pardon? There's no place in the Palace of the Metallic Shade I'm not meant to go. I *do* happen to be the mistress of these grounds." She picked up the candlestick sitting in the doorway and stepped into the room, her voice dripping with sarcasm as she added, "Though you seem to have trouble remembering that."

Within moments, the sickly-sweet scent of rouge and powder pervaded the room, causing the fastidious Seika's face to scrunch into a frown.

"Please. Not a moment goes by that I'm not painfully aware of that fact. I've been eagerly counting down the days until a changing of the guard."

“Goodness.” Reiga’s face twitched at Seika’s scathing, snide remark. She couldn’t seem to think of a decent comeback, however, as she opted for a change in topic instead. “Oh, that reminds me. Speaking of counting down the days, the Rite of Reverence is coming up soon. I have high hopes for you. How are your preparations coming along?”

“As anyone with decent intellectual capabilities could surmise, I’m in the midst of dance practice as we speak.”

That said, she had no desire to continue dancing before the detestable consort. She let her shawl drop to the floor, trading it for a handkerchief she used to wipe the sweat from her brow.

“Oh, no, Seika.” Reiga gave a grating laugh. “*This* hardly counts as preparing for the Rite of Reverence.”

“Excuse me?”

Seika shot back a glare filled with unadulterated irritation and contempt, but much to her surprise, Reiga met that look with a slow smirk. “You won’t become the empress by twirling around in circles like a buffoon.”

For once, the Maiden was the one cowed by her consort’s threatening tone and air. “I beg your pardon?”

“My, you must be hard of hearing. Or is it your brain that’s the issue? Do try to figure it out the first time. It’ll take more than a bit of skill in the arts to rise to the top of the Maidens.” Reiga’s voice sounded as sweet as it did venomous. “What do you take us consorts for? Do you think dancing well is all it takes to reign over a kingdom? That one can claim the highest status in the land just by reciting poetry? Don’t be daft. This isn’t a school.”

“The Maiden Court *is* a school. It’s where the consorts personally bring up the next generation.”

“You’d do best not to take a front at face value, you brat.” The drop in Reiga’s pitch was like a blade to the throat. Seika couldn’t help but gasp at the harshness of her tone, and the consort slipped back into her usual purr to mollify her. “I suppose it *is* a school, in a manner of speaking. But it’s not dances or scriptures that are taught here. It’s scheming and trickery.” She took a slow

step toward Seika, accentuating her ample bosom with each movement. “It’s not enough for a woman to be beautiful. It’s not enough for her to be a good student. Only those who have the charm to attract the Supreme One and the nerve to bring down their enemies without hesitation can seize glory.”

Flaunting her fingernails and their sensational red polish, the Pure Consort stroked her Maiden’s chin. “This is no time to be striving for artistic perfection. You ought to be taking down the others. That’s how to bring the wealth and power rolling in. With the Rite of Reverence coming up, you should be buying over the court ladies from the main palace, not practicing your dance. You should be sending our apprentices to the empress’s side and having them find out the tasks. You should be bribing the shaman who will be involved in the judging process. Do you understand me?”

It was a blunt enough statement to strike Seika speechless. Yet Reiga’s *true* demand was even worse than she could have imagined.

“And one more thing. You need to drag Kou Reirin off her throne.”

“Kou Reirin?” Seika parroted before she could stop herself.

She’d understand if she’d been ordered to toss the talentless Shu Keigetsu out of the Maiden Court. It was the nature of the inner court women to oust the weakest prey. In a way, that could even be considered the righteous act of teaching an unworthy Maiden her proper place. Seika herself had taken multiple opportunities to come down hard on Shu Keigetsu for that very reason. But why sabotage the prince’s flawless butterfly, who was beyond reproach in terms of looks, talent, and personality?

“Lady Reirin is a wonderful Maiden. Although her health came into question around the time of the Ghost Festival, during the Harvest Festival, she held a tea party, rushed to the Untouchable Village to save a family member, and did a splendid job taking the reins of the situation. There’s no reason to—”

“That’s exactly the reason,” said Reiga curtly, cutting Seika’s rebuttal short. “Don’t you see? We need to bring her down *because* she’s far more fit than we realized.”

“Huh?”

“We could have given her a pass if only she’d stayed as indisposed as she was during the Ghost Festival. She’d be a gorgeous blossom just there for show, without a hope of bearing His Highness an heir. Oh, yes, were that the case, I’d have no quarrel letting her sit at the top. A barren flower poses no threat.” Reiga’s face fell with a dramatic sigh, as if she were the victim in this scenario. “Unfortunately, she’s more of a go-getter than I anticipated. She’d have to be quite hardy to make it across a river unscathed. She’s a shrewd little thing too, feigning innocence as she rushed straight to Prince Gyoumei’s side. Kou Reirin *is* the niece of that charlatan empress. It’s possible she’s been deceiving us all along.”

“She wouldn’t…”

“Seika. The best advice I can give you is to nip the buds of discord while they’re still small. As things stand, Kou Reirin presents the greatest threat to our Palace of the Metallic Shade. You must take every opportunity to strike her down.” Casting a faint smile toward the ominous flicker of the flame, Reiga held out the candlestick to Seika. “Fret not. Considerate as I am, I’ll set the stage to compensate for your own unpreparedness.”

“Excuse me?”

“Based on the intel our apprentices have gathered, the first trial will involve a large-scale undertaking under a tent. I’ll tamper with the poles, and your job will be to prompt Lady Reirin to stay beneath it until the last moment. After that, all that’s left to do is give the apprentices the signal.”

“Wha…!”

Seika was dumbstruck. After a beat, she turned red enough to put the fire to shame before knocking the candle aside. There came a metallic *clang*, and the flame died out a few moments later.

“I think not. You believe I’d stoop to such lows?” Her fist trembled so violently that it was evident even in the darkness. “Despite certain sordid women’s attempts to pervert it, the Maiden Court is a school for prestigious girls to better themselves. The women with the proper talents will obtain their rightful positions. There’s no room for unsightly schemes to come into play!”

Justice was a virtue. Those with talent would get their proper due. Such a

balanced world was the ideal Seika sought, and she wouldn't tolerate *anyone* violating that beautiful vision. She couldn't believe that, of all people, it was a member of the Kin clan—albeit one from the branch family—who dared to infringe upon that.

"Besides, how well do these schemes you're so proud of actually work?"

Anger getting the better of her, Seika glared at her aunt—at the vixen who, despite being the daughter of a concubine, unabashedly presented herself as the face of the Kin clan.

Seika's mother, Seishuu, was Reiga's half sister. Seishuu was both the daughter of the venerable legal wife and a descendant of the founding family line known as the Haku clan, while Reiga was little more than the daughter of a branch family mistress whom the patriarch had brought into the main line. Despite this, the ambitious concubine had conspired to get Seishuu married off to a lowbred man so she could shove her own daughter, Reiga, into the position of consort.

Both Seika's grandmother, the official wife, and her mother, Seishuu, were proud women. Despite being shunned by the former's husband and tormented by the vulgar concubine and her retainers, they'd carried out their duties in silence without ever once showing their tears. Still, that didn't mean it didn't hurt.

Even as they heard exaggerated flirting coming from the mistress's living quarters, even as they were robbed of every last one of their loyal handmaidens, even as they received vindictive letters from those who had been brought to ruin by her husband's business, her grandmother and her mother had clenched their fists hard enough to draw blood and endured. Seika had witnessed their suffering ever since she was a little girl. She had watched as they quietly continued to bring pure flowers to bloom, heedless of the weeds that ravaged their garden like they owned the place.

Throughout it all, she had told herself thus: The main line of the Kin clan, that which had descended from the Haku clan, was a pure bloodline that valued pride. She swore that one day she would pluck all the hideous weeds and grow truly beautiful, enormous blooms to bring the Kin gardens to heel.

The result? The branch line, only ever concerned with making money, had failed to raise a decent candidate to be Maiden. Meanwhile, having devoted herself to the arts with pride and determination in her heart, Seika's beauty and talent had blossomed before everyone's eyes. Her skill was such that she'd earned Reiga's begrudging endorsement. It was pride and pedigree that would win out in the end. Beauty and integrity would reign supreme.

Her confidence in that fact drove Seika to go on the verbal offense. "Yes, I suppose your mother *did* succeed at seducing the patriarch and ousting my distinguished grandmother and mother. But what of *you*, Aunt Reiga? While you seem to delight in playing the vixen, for all your schemes, you're still the third-ranked—"

Smack.

A sharp slap echoed through the dark room.

Unsatisfied to stop at striking Seika across the cheek, Reiga grabbed her by the chin, nails digging into flesh with the strength of her grip. "Don't get too fresh with me."

"…"

"Oh, you think a concubine *foul*? Mainline descendants really do speak nothing but platitudes. You dreamers are always oblivious to the practical side of things. Tell me, just *whose* pragmatic leadership has sustained your wealth all these years?"

"Third-ranked" was Pure Consort Kin's hot button. Seika had used it in a deliberate attempt to rile her up, but it appeared she'd incurred more of Reiga's wrath than she'd bargained for. Or perhaps the consort was taking this opportunity to unleash all her mounting resentment.

The buxom consort glowered at Seika, eyes flashing and lips quivering. "You seem to have forgotten your place amid your life of luxury in the Maiden Court. Or perhaps it's my own fault for being too lenient. Hear this: I hold your fate in my hands. I can declare you unfit to be a Maiden and throw you out of the court whenever I so please."

"Wha—"

“If you don’t have what it takes to make the Kin clan rise in the ranks, I will have you leave the Maiden Court. And I will see to it that you participate in the matchmaking fair back in our domain, along with the rest of the Kin girls.”

Seika gasped upon hearing that abominable term.

The matchmaking fair was a unique method of finding a son-in-law that traced back to the Kin branch line. Clan members would bring their daughters of age to a venue where wealthy, unmarried men awaited them, whom the girls would “introduce themselves” to via song and dance. The official stance was that it was to match the beloved daughters of the Kin domain with men fit to care for them, but in practice, it wasn’t all that different from human trafficking. The idea was to parade around good-looking women wearing nothing but a thin strip of cloth and sell them off to the bidder who offered the highest bridewealth. The men would get their hands on a beautiful girl, while the Kin clan would deepen its ties to affluent merchant families.

It was a repugnant ritual devised by the Kin clan back in times of financial hardship, and as a matter of fact, it was through this very practice that Seika’s mother had been bought by her father, a nouveau riche of disreputable character. He had a good head for business and held considerable power within the Kin clan’s territory, but both Seika’s mother and the girl herself despised him for his vulgar nature, which no amount of wealth could hope to conceal.

“Have you lost your mind? You’d put forth a girl who once served the imperial family as a Maiden in a *matchmaking fair*?!”

“My, no need to be modest. Used goods or not, there are plenty of men who would jump at the chance to marry a girl with your stunning looks. A Maiden is a ‘fiancée,’ not a wife, so it will count as your first marriage for all intents and purposes. I’ve already made some arrangements in private.” The viscous tendrils of her voice sent a shiver down Seika’s spine. “He hails from a very wealthy merchant family from our clan’s territory. Though he’s getting up there in years, he’s been generous enough to prepare a hefty bridewealth. He’s an obliging sort, and it seems he’s fond of taking young girls swathed in gauze and turning them into ‘adults’ on the spot. How promising.”

“Wha…”

“You’re so good at dancing with a shawl. I’m sure your future husband will appreciate that. Isn’t that great? You’ll be able to spend the rest of your life mastering the art of the dance…all while writhing and twisting about in a thin sheer dress.”

After pulling her hand back with a laugh, Reiga oh-so-thoughtfully crushed the shawl left abandoned on the floor underfoot. There came a loud *rip* as the cloth easily tore in two.

“Did you think you could escape so long as you became a Maiden and gave a decent enough showing? Listen here, Kin Seika.” Reiga gazed upon her petrified niece with satisfaction. “I *do* see the worth in your strong will and pretty face. I was willing to take a snob like you as my Maiden if it meant making a Kin empress a reality. However, I have no use for an incompetent little girl who can’t even bring herself to sabotage a rival.”

She kicked the tattered remains of the shawl away with the tip of her shoe.

Then she glared at Seika as if to drive her point home. “Your ‘aesthetics’ are a fleeting pipe dream attainable only by those of noble birth. Quit spouting platitudes and actually do something for your clan, you useless brat.” The Pure Consort was dripping with more threat than she would ever use in front of a man—and with that, she left the room behind at last.

For a while, Seika stared at the torn remnants of her favorite shawl in a daze. Spread out over the floor in a sorry state, the sheer fabric was the picture of the trampled feathered robe of a celestial maiden.

Sluggishly sinking to her knees, Seika clutched the thin piece of cloth to her chest with trembling hands.

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“All done!”

Ran Houshun was in high spirits as she clutched a thin sheet of paper to her chest, its ink yet to fully dry.

The indigo blue court ladies attending her side reacted with a helpless smile. “Careful, Lady Houshun. If you hold it close so soon, you’ll dirty your garments.”

“Oh no! I-I’m sorry,” she squeaked with a small gasp.

Charmed, the court ladies looked upon her with soft gazes, as though appreciating a precious infant.

Houshun had to elicit the protectiveness and loyalty of her court ladies by making herself appear helpless. Otherwise, the women would leave their posts in a heartbeat. Perhaps due to their fickle Ran blood, the Palace of the Indigo Fox’s turnover rate was second only to the Palace of the Metallic Shade.

“It’s all right. We can remove the ink stains for you anytime. We all consider your carefree innocence to be an irreplaceable treasure.”

“Indeed. Your smile is our sole source of comfort.”

“Hrk… It pains me to always take advantage of your kindness.”

For once, she didn’t mind playing out this stupid charade with the shallow court ladies who saw their own Maiden as nothing more than a small animal. That was how generous a mood Houshun was in that night.

“You must really have enjoyed your match against Lady Reirin if you’ve stayed up this late making a record of the game,” remarked her head court lady, an indigo blue named Meimei.

Houshun gave a bashful nod. “Yes. The time I spend with Miss Reirin is always so much fun.”

Those were her honest feelings. Indeed—Houshun was having the time of her life lately. The reason being that she had been going around messing with the upstanding “prince’s butterfly,” Kou Reirin, on the regular.

Just that day, she had ambushed the Kou Maiden under the pavilion early in the morning and challenged her to a game of chess, threatening, “If you won’t indulge me, I’ll go play a prank on Lady Keigetsu instead.” She’d been trounced in an instant, but that delighted her. Since Houshun spent all her time in the Maiden Court playing innocent, it wasn’t often that she had the chance to go all out. Plus, everyone else was so bad at the game that she couldn’t have done so if she tried.

There was no fun in holding back and losing on purpose, but there was a

strange sort of thrill in giving her all and getting crushed for her efforts. What's more, she sensed the ruthlessness of a ruler in Kou Reirin's strategy of sacrificing her soldiers to checkmate the general from the shortest distance possible, and witnessing that in action sent a shiver down her spine.

Her excitement had carried into the night, so she'd decided to preserve the memory in the form of a game record.

Oh, this is the best! Why didn't I realize Miss Reirin's true colors sooner? I can't get enough of that disgusted look on her face! Her reluctance to play against me! Her clear repugnance! Gosh, I'm smiling just thinking back on it!

Despite her modest demeanor, it seemed Kou Reirin was very firm in her likes and dislikes. Houshun had unfortunately received her stamp of disapproval, so each time they crossed paths, the other girl looked at her like food scraps that had been left out in the summer sun for ten days straight. That said, Kou Reirin had decorum, so she never came out and insulted her or shot a glare her way. That was the greatest thing about her.

For instance, the moment she sensed Houshun approaching, she would snap the door shut with a smile plastered on her face. That mercilessness of hers was positively thrilling.

In another example, when she spotted Houshun patiently lying in wait in the winter gardens, the girl had sadly murmured, "She's still active in winter, I see…" Houshun was used to being treated like a small animal, but that was the first time she'd been likened to a frog that missed its window for hibernation. It had tickled her funny bone enough to make her burst out laughing.

In short, it was fun.

It was so much fun getting a glimpse of the ferocity buried within the pretty, righteous honor student known as Kou Reirin.

Hee hee. If I'd known this would happen, I would've messed with Lady Keigetsu sooner.

She knew the trick to riling Reirin up. The quickest method was to endanger those she held dear rather than the girl herself. Still, she had to be careful not to go overboard. If she took things too far, the Kou Maiden would be sure to go

in for the kill.

Really, though, what does Lady Reirin see in someone as lame as Lady Keigetsu? If she's just got a morbid fascination with the hideous, I don't see why she wouldn't like me*.*

Teasing a clever girl like Reirin had become Houshun's greatest joy, but if she ever came around to offering her the same friendship she did Keigetsu, that would be fun in its own right. Reirin was the type to protect her "friends" at all costs. In which case, Houshun would return the favor with all her might. She was positive she would make for a devoted friend.

Thinking it a waste, Houshun's lips nearly jutted into a pout. After a moment's thought, however, she dismissed the idea. When it came down to it, fighting and raising a ruckus with an interesting person was much more fun than smiling and playing at friendship.

Hee hee…hee hee hee! This rules! I never thought I'd be having such a good time in the Maiden Court.

Struck by a sudden idea, Houshun took to grinding her ink stick once more. She was going to write another game record so she could share this euphoria with her older brother, who was shriveling up in exile. To annoy him, of course. Houshun's feelings toward Rinki were somewhat complicated.

Oh, how she wished this fun could last forever. If only she could leave this worthless fight to establish the mistresses' pecking order to the men on the outside while *she* spent all her time engaged in verbal warfare and a battle of the wits with a girl she'd taken a shine to.

If only things could work out like that, it would be simply—

"Hello, my little Houshun. Have you been up all night studying? I assume you're preparing for the Rite of Reverence. Very commendable."

Yuck.

Just as Houshun was about to dip the tip of her brush into the inkstone, a middle-aged woman entered the room, nearly drawing a click of the tongue from the Maiden. Needless to say, the only woman who could enter the Maiden's room without permission was the Virtuous Consort, Ran Hourin.

As soon as the consort arrived on the scene, the attending court ladies straightened up in a fluster before pressing their foreheads to the floor.

The youthfully dressed, petite consort stopped just short of Houshun, making a deliberate effort to soften her gaze. “What’s this, my little Houshun? Were you writing a game record? I suppose the four arts *are* the height of feminine pursuits. My, what an incredible match this was.”

“Y-yes… I went to Miss Reirin for tutoring…and she beat me in the blink of an eye.”

Houshun rose to her feet, pretending to be flustered as she hid her mouth behind her sleeves. To no surprise, she was silently mouthing *Pesky old bag!* in their shadow.

The consort always called her “little Houshun” in that sickly-sweet way of hers. It wasn’t out of a desire to dote on her niece—rather, she thought it was *cute of herself* to use the nickname. She was like a little girl who hugged a doll to her chest, not because she cherished it but because she loved the look of it in her arms.

Every now and then, when she was in the company of the other consorts, she’d say, “Come now, my little Houshun… Oh, pardon, I meant *Houshun*,” before playfully sticking out her tongue. Houshun felt the utmost contempt for her in those moments. How many years did she think that cutesy act was going to work?

“I see. Lady Reirin is quite adept at chess, isn’t she? Well, she can do just about anything, really.”

“T-true. As talentless as I am, I’d like to learn from her example and better myself.”

“Oh, goodness, spare me the self-deprecation. I know the truth full well.” Smiling, Hourin snatched up the brush from the opposite seat. Then she abruptly smeared its tip against the paper. “You’re a sneaky little shit.”

“Huh…?” Though Hourin’s behavior *had* caught her off guard, Houshun was quick to hide her face in her sleeves and put on a show of fear. “Wh-what do you mean, Virtuous Consort?”

Despite the tremble of her voice, she was calmly thinking, *Oh, wow*. *She'd really take her Maiden to task right in front of the court ladies? What is she, stupid?*

It hadn't taken Houshun long to suss out that, for all she tried to look innocent, Virtuous Consort Ran was a callous woman. Though it wasn't public knowledge, the Ran consort and her Maiden had just as fraught a history as the Kin duo. The thing that set them apart from the Kins was that the consort was the one who hailed from the official wife's bloodline, while the Maiden was the daughter of a concubine.

Thanks to the patriarch's skillful manipulation of information, outsiders had no way of knowing, but Houshun and Rinki's mother had once been a prostitute known for her poetic genius. The patriarch had taken a liking to her, bought her freedom, arranged for one of his relatives to adopt her, and spent years "cleaning up her affairs," until at long last he had managed to take her as his concubine.

It would have been no surprise if the relationship between her child, Houshun, and the rightful heir, Hourin, had been a strained one, but they'd gotten along well enough to this point. This was because, unlike in the Kin clan's case, Houshun's mother had done everything in her power to ingratiate herself to the official wife. She'd made herself unnecessarily small, pledged her allegiance to the legitimate spouse, and in doing so secured her place as a prostitute-turned-concubine.

Her son, Rinki, had become one of the patriarch's favorites, and Houshun had become the clan's Maiden. The inferior had maintained equilibrium by pandering to her superior.

Yet after all this time, things were finally coming apart at the seams. Houshun had stopped putting in the effort to act subservient.

Who can blame me? I got sick of it.

She had to spend her days serving a dim-witted consort as her helpless Maiden. The lack of stimulation was giving her a case of stiff shoulders, and she was struck with the occasional urge to rock the boat as a result. In hindsight, it may have been those destructive impulses whirling inside her that drove her to

start her meddling in the south.

I thought she'd come chew me out after the whole Ryuu-un debacle, but she's slower on the uptake than I expected.

If Houshun had been in her shoes, she would have caught on to her Maiden's revolt and Rinki's betrayal the moment Shu Keigetsu was abducted during the Harvest Festival. By the time she'd sent the deed for Ryuu-un up in flames, it should have been obvious that Houshun was locking horns with Kou Reirin of her own accord and hiding it from her aunt.

All it took was Houshun throwing her brother to the wolves and playing dumb to make Hourin swallow her story for three whole months. It went to show how convinced she was that Houshun was the powerless, virtuous, small-time daughter of a concubine who couldn't even scheme.

"I won't be fooled by your phony whimpering. I've read the letters you've been sending to Rinki each month. Here I thought the pages were full of noble sentiments, but if you read every third letter, it's nothing but insults aimed at me! Rinki took the trouble of sending it back to me marked up in red ink."

Oh, that.

Houshun nearly snickered upon recalling the letters. Her games with Kou Reirin were so much fun that she'd gotten a little carried away with those. It would've been dull to write normal letters, so she'd thrown a bit of wordplay into the mix. If you read every third letter, it was full of put-downs for the Virtuous Consort, and if you read only the beginning of each line, it was a dig at her incompetent brother. It seemed the latter had earned her Rinki's wrath.

Such a shame that exile had robbed him of his sense of humor.

"Th-that's not true… I'd never write something like that. Perhaps my brother claimed as much because he was looking for your attention…" Her eyes watering, she foisted the blame onto her brother as she brainstormed how to talk her way out of this one.

There was plenty of other evidence pointing to Houshun's true nature, yet it was a silly little limerick—of all things—that had clued this woman in. Hourin was shortsighted enough to raise her voice in front of the court ladies when a

consort was only as good as her reputation. To bamboozle her would be a simple task.

Guess what, Auntie? The blood of the Ran clan, those who preside over wood and weave webs of words at will, runs just as thick through the daughter of a concubine as anyone else. Unlike people of your ilk, who rely on their pedigree, us commoners actually put in the work to hone our skills.

That went for her mother, Rinki, and herself. They'd hidden their true natures, kept their heads down, and made themselves small, secretly sharpening their claws all the while.

I won't lose to anyone in a war of words—

Just as she was about to make her first move in the verbal battle, Hourin did the unexpected.

Splash!

Lo, she grabbed the inkstone and dumped its contents on Houshun.

"I won't hear you out, and I don't care what you have to say."

The shrieks of the court ladies echoed around them. While Houshun stood there in a daze, dripping ink, the Virtuous Consort grabbed a handful of her hair.

"Eep…"

"Listen here, my little Houshun. If you have smarts, it's not fair to keep them hidden. If you won't take your role as a Maiden seriously, then it falls upon me to discipline you as your consort. Ha ha! I know plenty of ways to deal with a bigheaded brat who's nothing but talk."

Strands of hair audibly snapped as Hourin tightened her grip.

Houshun let out a genuine yelp as ink dribbled into her eyes and pain seared at her scalp. "P-please stop this, Virtuous Consort!"

"Tell me. Have you been mocking me all this time? Me, a mainline descendant of the clan who prizes intellect above all else? How dare you."

There came the sharp *smack* of Hourin slapping her across the cheek. Houshun was horrified to receive her very first taste of physical violence.

What's going on?

This was all wrong. She didn't understand what was happening. It would be a major scandal for a consort to lay a hand on her Maiden with so many witnesses around. If she'd deemed Houshun a cunning sort, she ought to have avoided a method as easy to call her out on as violence. Even a toddler would realize that much.

So why had the Virtuous Consort resorted to such foolish, irrational acts?

"Listen here. You're going to pay if you continue treating me like a fool. If you don't swear to obey me here and now, I promise you're in for an even bigger world of hurt. Hee hee. Now, how should I have you demonstrate your loyalty?"

Smack!

"Ow…"

Tears welled in Houshun's eyes as the consort swung her hand down a second time. She erupted into tremors down to the soles of her feet. The Virtuous Consort had ceased to weigh the pros and cons of her actions. She was driven by pure, wild emotion. Houshun found that incomprehensible impetus and the ensuing primitive violence utterly terrifying.

"It can't be something *easy*. It has to be a real challenge. Oh, I know. Why don't you drag Kou Reirin off her throne during the Rite of Reverence? Trounce the flawless Maiden who puts her competition to shame! If you can manage that, I'll let you off the hook."

Smack!

"I won't tolerate failure. And obviously, you're *really* in for it if you try to squeal on me. Oh, here's a fun idea: I'll force you to swallow a silver needle."

Smack!

Bringing her face right up to her speechless Maiden's, the Virtuous Consort returned to a wheedling tone of voice. "Am I clear, my little Houshun?"

Then, upon noticing that she'd dirtied her own hands, she scowled in disgust and wiped the ink on Houshun's robe.

"Goodness, even *my* palms are stinging after that. It's much easier to leave

scratches with my nail guards. Oh, but I'd better avoid her face." After grumbling under her breath and shoving Houshun aside in a fit of annoyance, the Virtuous Consort left the room behind with a spring in her step.

A hand still pressed to her cheek, Houshun staggered and crumpled to the ground.

"L-Lady Houshun!" In an instant, her pale, paralyzed indigo blue attendants snapped to their senses and flocked to her side. "You poor thing!"

"What was the Virtuous Consort thinking?!"

"C-come, let's wipe off all this ink. We'd best get a cold compress for your cheek too."

Despite their unanimous condemnation of the consort, their voices were shaky and hushed, as if they were afraid to be overheard.

I don't get it.

Houshun looked at the floor in a daze, feeling ink trickle down her cheek. She couldn't comprehend what had just happened.

At long last, she *did* register one fact she was forced to accept. The Virtuous Consort was reckless enough to raise a hand against her Maiden in front of the court ladies—yet so too did she have the power to prevent the girl in question or her attendants from tattling on her.

She had influence and violence on her side.

"It hurts…" Houshun muttered in a daze.

"You poor thing… You poor thing!" the court ladies wept.

Still, all they did was lament her plight. Not one of them had the slightest inclination to openly denounce the consort. They'd told Houshun they would remove ink stains for her "anytime," but they'd waited to rush to her side until they were sure the Virtuous Consort was gone. The hands with which they held their handkerchiefs were trembling, rendering their efforts useless.

"I know plenty of ways to deal with a bigheaded brat who's nothing but talk."

Like a curse, the Virtuous Consort's words echoed over and over again in her

mind. Houshun stared blankly at the ink-drenched letter left unfurled on the table.

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Kasui stared blankly at the letter spread over the vanity.

It was a letter that had never made it to its recipient. One that would never have a sequel. In fact, she was forbidden to so much as read it in the presence of others.

Since she had sent her attendants elsewhere, her personal quarters were quiet, not a single candle lit despite the late hour. For lack of a brazier, a chilly darkness enveloped the room in the winter months. It was far too dark to be reading a letter, but Kasui had no need for light when she had long since memorized its contents.

Kasui heaved a deep sigh, then neatly folded up the letter and hid it in the back of the vanity drawer. In its place, she withdrew another item from the same compartment and unwrapped the cloth wound tightly around it. Inside was a mirror with an intricate snowflake pattern. Too big to fit snug in her palms, it was an exquisite piece of craftsmanship that reflected her face without distortion even in the black of night.

She placed the mirror atop the dressing table and stared back at her own likeness.

“For heaven’s sake, girl. What do you hope to see by peering into a mirror in total darkness?” came a soft voice just as a flame appeared behind her reflection. Kasui hid the mirror behind her back as she turned toward the door.

The candle the woman held was almost blinding to eyes accustomed to darkness. As soon as Kasui identified the intruder by the light of the flame, she stood from her chair and bowed. “Good day to you, Worthy Consort Gen.”

“It’s far too late to be saying ‘good day.’ Try ‘good night.’” Gen Gousetsu, the Worthy Consort and mistress of the Palace of the Darkest Edge, gave a dismissive shrug. “Children shouldn’t be up this late. Go to bed.”

Like any of the Gen women, known for their lack of emotional range, she always sounded dispassionate. The sight of her smiling was likewise an

exceedingly rare one. Still, to a fellow Gen like Kasui, that aura of hers felt familiar rather than frosty, and it was in the Worthy Consort's presence that she tended to feel most at ease.

Thus, it was with respect and fondness that Kasui impassively responded, "I will."

"Good."

Gousetsu's expressionless nod likewise contained affection, no doubt.

A rather long silence hung over the pair. In moments like these, the court ladies with weaker Gen blood would often lose their heads for discomfiture, but the consort and her fledgling were not on bad terms in the least. In fact, they'd been close since even before Kasui had become a Maiden. Both women preferred to keep a certain distance, that was all.

Eventually, the Worthy Consort broke the silence no less abruptly than she'd stopped speaking. "Were you practicing your makeup?"

"Huh?"

"You were using a mirror."

Dropping her gaze, Kasui nodded. "Yes. I suspected the upcoming Rite of Reverence might include a beauty contest."

"You've worked hard. Come as you are. There's no need to be so worried."

"Thank you for saying so, but it's hard not to be nervous. It won't be the familiar faces of the consorts doing the judging but His Majesty himself…" As something weighed on her mind, she added, "Along with the miraculous shaman, who so rarely graces us with her presence."

Gousetsu lapsed into silence for a fleeting moment, but she soon flicked her gaze toward the mirror. "Your conscientiousness is a virtue, but it's too dark in here to make out the shade of the cosmetics."

"I was simply going over my makeup routine."

"I see."

Another silence fell. Once again, the two women were not at odds. It was

simply that they kept missing their chance to take the conversation deeper.

“Take this,” Gousetsu said after that short lull, in yet another display of her unique sense of distance. She fished around in the sleeve of her stately black robe and, in a graceful motion, presented Kasui with a small lacquered box. Though small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, it was a high-class item inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

“What is it?”

“Rouge. You don’t appear to have much in the way of cosmetics.”

Sensing how extravagant the product was before she’d even opened the lid, Kasui blinked. “I can’t accept this. You’ve already afforded me quite a bit of spending money.”

“I don’t mind. I have no use for it.”

She attempted to decline the gift, only for Gousetsu to press it back into her hand. Though the consort was taciturn, she wasn’t the reserved sort, and she rarely bothered with shows of restraint or modesty. If she claimed she had no use for it, it meant she really didn’t need it. True enough, from makeup right down to the color of her robes, the Worthy Consort almost never bothered to deck herself out.

After yet another silent back-and-forth, Kasui decided to accept the rouge. She figured it might help the Worthy Consort to flaunt her good relationship with her Maiden.

“Thank you very much. I’ll make a point of expressing my gratitude when I use it on the day of the event.”

“Don’t tell anyone it came from me,” Gousetsu immediately rebuffed her. When the Maiden lifted her gaze with a questioning murmur, she insisted, “I’ve barely played a role in your education. You needn’t heap praise on a consort of my caliber.” She sounded as matter-of-fact as ever, but there was a hint of self-deprecation to the words.

Kasui frowned in consternation. “You’ve always provided me with kind guidance.”

She meant that. Gousetsu and Kasui didn't always dine at the same table like the pair from the Palace of the Golden Qilin. They didn't host extravagant events together like the Metallic Shade's duo, nor did they converse with a smile like the pair from Indigo Fox. Still, Kasui could sense the love within Gousetsu's scarce words and muted expressions.

At times, the Worthy Consort even showed hints of overprotectiveness. If Kasui stayed up even a little late, she'd urge her to sleep. Once, when the Maiden had wandered to the outskirts of the palace while admiring the scenery, she'd even come looking for her out of concern. Ever since, she would abandon whatever she was doing to accompany Kasui each time she left the palace. It seemed the women of the Maiden Court had looked on with great interest, interpreting the constant sight of them walking together in companionable silence to mean they were as close as a mother duck and her baby duckling.

"I'm truly grateful to have you as my guardian."

Gousetsu's eyes widened a fraction, after which a faint smile rose to her face. "Good."

Before Kasui could determine whether that was a look of joy or self-derision, the woman turned on her heel.

"It's not good to keep late hours. You're plenty skilled without all this last-minute studying. Forget the makeup practice and go to sleep."

"Of course. I'll only be a little bit longer."

"Staring at a mirror in the dark won't do you any good. If you insist on keeping at it, at least light a candle."

"I don't like starting fires," Kasui mumbled in response.

The Worthy Consort abruptly stopped in her tracks on her way out. She slowly turned around, and as Kasui stared back at her guardian in turn, it dawned on her that this was her chance. It was time to bring up the issue she'd put off for so long as she'd struggled to discern the woman's true motives.

"I must confess, Worthy Consort Gen. I was not practicing my makeup at all. I was staring at my own face."

“…”

“No, to be more precise, I was looking for traces of Bushou’s countenance in my—”

“Kasui,” Gousetsu cut in the moment she took a large stride forward.

Upon calling the girl’s name, she thinned her lips into a line and dropped her gaze. Still, the implication of the gesture was clear:

Do not speak of her.

Cowed, Kasui backed up the tiniest bit.

When she saw that, Gousetsu turned on her heel once more. “Go to bed,” she declared in a quiet voice, and this time, she left the room without looking back.

Alone and plunged back into darkness, Kasui listlessly faced the vanity again. In the bronze mirror polished to the shine of a lake surface, her own image stared back at her.

“Why?” Kasui trailed her fingers over the mirror’s surface, as if to reach out and touch what lay beyond it. “Why won’t you tell me the truth?”

Having absorbed the chill of a winter night, it was ice-cold to the touch.

“Can I trust you, Worthy Consort Gen?”

In the endless darkness, the mirror that shone with a light as harsh as the night stars maintained its silence.

Chapter 2:
Reirin Embodies a Flower

TODAY I GOT A PEEK at the imperial capital's market. Given how it's allowed me to wander freely outside the grounds, I'm grateful for the Worthy Consort's advice to come to the imperial palace not as a Maiden-to-be but disguised as a court lady in training.

The market was vibrant enough to drive home the true glory of the Kingdom of Ei, the ruler of this continent. Despite the cold season, there were even rare tropical fruits on display. I was able to buy some with the spending money the Worthy Consort afforded me, so I plan to dry them and have them delivered.

Speaking of rarities, they even sell miracle hemp in the medicine shops here. Granted, since it's kept in short supply and few seem to know its uses, there wasn't much of it. It works well on burns, but no one in the imperial capital seems to know that. For my part, I ended up buying other, more precious medicinal herbs.

On that note, have your burns gotten any better? You're good with your hands, and I know you like craftwork, but I never imagined you'd try your hand at casting in secret. No doubt it was because you admired my own goldsmithing, but you're too young to be doing that. Make an effort to be more cognizant of your age.

Be careful of your injuries and try not to worry our parents. Don't get burned again.

Love,

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Mornings in the Maiden Court tended to be a tranquil affair. To avoid rousing any consort who may have spent her night with the emperor, the court staff would ring a muted bell around the hour of the dragon, signaling the Maidens to leave their palaces and quietly gather in the Maiden Court.

On the first day of the Rite of Reverence, however, gongs resounded all across the Maiden Court and flower petals danced through the air. The court ladies and Eagle Eyes gathered in droves, kneeling in rows around the gravel-lined square just outside the court.

A wooden stage had been constructed in the center of the area, and on a raised platform toward its rear were the extraordinarily opulent thrones and chairs prepared for the occasion. On the other side of the stage was a gigantic tent made up of sturdy-looking pillars and five different colors of cloth. Respectively, these were the stage upon which the arts for the Rite of Reverence would be performed, the stands from which the emperor and dignitaries would appraise them, and the Maidens' dressing room.

"Oh, it's almost time for the Rite of Reverence to begin. What an invigorating morning!"

Inside the spacious tent, all five Maidens were already seated. Among them, the Kou Maiden who sat in the center—Reirin—was in good spirits, gazing half-lidded upon the rays of morning sunlight filtering through the fabric of the tent.

"You call this invigorating?! This is earlier than it was supposed to be, and just look at how we're dressed! We look ridiculous, and it's freezing!" the Shu Maiden sitting to her right—Keigetsu—snarled as she rubbed at her arms.

Indeed, the girls were all dressed in nothing but their nightwear of a white robe and a short jacket. This was because they'd been dragged out of bed by court ladies whose faces were shrouded in gauze (at a much earlier hour than they'd been informed), only to be shoved into a basket and carried off to the tent.

None of them had so much as washed their faces or combed their hair. Their

jackets notwithstanding, all they had on underneath was a single nightgown. It was fortunate that no one had seen them aside from the court ladies, but the girls were beside themselves worrying what would happen if the flaps of the makeshift tent were to blow open.

Kin Seika, seated to Reirin's left, had spent the entire time hanging her head in silence, while Ran Houshun, seated at the far right, was covering her face with her sleeves and shivering, perhaps due to the cold. There was only a single brazier placed at either end of the tent, so it was indeed somewhat chilly. Gen Kasui, who occupied the leftmost seat, was sitting straight at attention. Given how drowsy she looked, it was possible she wasn't much of a morning person.

"I can't believe this. I was already on edge after I heard we'd be staying in a guesthouse by ourselves, and now we've been kidnapped right before the rite begins?!"

While Keigetsu fumed, Reirin calmly put a hand to her cheek. "Hmm… Personally, I thought the kidnapping explained why we had to be isolated in the first place."

It was a rule that Maidens participating in the Rite of Reverence couldn't ask for help from their court ladies. To that end, attendants were encouraged to keep their distance from their mistresses for the duration of the rite, thus forcing the girls to dress themselves. This year, Empress Kenshuu had made a point of enforcing that. She'd ordered that the Maidens be isolated in purified guesthouses within their respective palaces, starting from the eve of the competition.

Reirin had been overjoyed at the sudden opportunity to strike out on her own. After all, even counting her time before the Maiden Court or her period of exile as "Shu Keigetsu," she'd never once lived by herself. The same couldn't be said of Keigetsu and the rest.

All five girls had been forced to set and clear their own tables, make their own beds, and sleep alone. Next thing they knew, they'd been thrown into the rite with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The quick succession of unexpected developments had already taken a mental toll on them.

"There must be a reason for this. Let's trust in Her Majesty and wait. Look,

there's even some fruit set out for our breakfast. Would you like one?"

"I'm in no state of mind to be snacking!" Keigetsu snapped.

"What a shame. These are all high-grade fruits hard to come by in winter." Reirin brushed aside her friend's retort, gracefully reaching for one of the figs set out on the table beside her.

In addition, the tray was packed with an assortment of fruit that seemed to cover every season of the year and every country on the continent, from pomegranate to grapes to colorful citrus fruits. Since the majority were Empress Kenshuu's personal favorites, it stood to reason that she was the one who had provided the refreshments.

My, this is delectable.

It was delightful to partake in such luscious juiciness first thing in the morning. The truth was, Reirin had been so hyped for the freedom of living alone that she'd woken up with the sun and worked out in her underwear. After all that exercise, the sweet taste of the fruit hit the spot.

If she were in Keigetsu's form, she would have cleared the entire tray, but she was bound to throw up if she ate too much in her current body. Instead, she scrutinized the selection and picked out only her favorites.

As she chewed deliberately so as to savor the taste, Keigetsu shot her an exasperated look of disbelief before chancing a timid glance toward the front section of the tent. "What do you think that partition screen is for? What's behind it?"

Set right in front of their chairs was a gigantic partition screen tall enough to reach the tent ceiling. There seemed to be a good deal of space on the other side, so even from their seats, it was clear to see that something had been prepared for them.

"Well…that's hard to say. Shall we go take a look?"

"Not a chance! The court ladies carrying the baskets told us to sit here and wait! What if disobeying their instructions hurts our evaluation?!" Keigetsu dismissed Reirin's well-intentioned proposal out of hand. "What's the idea here? What sort of Rite of Reverence is this going to be?"

Given how poorly she performed under pressure, Keigetsu seemed to be a nervous wreck. Then again, the same went for the rest of the Maidens. The girls were stiff as boards, focused on not tripping up or committing a blunder in the face of these unforeseen circumstances.

Nibbling on her fruit, Reirin looked on with mild confusion. *Is there really a reason to be so high-strung?*

It wasn't as though this was a life-or-death situation. Sure, it *was* unnerving to demonstrate their abilities before the emperor and his retainers rather than the familiar faces of the crown prince and consorts. That being said, even if her reputation *did* suffer or her rank *did* fall as a result, Reirin wouldn't have minded. What mattered in the end was that the one with the appropriate talents was given her proper due—that the finest woman would become the crown prince's wife and pass on the most eminent blood of all to her son.

That "finest woman" didn't have to be her. There was nothing more reassuring than the thought of a talented girl being handed her rightful position and supporting Gyoumei.

Oh, but His Highness has also *been rather restless these past few days.*

A faint smile rose to her lips as her thoughts turned to Gyoumei. In contrast to the ceremonies held in the Maiden Court, the crown prince wasn't permitted to meddle in the Rite of Reverence. The purpose of the ritual was to provide the emperor and empress a chance to appraise the future mother of the nation, so the son was forced to defer to his parents.

The rules hadn't always been so strict, but due to past princes' attempts to give their favored Maidens an advantage, the regulations had been tightened over time to prevent romantic feelings from influencing the judging process. Nowadays, the crown prince wasn't even permitted to set foot in the inner court for the duration of the rite.

Gyoumei had been concerned that a rite both headed by his mother and entirely out of his hands was sure to mean trouble. He'd made frequent trips to see Reirin prior to the proceedings, nagging her not to do anything reckless and to put her own well-being first.

There's no point in worrying. I don't have the strength to do anything rash in

this body.

For the record, Reirin had responded to her concerned cousin's advice with a graceful nod, meanwhile letting his words go in one ear and out the other.

While she was lost in her thoughts, the ceremony started outside the tent. She heard the sounds of the gongs resounding louder than ever, the entire crowd dropping to their hands and knees, and the shaman beginning to offer a prayer.

It's funny that the ceremony is beginning while we're still hidden out of sight, when we're ostensibly the stars of the show.

Intent on still paying her respects from the other side of the tent, Reirin rose from her chair, and the other Maidens scrambled to follow suit. Everyone was expected to kneel before the most exalted being in the land. It didn't matter if they couldn't see him.

"We shall hereby commence the first trial of the Rite of Reverence," came a voice from beyond the tent following several moments of kowtowing. The crisp words echoing through the hushed space were those of Genyou, the emperor of Ei. "O Maidens, may you learn from the virtues of your ancestors and predecessors alike and strive for self-improvement."

He had a throaty voice. Though it wasn't so gruff as to sound intimidating, it had the strange power to bring others to heel.

Upon hearing the emperor's announcement, the Maidens steeled their expressions and bowed from behind the tent.

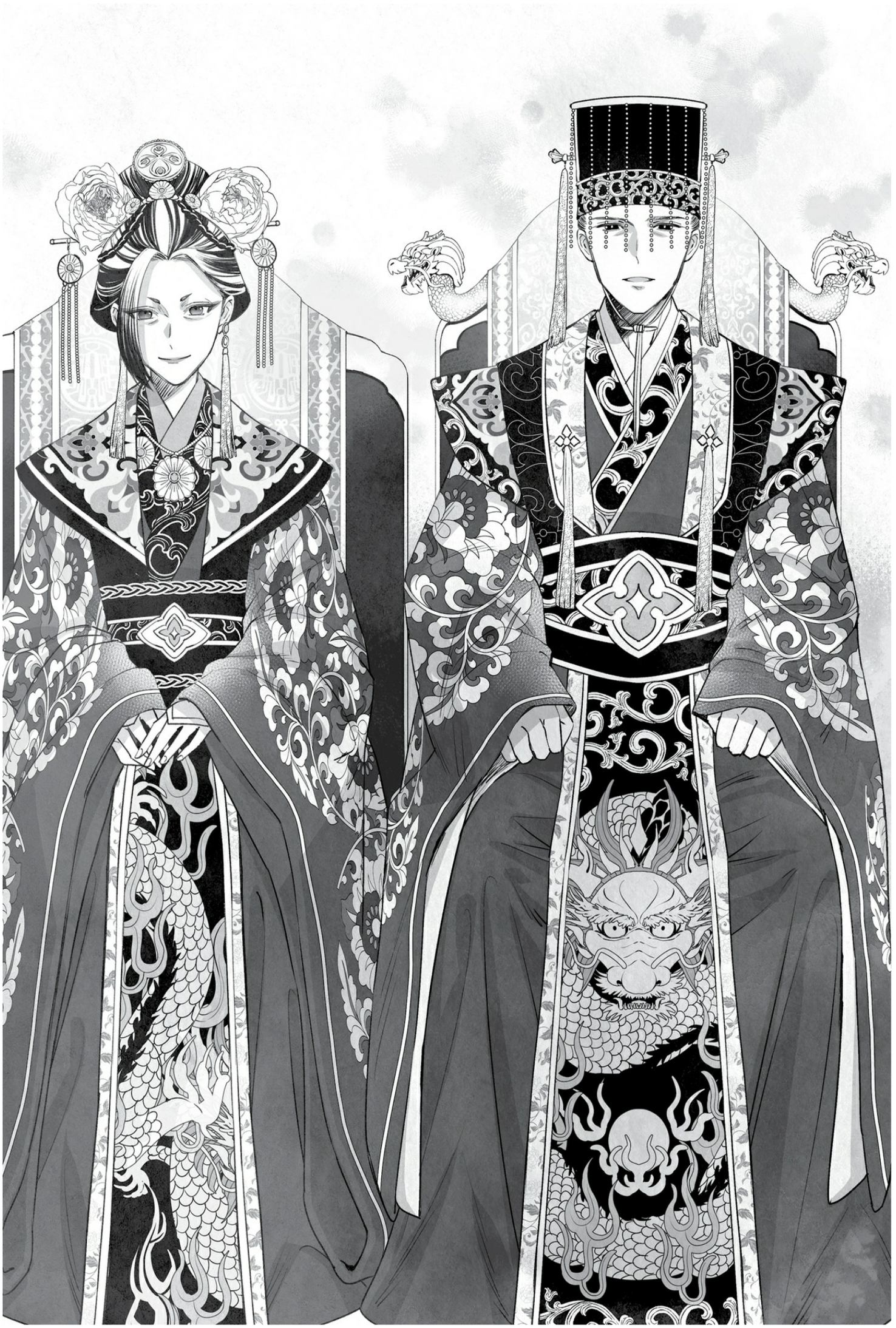
His voice sounds as lovely as ever. I can't wait to see his face and say hello, thought Reirin as she likewise kept her head down.

Since his official wife, Kenshuu, had doted on her from an early age, Reirin had been granted plenty of opportunities to meet the emperor prior to becoming a Maiden. A man in his mid-forties, Emperor Genyou was the taciturn sort, but he was also a handsome fellow who always wore a reserved smile on his face.

Empress Kenshuu was so dynamic a personality that she tended to leave the stronger impression of the pair, but whenever her aunt horrified her audience

with some irreverent comment, Genyou always kept his calm and showed not a flicker of expression. That was one of the reasons Reirin harbored such respect and affection for the emperor.

“Good morning, girls. You’re free to lift your heads now.”



The girls remained prostrate long after the buzz had resumed outside the tent, until at last a woman in an extravagant robe lifted the flap and stepped inside. This dignified beauty with a relaxed smile and a deep voice was none other than the facilitator of the rite, Empress Kenshuu.

“I see you all showed up in nothing but your underwear, just as I ordered. Good. Now, for the great glory of His Majesty the Emperor and so on and so forth, let’s get this Rite of Reverence underway.”

Down-to-earth woman that she was, she gave the Maidens a sweeping glance and got the ball rolling with some rather slapdash opening remarks. She was likely cutting corners because the emperor and dignitaries couldn’t hear her through the tent.

You’re incorrigible, Aunt Kenshuu.

Reirin nearly erupted into a fit of giggles, but it seemed the women of the Kou Palace were the only ones capable of laughing in such a situation. The other Maidens shrank in on themselves in their confusion, hanging on to Kenshuu’s every word.

“For the first task of the Rite of Reverence, as the empress of Ei, I ask you Maidens this: ‘What flower should a consort embody?’ Show us your answer.”

That part alone she announced loud and clear enough to be heard outside. The Maidens exchanged bemused looks that said, *What does she mean by embodying a flower?*

The empress elucidated her point. “A consort’s duties involve accompanying the emperor on outings and tours. Not all of these will be to controlled environments like the inner court. Yet no matter where you are, even if you’re tossed out in nothing but your undergarments, you must dress and act with the dignity expected of the emperor’s wives. And you must do it all on your own power.”

As she looked out over the Maidens, her gaze was as stern as that of a warlord on the battlefield. “With that in mind, I ask you this: What is the ideal form of the consorts, the flowers of the inner court? To which blossom do you aspire? Here I have laid out all manner of seasonal flowers, a rainbow of

garments, and every accessory or cosmetic tool imaginable. Use these to embody the flower of your choice, and once you're ready, head to the stage and present yourself to the emperor."

With a snap of Kenshuu's fingers, court ladies dressed in verdant robes—attendants from the main palace, presumably—came into the tent and pushed the enormous partition screen to the side. The makeshift wall scraped against the dirt as it shifted, at last allowing a glimpse of what lay behind it.

The area was lined with exquisite fabrics and crammed full of hanging racks, shelves, tables, and mirrors, forming a gorgeous flood of color.

"You're free to take home anything you wear out of here. Consider it a gift from His Majesty. Since cosmetics sit on the skin, I've brought over the ones you normally use. Now, begin," Kenshuu smoothly declared, slipping out of the tent before the Maidens had the chance to ask any follow-up questions.

"I extend my greetings to Your Imperial Majesty, descendant of the dragon and the most esteemed leader of these lands. We shall hereby begin the first trial of the Rite of Reverence. The task I have given to these Maidens is…"

From the sound of it, she was repeating the same explanation to the judging committee of the emperor, shaman, and retainers.

The curtains had risen on their battle. Realizing as much, the Maidens rose to their feet and began inspecting the garments and makeup tools with strained expressions. This was more than a simple beauty contest; it was a test of whether they had the appropriate ideals and resolve. The twist on the conventional theme was surprising enough to draw cries of panic from the contestants.

Goodness. This is a much more traditional trial than I expected.

Well, *some* of the contestants.

In Reirin's case, the sound was better described as an admiring sigh. Knowing her aunt, she hadn't discounted the possibility of tasks like a "waterfall meditation session" or "triple all-nighter farming extravaganza," so she was surprised to find the empress's ideas adapted into something appropriate for a Maiden's evaluation. Her gamboge golds must have done their best to keep her

in check.

I'd better do my *best too.*

While she rolled up her sleeves in spirit, someone beat her to the punch in approaching the sea of garments. The one to pick up a lustrous black robe, green sash, and vibrant red camellia was the Maiden of the Gen clan, Kasui.

"I'll go with the camellia," she declared in a dispassionate voice that evoked the tranquil winter. "Its evergreen leaves represent unwavering loyalty, and a flower that blooms in the snow symbolizes perseverance in the face of hardship. There could be no flower more fit to embody the Maiden of the Gen clan, those who preside over winter."

Kasui had never shown much interest in dressing up, but that made it easy for her to choose an outfit suited to the occasion without her personal preferences getting in the way.

When she picked out jade earrings and a white shawl reminiscent of the snow without a moment's hesitation, the other Maidens rushed forward. It occurred to them that if they didn't make their decisions fast and keep the other girls in check, all the good flowers would be taken.

"Then I choose the peony. The blossom hailed as 'the king of flowers' is perfect for the woman who rules over the flowers of the inner court." So said Kin Seika as she took a branch of white peonies in full bloom, a brilliant gold and silver robe, and an iridescent shawl.

"I…"

As for Keigetsu, she cast a conflicted glance toward the cotton rose that had once been Noble Consort Shu's epithet, only to shake the thought from her head. It was the only summer flower available, but the symbol of an exiled criminal couldn't possibly be suited to a consort.

Peach blossoms were an auspicious symbol of longevity and immortality. Another option was the wintersweet, the fragrant flower of what was counted among the four most aromatic shrubs. Then there was the chrysanthemum, the plum blossom, the daffodil, the winter daphne, and the buttercup…

After much indecision, she ultimately picked out a plum branch lined with red

buds. Its flowers bloomed in early spring, not summer, but the bright crimson petals seemed like a good match for the Shu clan. It was a flower that endured the winter and heralded the coming spring before the rest of its peers. A bloom that overcame adversity and brought spring in its wake was surely worthy of any consort, regardless of her clan's associated season.

"I'll go with the plum blossom. This should make it easy to coordinate the rest of my outfit."

All she'd have to do was pick out red-themed robes and accessories to match the flowers. That much she was used to doing.

She perused the ruquns and jackets lined up on the garment racks, muttering, "I need something red."

Right then, Seika opened her mouth to mumble, "Choosing a red robe for the simple reason of matching the plum blossoms doesn't have much substance to it."

"Excuse me?"

"We're meant to *embody* a flower, and we have to explain our reasoning before His Majesty. You ought to focus on how best to convey the connotations of the plum blossom, not just look for a robe of the same color as the flower."

When she realized that Seika was not insulting Keigetsu but giving her honest advice, Reirin's eyes lit up from where she was listening beside them. *Goodness!*

For all her own abundant talent, Seika was harsh toward those she had deemed "inadequate." No one would have expected her to extend a helping hand to another clan's Maiden.

This is wonderful! I believe I've just stood witness to seeds of friendship blooming!

Perhaps she too had begun to see the charm in Keigetsu's passion. Delighted, Reirin flashed Seika a smile on instinct, yet for some reason, the latter awkwardly averted her gaze.

"You might do best to take instruction from Lady Reirin on the matter. You

two seem quite close these days.”

“Oh! That’s a lovely idea.”

“W-we’re not *close*!”

In contrast to the excited way Reirin clapped her hands together, Keigetsu wrinkled her nose in embarrassment.

Seika went on to add, “It makes no difference to me. Still, if you don’t have someone to watch over you, I’m sure you’ll keep putting off your turn as you dither over your makeup and attire—and Lady Reirin, I believe *you’re* the sort who won’t be able to focus on yourself until you see Lady Keigetsu through the process. Isn’t that simple fact?”

“You make a fair point.”

“I can dress myself! Besides, isn’t it against the rules to receive help from another Maiden during a trial?!” Though Keigetsu was quick to object, perhaps due to her own lack of confidence, she soon cast a glance at Reirin and strung together some excuses. “Well, Kou Reirin doesn’t seem to be in any rush, so there’s a chance she’ll just so happen to hang back in the tent until the end. Not to help me or anything, of course…”

Reirin accepted her contrarian friend’s endearing request with a smile. “Indeed. I’m in no rush, so I’m sure my turn will just so happen to come last.”

“I see.” Seika gave a small nod upon watching this exchange. Yet if Reirin’s ears weren’t mistaken, there was a crack in her voice, and the hands with which she clutched at her robe were trembling a fraction. “That’s very kind of you, Lady Reirin.”

“Lady Seika?”

Was it the cold, or was she shivering in anticipation of taking the stage?

“What’s the ma—”

Concerned, Reirin tried to reach out a hand, only for Seika to suddenly thrust herself forward. “Lady Reirin!” But the moment her shawl made a faint rustling sound, Seika clamped her mouth shut and pursed her lips.

“Is something wrong, Lady Seika?”

“No…” Was it Reirin’s imagination? The girl looked a touch pale, and not just because she had yet to apply her makeup. “It’s nothing.”

A stiff smile rising to her face, Seika turned her back to Reirin and Keigetsu. Upon returning to her seat, she began to dress herself with the attention to detail of a master dancer.

When she saw that, Keigetsu hurried to finish picking out a robe. “I-I’ll go ahead and get changed too. I’ll consult you on the details later.”

Meanwhile, Reirin, who had yet to even settle on which flower to represent, peered at the arrangement and tilted her head with a considering hum.

What flower should a consort embody, hm?

Her heart raced with excitement as she pondered the riddle of the task. What flower would be most appropriate for the occasion? To put it another way, what were the qualities a consort ought to have?

If beauty and dignity were the most important criteria, the peony would indeed be the best pick. Still, it was wonderful how Kasui’s choice of the camellia evoked the thought she’d given to her clan and the season, and if one read “spring” to mean “prosperity,” that made Keigetsu’s plum blossom an auspicious flower that invited glory to the garden of the kingdom.

Speaking entirely to my own personal preferences, I’d choose the caterpillar fungus, which has fused with an insect…or a carnivorous plant, which rises above its place on the food chain to eat bugs. But I don’t see either of those here.

Reirin had a great deal of respect for those two flowers and their somewhat abnormal brand of vigor, but unsurprisingly, no one had thought to provide either for the occasion. Besides, “embodying” one of those was bound to throw the Rite of Reverence into a state of chaos.

In that case…

It was as she was taking turns studying the flowers in their vases that she finally noticed Ran Houshun standing right next to her. Thinking about it, the girl had been silent ever since the rite began.

Hm? Actually, she hasn't said anything for the past several days.

Reaching back into her memory, Reirin realized that she hadn't spoken to Houshun for almost ten days now. It had been so nice to be free of her toxic presence that she hadn't bothered to question it, but it was also odd, given the extent to which the girl had been hanging off of her as of late.

"Lady Houshun?"

It had been a while since Reirin had gotten a proper look at the Ran Maiden, and for some reason, Houshun was looking more haggard than she remembered. Granted, due to the girl's nervous habit of hiding her face behind her sleeves, it was entirely possible Reirin was just seeing things.

All of a sudden, Houshun lifted her face. "I…" A smile made its way to her cherubic features. "I'm going to choose the daffodil, Miss Reirin."

There was a hint of sweetness to her voice, as if to accentuate her young age, and she tilted her head in a gesture reminiscent of a small animal. She was behaving like the same old Ran Houshun, but there was something the slightest bit off about her.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Houshun?"

"Just as its nickname of the 'flower in the snow' implies, it's a valiant flower that blooms in the face of the bitter cold. It may lack the splendor of the cotton rose or the dignity of a camellia, but its small blossoms are bursting with fragrance, and it even has medicinal properties that can serve to save the people… I consider *that* to be my ideal."

Houshun went on and on, refusing to meet Reirin's frown with her own gaze.

"Isn't it time you started applying your makeup, Miss Reirin? You prefer to use liquid face paint, don't you? I imagine it will take some time to dissolve."

Not a moment later, she turned the topic from flowers to cosmetics.

"Hm? Yes. Once I've aided Lady Keigetsu, I plan to take my time getting ready."

"Of course." After responding to that with an adorable nod, Houshun lowered her voice a fraction. "I've already picked the daffodil, though. You ought to

think carefully about your choice, Miss Reirin."

"I suppose so…?"

It wasn't all that odd a conversation, yet something about it bothered Reirin. While she was still struggling to pin down what the issue was, Houshun returned to her seat with her chosen flower and outfit in hand.

Just then, Keigetsu called out to her in a panic, apparently having stumbled at the early step of tying her sash. "Hey, Kou Reirin! My sash isn't crooked, is it? I'm not asking for your help, since that would break the rules. I just wanted to check!"

Erupting into giggles at the overly defensive summons, Reirin decided she'd do as much as she could to help "without breaking the rules." She would put the Houshun issue on the backburner for now. It wasn't that unusual for the girl to go around making vague insinuations anyway.

"Oh dear, Lady Keigetsu. Wearing an ornamental pin on your head, a necklace around your neck, a decorative belt under your chest, and bracelets on your wrists is a bit much. You needn't adorn *all* your vitals…"

"That's not what I was going for!"

"In that case, let's make the knot of your sash a little simpler. You want all eyes to be on the branch you're holding, so I'd recommend forgoing the bracelets. Have you thought of what you're going to say about the plum blossom? Also, about your makeup—"

"Slow down. Don't say it all at once!"

Despite having asked for the advice herself, Keigetsu covered her ears with a squeal. Reirin found it a charming sight. Earnest and perpetually at her wits' end, Shu Keigetsu would lose heart the moment Reirin failed to offer her hand.

Goodness, I've never known a girl so adorable and rewarding to look after.

The Kous were caretakers by nature, and Reirin was the girl through whom the clan's blood ran thickest. Much like a trailblazer might itch to test his skills on the barren land before him, the more work someone was, the more her heart tingled with excitement.

“Let’s address the issues one by one, then. First, shall we flatten out this knot?”

“I’d like to, but I can’t figure out how to make it stop sticking out.”

“It’s because you’re trying to tie the cord along with the rest of the sash. Once you undo this tie here, see…”

Reirin instinctively reached out to help her klutzy friend, only to be rebuffed in a sulk. “Stop that. I have to do it myself.”

Perhaps due to Keigetsu’s tendency to jump to conclusions, once the Shu maiden had accepted a rule or law, she made sure to follow it to the letter. In the past, she’d seemed a bit more willing to take advantage of Reirin, but for whatever reason, she endeavored to do most things on her own as of late.

Amid their banter, the time passed in the blink of an eye.

“I’ll be going now. Best of luck to you all.”

“If you’ll excuse me.”

Kasui and Seika were the first to finish their preparations. They left the tent with their branches in hand, shooting Reirin and Keigetsu a sideways glance. Not too much later, Houshun scurried out after them with her daffodil.

“I, Gen Kasui, Maiden of the Gen clan, extend my greetings to Your Imperial Majesty, the glorious emperor of Ei. The flower I believe most suited to a consort is…”

Soon the sounds of Kasui’s sonorous introduction and the court ladies’ awed exclamations drifted over, drawing a nervous look from Keigetsu as she hung back in the tent.

“A-all right, Kou Reirin. That’s good enough. You’d better get started on your own preparations.”

“Thank you, but…Lady Keigetsu? Your lipstick is smudged.”

“What?! You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Keigetsu kept glancing back at Reirin in a fluster or inclining herself toward the front of the tent while she did her makeup, the sight of which made Reirin

far too anxious to focus on herself.

“Come here. Hold still.”

After reaching a hand to stop her friend from scrubbing at her lips and making matters worse, she grabbed some white powder and a handkerchief sitting on the table and dabbed at the offending area.

Upon noting that Keigetsu’s face had gone stiff with tension, Reirin gently cupped her face in her hands and smiled at her. “You’ll do fine, Lady Keigetsu.” Hoping in her heart of hearts that her eyes could become Keigetsu’s undistorted mirror, she said, “You’re a wonderful woman. I’m certain you can embody a gorgeous flower. Off you go now.”

“I…” For a moment, Keigetsu looked back at Reirin with a pleading gaze, but at length, she turned her head to the side. “I’ll do my best.”

Then, as if to hide the blush on her cheeks, she fled the tent with hurried steps.

“Now then.”

Now that she’d wound up as the last presenter, it was finally time for Reirin to start on her own preparations.

“Which flower shall I choose?”

First cladding herself in the safe choice of a white ruqun, she was idly looking over the vases of flowers when her thoughts abruptly turned to what Houshun had said.

“I’ve already picked the daffodil.”

The girl had told her to think carefully about her choice.

Think “carefully,” not “fast”?

What was there to think about?

Furrowing her brow, Reirin ruminated on Houshun’s words. Earlier, she’d turned the topic to makeup. She’d encouraged Reirin to hurry, warning her that her white powder would take some time to dissolve.

It doesn’t take that *long to dissolve white powder in water.*

It didn’t seem like a matter that warranted the words of caution.

The very next moment, Reirin lifted her head, the pieces of the puzzle clicking into place inside her.

Words of caution?

The daffodil…

Houshun had chosen the daffodil as the flower to symbolize her future self. The small flower bloomed near clean water and had a pleasant fragrance. Its leaves had medicinal properties—but on the flip side, it was so poisonous that merely coming into contact with water it had soaked in could cause inflammation of the skin.

Don’t tell me…

Perhaps she was overthinking it. Still, she could at last pin down what had felt so off to her.

Houshun hadn’t stumbled over her words even once during their earlier conversation. Usually, when she was putting on her “timid Ran Houshun” act, her voice would have a perpetual quiver to it, and she would insert deliberate pauses with all her “ums” and “erms.”

She was clearly different from her usual self.

As Reirin pursed her lips into a line, she picked up the white powder set out atop a yellow sheet. Judging by the container, it was her go-to face powder from her room in the Palace of the Golden Qilin. Kenshuu *had* mentioned bringing the Maidens’ personal cosmetics over.

Instead of applying it straight to her face, Reirin dipped the twisted end of a cloth into the mix and smeared a very small amount on the back of her hand.

Shkt…

A few beats later, that same spot of skin heated up, growing red and swollen, along with a sharp spasm of pain. Reirin’s breath caught in her throat. What would have happened if she’d smeared it all over her face like she usually did?

Just then, Keigetsu came bustling back in, the tent flap rustling in her wake.

“Hey, Kou Reirin! Why, pray tell, are you standing around in a daze instead of doing your clothes or makeup? Ran Houshun has already taken the stage. I’m up next, and you go after that. Get a move on!”

“Oh… Lady Keigetsu…”

“I forgot my branch of plum blossoms. You should have said something!”

It seemed she’d come back to retrieve something she’d left behind.

Too preoccupied with her own upcoming turn, she didn’t take much notice of Reirin’s stupor as she breezed over to the table with the flower assortment. As Reirin watched her friend go in a daze, her head abruptly snapped to attention.

Just now…

She felt her senses sharpening in the presence of danger.

I heard something.

Having seen her through countless brushes with death, Reirin’s five senses heightened on command and alerted her to a certain sound: the *hiss* of something melting. It was faint and ominous, almost akin to the warning rattle of a snake.

“Say, maybe I should break the branch to make it a little— Kou Reirin?”

There was a thick pillar looming behind Keigetsu as she picked up her plum branch and muttered to herself. It was one of the pillars forged from melted and rehardened steel to hold up the extravagant tent around them. Buried deep within the earth, it ought to have been sticking straight up to brace the ceiling, yet for some reason, it seemed to be tilting.

“Watch out, Lady Keigetsu!”

The moment she understood what was happening, Reirin rushed over to Keigetsu and pushed her to the ground to shield her.

Upon successfully finishing her speech, Seika maintained her usual graceful gait as she stepped down from the stage. Back straight, she walked unhampered by the long ruqun trailing behind her, only the peonies she’d

tucked behind her ear swaying with each step. She was apathetic to the satisfied smile of the emperor beyond the stage and the respect in the gazes of the kneeling court ladies.

At a court lady's direction, she migrated to a corner of the square. There, the Pure Consort—Kin Reiga—sat in wait against the backdrop of the Kin clan's partition screen.

"Splendid work, Seika."

Seika took the seat next to her in silence, while the consort rambled on in high spirits.

"As the king of flowers, the peony is the perfect pick for the pinnacle of all women. It has the splendor the Kin clan is known for, so it was an excellent choice on that point as well. Between the gold and silver embroidery on your garment and looks that put its beauty to shame, it was a magnificent showing. Look at that—the poor Ran girl can't hope to follow up that act."

"…"

"Most impressive of all was how you convinced Kou Reirin to go last. You *were* the one who gave her the idea, no? Oh, look, Shu Keigetsu just stepped out of the tent. Perfect." After giggling out another compliment, Reiga abruptly dropped the pitch of her voice. "Now, give the signal."

The consort jerked her chin toward the tent in the distance, hiding the motion in the shadow of her fan. Just outside it, right at the foot of the pillar, there knelt an Eagle Eye who presumably had the backing of the Kin clan. Though his face was bowed with a solemn expression, he cast the occasional glance in the two women's direction.

"The current Eagle Eyes' captain is such a stiff that I could only buy over a grunt like him. Granted, that should make it easier to cut him loose when the time comes. As soon as we give the signal, he'll knock down the pillar. Fret not—'taking care' of him in the aftermath should be a simple task. No one will trace it back to us."

Seika balled her hands into fists. Reiga plotted to topple over a tent with someone still inside with all the ease of plucking a withered branch from a

flower vase. Her Maiden found it unconscionable that she could commit such a heinous act without batting an eye.

“What, you don’t believe that he can knock down a steel pillar? Oh, but he can. Through a certain connection of mine, I can procure this amazing water that can melt steel. The same goes for incense that induces dreams and alcohol that gives pleasure… Just heed my commands, and it’s possible to come by all sorts of useful tools.”

Still Seika said nothing.

“Come now,” urged Reiga, her smile revoltingly smug. “What did I just tell you? All you have to do is face him and wave a fan with the Kin clan crest three times. Do that, and you can stay my darling Maiden forever.”

Seika bit down hard on her painted lips. Despite handling all the setup herself, the Pure Consort wanted to force *Seika* to give the final signal to make it clear the responsibility for the attack lay with her. Her goal was to leave no room for excuses and drive home that Seika herself was the one who had turned a blade of malice against Kou Reirin.

I’ll never do it.

The Maiden clenched her fists tighter than ever, her fan still resting atop her knees.

Yet because the signal was so casual and easy to make, the occasional whisper crossed the mind Seika was so certain she had made up: *All you have to do is wave it three times. What’s so bad about that? Why, it would be easy enough just to do that on accident.*

No! I mustn’t think like that.

It would be but a single pillar going down. There was no guarantee that Kou Reirin would be flattened underneath. If the girl moved to the back of the tent, the worst that would happen was getting some dirt on her garment and flower.

It’s unacceptable. It’s shameful of me to even think it.

Besides, was it truly Seika’s fault that Kou Reirin had remained behind in the tent? In point of fact, that bumbling Shu Keigetsu was the real reason her turn

was going to be last, and Reirin was the one who had made the choice to help her friend. Such a trifling level of suggestion hardly even counted as suggestion at all.

"Or would you prefer to be locked up in the bedroom and kept like cattle? I've heard that merchant doesn't tolerate his wives talking back to him."

The whispers of temptation and the threat shared the same woman's voice.

"…"

When Seika kept a tight grip on the handle of her fan, Reiga gently placed a hand over the back of hers. "You're hopeless."

Her voice was shockingly gentle, not a trace of disparagement to be heard. When Seika looked up in surprise, her eyes went even wider upon seeing her aunt's expression.

The smile on Reiga's face was not one of compassion—it was one of cruelty.

Pinning Seika's hand in place, she gave a light wave of her own dragon-crested fan three times.

"Wha…"

"Didn't you realize? I said we had to wave 'a Kin clan fan' three times. I never said it had to be yours."

Upon receiving the signal, the Eagle Eye switched which leg he was kneeling on. That same moment, Seika caught him sprinkling something over the base of the pillar with that casual stretch of his hand.

"He can't—"

"Don't get up."

When Seika blanched and nearly rose to her feet, Reiga held her down with the hand pressed firmly to her knee. Not only that—she hid her and Seika's faces behind her fan. To the casual observer, it would look like the consort and her Maiden were engaged in a friendly, whispered conversation.

"You ought to watch this. The miraculous steel-piercing water is a sight to behold. That pillar is going to come down any second now—and it's going to

look completely natural. I do wonder if Kou Reirin's lovely visage will be smashed to pieces in the process."

"St-stop…"

"Excuse me? *You* did this. I told you exactly what the signal was, but you didn't stop me. You didn't even notice what I was doing. Kou Reirin is going to die due to *your* incompetence."

Out of the corner of her eye, the consort spotted Shu Keigetsu looking down at her hands with a start and doubling back to the tent in a panic. Evidently, she'd forgotten something.

"Oh my, I suppose we'll be adding the remains of a sewer rat to the pile."

Each time Reiga giggled, a syrupy-sweet scent pervaded the air.

Still pinned to her chair, Seika shook her head as the color drained from her face.

This was bad. She had to put a stop to it. She had to raise her voice and tell the two girls in the tent to get out of there.

"Two birds with one stone. How convenient."

While Seika sat there frozen in fear, the pillar of the tent came down before her very eyes.

Boooom!

The second after Reirin pushed Keigetsu down, a thunderous crash echoed through the space. Though muffled by the noise of hanging racks and furniture falling and shattering, an uproar rose outside.

"Eeeek!"

"The tent has collapsed!"

"Are the Maidens all right?!"

Heedless of the commotion akin to a disturbed beehive, Reirin groped around in an attempt to confirm her situation. The candles in the tent had blown out when the pillar came down—not to mention the bulky cloth draped over her

head—so it was too dark to see a thing.

She eventually discerned what was going on through her fingertips and her eyes, which had gradually grown accustomed to the dark. It seemed the tent had collapsed, taking even the cloth ceiling down with it. The tables and hanging racks that were caught up in the cave-in had shattered upon hitting the pillar, sending cosmetics and clothes tumbling across the floor. Water and shards from the broken vases and coals spilled from the overturned braziers had made a mess of the two victims' garments.

"Oh, thank goodness! You're all right!"

The moment Reirin expressed her relief, one of Keigetsu's shrieks came flying back at her. "I'm anything but!" Flat on her backside and pinned down by Reirin from above, the Shu Maiden was shaking with eyes full of tears. "A-are *you* all right?!"

"I appreciate your concern. I was able to escape injury thanks to the hanging racks and tables breaking the pillar's fall. We were very fortunate."

"How is this *fortunate*?! It's a disaster!"

"Hm? We're both alive and well. We're not even bleeding."

Reirin blinked. So long as they had all their limbs intact and were holding on to consciousness, she considered that a win in the grand scheme of things.

I was saved by my habit of checking for potential hazards. You never know what will turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

After all, the slightest of scrapes or bruises would see Reirin's physical condition deteriorate in an instant. She had learned to subconsciously look around for sharp objects in the vicinity or any items in danger of falling, and she'd become instinctively wary of furniture that was heavy, sharp, or otherwise a potential danger if it fell. Thus, she'd immediately picked up on the strange noise coming from the imposing steel pole, calmly determined where it was going to topple, and managed to avoid it from there.

My frailty can come in handy sometimes.

Reirin felt the slightest bit of awe over the surprising perks to her weak

constitution, but the same couldn't be said of Keigetsu. After scooching on her butt to escape Reirin's arms, she fussed with the hem of her garment, which had been doused in water and charcoal. "Wh-what am I supposed to do? My clothes and flower are both a mess," she squeaked out.

"True. You might be better off swapping to a different flower," Reirin agreed, placing a hand to her cheek.

Both her garment and flower were covered in soot and debris. She certainly couldn't take the stage looking like that. Of course, the same went for Reirin.

"That's all you have to say?" In stark contrast to Reirin's relaxed attitude, there were tears welling in Keigetsu's eyes, given how poorly she dealt with the unexpected. "A-and after I went to all the trouble of getting ready… What am I supposed to do? There aren't any other garments or flowers left! Why does this always happen to me?"

Her emotions running high, Keigetsu appeared to be jumbling this up with past experiences.

"Are you all right?!"

Just then, there came a sharp voice from outside the tent. It sounded like Shin-u, the captain of the Eagle Eyes. He was meant to be guarding the crown prince, but it seemed he'd come running over as soon as disaster struck.

"C-Captain! Help—" Keigetsu tried to call for his aid, only for Reirin to cover her mouth.

"Wait!" Reirin shouted, commanding Shin-u to a halt when he attempted to part the tent and step inside. "This tent is the Maidens' changing area. I must ask that you refrain from entering." Her tone would brook no dissent.

Keigetsu looked back at her, boggling. "Don't be—"

"Don't be ridiculous. This is an emergency. Permission to enter, please." Outside the tent, it seemed Shin-u was no less shocked than Keigetsu was. There was a note of irritation in his deep voice. However, it seemed Reirin was correct that he couldn't set foot in the Maidens' changing area on a whim.

Reirin denied him for a second time. "There is no need. We haven't suffered

so much as a scratch. We are in the midst of a solemn ceremony graced by His Majesty. Please leave us."

"I need to make sure you're—"

"Captain Shin-u. Consider this an order from one of the main stars of the rite, the Maiden of the Kou clan. Leave us at once."

When Shin-u dug in his heels, she called him by his name. Although he held an exceptionally high rank within the Maiden Court due to his imperial blood and skill as a military officer, Reirin still outranked him by a hair.

Shin-u lapsed into a hesitant silence, until at last he responded to her command. "As you wish. But His Highness is quite concerned. I ask that you both emerge from the tent as soon as possible."

"Of course. Lady Keigetsu will be the first of us to take the stage, as per the set turn order," Reirin replied lightly, twisting the meaning of his words.

Silence fell over the tent once more.

"Now then," she said, turning to Keigetsu. "Let's get you ready."

"What are you saying?! Why didn't you call for help?! We can't resume the Rite of Reverence after everything that just happened!"

"Whatever are *you* saying?" Even when Keigetsu grabbed her by the collar in a flash of rage, Reirin only smiled back gently. "The Rite of Reverence *must* resume. No matter what."

"Wha…"

"Listen here, Lady Keigetsu," she began, attempting to persuade her friend. "The Rite of Reverence is unlike the typical ceremonies held in the Maiden Court. It is held in the presence of the emperor—a rite dedicated to His Majesty, so to speak. Neither failure nor delay is an option."

This drew a small gasp from Keigetsu. "You're…blowing it out of proportion."

"I most certainly am not. It is the honor of our kingdom that is at stake here, not our own reputations. A rite meant to celebrate the splendor of the future consorts—and, by extension, the successors to the kingdom—cannot be interrupted. Why else would it have taken so long for help to arrive?"

There ought to have been guards posted right outside the tent, but Shin-u was the only one to come over. It seemed Keigetsu understood what that implied. She nodded along, the color gradually draining from her face.

“It was likely His Highness’s own call to send us the captain. And when he’s forbidden from interfering too… He’s such a kind man. Taking the captain up on his offer to help would mean forcing His Highness to break the law.” Reirin’s smile grew wider as she added, “Besides, wouldn’t asking for help and putting the ceremony on pause be a blow to our pride?”

“Huh?”

“Is it not written in our ethics texts that if someone comes looking for a fight, you must give them double what they seek?”

“Huh?” Keigetsu stared back blankly.

Awed by the number of expressions her friend could flit through in such a short time, Reirin clasped her hands to her chest. “The truth is, Lady Keigetsu, I’m a tad furious.”

As she put more strength into her grip, her knuckles audibly cracked. Surely it would have made a more satisfying pop were she in Keigetsu’s body, but the clear sound her fragile bones produced was similar to that of a sword sliding back into its sheath, which had its own sort of charm.

Swiveling her head around, Reirin went on with the smile still on her face. “There’s a good chance the pillar’s collapse wasn’t an accident. Someone attempted to do us harm. Hee hee… First the Ghost Festival, then the Harvest Festival, and now the Rite of Reverence. There *do* seem to be quite a lot of forces out to sabotage ‘Shu Keigetsu.’ Why, I’ve had it up to here with this.”

“I-I don’t disagree, but—”

“And after you worked so hard to prepare for the rite. To attempt to bury one’s efforts beneath a single pillar is beyond the pale. Wouldn’t you agree?” asked Reirin, assuming the two of them were of the same mind.

Yet for some reason, Keigetsu panicked and threw up both hands. “I-I would. I’m livid. I really am…but I think maybe you ought to cool down a little…”

“Cool down?” The Kou Maiden tilted her head to one side, inexplicably causing her cocksure friend to freeze up with a squeal. “Perhaps you’re right. Yes, I’d do better to keep my composure. It’s akin to saying, ‘Oh, *that* was supposed to be an attack?’ Why, it’ll make our foe look like an utter fool. Good thinking, Lady Keigetsu.”

“Uh, that’s not what I—”

“Come. Let us jump back into the Rite of Reverence with a cool head.” Smiling, Reirin cut Keigetsu’s hemming and hawing short. As she rose to her feet, she proposed, “For a start, let’s get ourselves changed.”

Keigetsu shot her a perplexed look. “Into what? All the flowers were destroyed. The garments are filthy too. You want me to take the stage looking like *this*? There’s no way.”

On the verge of tears, she stared out over the crushed petals and charcoal-stained robes. Sure enough, not a single flower had made it through the accident unscathed, including the plum blossoms she had chosen.

Even so, Reirin refused to give up. “You’ll be all right.” Once more, she knelt down and cupped her inconsolable friend’s face in her hands. “There’s no predicament that can’t be overcome with a little backbone. Or if you’d rather just escape…shall we trade bodies so I can take your place?”

“No way!” Though Reirin had been surprisingly sincere in her proposal, Keigetsu shut her down in an instant. “Something tells me that would lead to disaster!”

The refusal wasn’t motivated by a thirst for independence so much as fear based on past experience, but Reirin was nonetheless pleased enough to start giggling. “I knew you’d say that.”

Of course. This girl never ran from anything. She was quick to scream and quick to cry, but she always managed to stand her ground.

I’m so proud to have a friend like her.

Reirin wouldn’t let anyone sabotage this darling friend of hers. She would go through with the rite, and she would throw it in the face of the one who had brought down the pillar. She’d show them that their schemes weren’t even

worth acknowledging.

“I have an idea.”

As she looked toward the back of the tent—where there sat an unscathed chair and a basket full of fruit—Reirin rose to her feet.

***

Keigetsu ascended the stairs to the stage, scolding her legs for trembling under her. Since she had switched places with Kou Reirin for the Ghost Festival and Harvest Festival, it had been a long time since she’d last participated in an official event.

In ceremonies past, she had been met with cold or scornful glances from the audience the moment she entered the venue hunched in on herself. Thus, long before she’d even made it to the stage, Keigetsu felt so nervous she thought she might shrivel up and die. It was even worse on the heels of so many unforeseen incidents.

Nevertheless, the Maidens had no choice but to take the stage. Clutching the ends of her jacket together, she forced herself to exhale a deep breath. She told herself over and over again that it was going to be all right. Normally, no matter how much practice she had put in beforehand, this was the part where she would get anxious and think *I should have done* that *instead*, but for better or worse, there was only one way forward this time. Thinking about it that way put her mind a little more at ease.

The court ladies and Eagle Eyes erupted into whispers as her figure came into clearer view with each step she ascended. They were probably surprised to see the Maiden with her hair in such a simple arrangement and her jacket inexplicably turned inside out. Or perhaps they were shocked that she still had it in her to take the stage after the tent had just collapsed.

Was she okay? Why was she dressed like that? Had she turned her overgarment inside out to hide an injury? She could practically feel those questions rising to their lips. Yet so long as the Supreme One of the emperor didn’t comment, none of them were in a position to ask.

Keigetsu took advantage of that to wordlessly step onstage. Standing stiffly in

the center of the platform, she lifted her face and looked out at Genyou and the several other dignitaries seated around him.

This was the first time she'd seen the emperor's face without bamboo blinds to obscure it since her initial admission to the Maiden Court. Perhaps for the sake of distancing himself from the women's quarrels, he was seldom seen around the inner court. Due also in part to his enormous workload, his personal quarters were instead located in the main palace, and it was said that he slept there more often than not. Even the inner court ceremonies were largely left in the empress's hands. Granted, since Kenshuu did such excellent work, none of the Maidens seemed to take issue with that.

Getting a glimpse of him for the first time in ages, Keigetsu felt he looked younger than he had in her vague recollection. His features were clear-cut, and he had a serene smile on his face. Still, the fact that he showed not a crack in that easygoing smile on the heels of such a horrible accident spoke volumes to how impenetrable he was. Kou Reirin, for her part, often described the emperor as "a kind and mild-mannered man," but whenever Keigetsu looked at Genyou, she felt the same quiet anxiety of gazing into a bottomless swamp.

Seated beside him, Empress Kenshuu was wearing a grim expression the likes of which was rarely seen on her face. She was probably worried about the cave-in, but even she wasn't permitted to ask questions before the emperor did.

To the emperor's right and one step down were the crown prince, Gyoumei, and the captain of the Eagle Eyes, Shin-u. Gyoumei was staring hard at Keigetsu, his virile features taut with tension. One look at him was enough to convey his worry, indignation, and frustration at having his hands tied, which filled Keigetsu with relief.

It was a reminder that he was a righteous man.

If a Maiden of his came under attack without cause, his brow would crease with concern all the same whether it was Kou Reirin or Shu Keigetsu. Though there would be a clear difference in degree between the two, of course.

Even farther away were Reirin's older brothers, Kou Keikou and Kou Keishou, present in their capacity as military officers from the main palace. Unsure what had happened to his sister, Keikou was acting restless enough to put Gyoumei

to shame, and so too had Keishou abandoned his trademark flippant smile to devour Keigetsu with his gaze.

Seeing that made her forget all about her nerves.

Even Leelee and Tousetsu were kneeling in the Maidens' waiting area at the edge of the stage. She couldn't see their expressions with them looking at the floor, but surely the two of them were cheering her on, resisting the urge to spring to their feet at any given moment. Somehow, she believed that without a doubt.

I can do this.

Cold and disdainful gazes weren't all that surrounded her on the stage. There were people who would come together to worry for her, get angry on her behalf, and watch over her.

"I, Shu Keigetsu, Maiden of the Shu clan, extend my greetings to Your Imperial Majesty, the glorious emperor of Ei."

Before the emperor could say anything to her, Keigetsu went down on her knees. She couldn't give him the chance to bring up the tent. There was no way she could give an explanation of what had happened without disrupting the ceremony. All she could do was start in on her speech while the audience was still debating how to react. She would force the rite onward.

"*This* is the flower I have decided is most suited to a consort."

She rose to her feet with all the grace she could muster, only to thrust the arms she had hidden beneath her jacket straight out in front of her. Her brown-lined overgarment fell to the floor, giving way to the brilliant vermillion robe underneath—almost like slicing open a fruit to reveal its flesh.

In one of her outstretched palms sat a small fruit of the same brown color as her jacket's lining. It was that bittersweet fruit Reirin had snacked on in lieu of breakfast.

"I have chosen the fig, also known as the fruit of fertility."

Her firm declaration drew a buzz from the crowd. Sounds of awe these were not. If anything, they were voices of surprise and bewilderment. Whispers of

“Isn’t that a fruit?” or “What happened to a flower?” reached her ears from every corner. Unsure of her motives, the audience was clearly debating whether this was the part where they ought to laugh.

The old Keigetsu would have been sure to cower and tremble before such an unwelcoming crowd, but much to her surprise, she found herself standing straight and tall.

Standing up straight is becoming a habit of mine.

Upon reaching that epiphany, Keigetsu nearly burst out laughing despite the circumstances. Kou Reirin had been exactly right. Thanks to the good posture drilled into her, Keigetsu’s body met every challenge with perfect poise, no matter what her mind was screaming at her.

Gaining momentum, Keigetsu raised her voice with dignity. In the back of her mind, she recalled word-for-word what Reirin had said as she pushed the fig into her hand.

“Listen closely, Lady Keigetsu.”

“This fruit we call the fig is actually a cluster of flowers blooming inward. Yet it is not admired for its beauty. Instead, it presents itself as a fruit and offers itself whole to the people.” She took her time speaking the words, making it sound like she was letting them all in on an amazing secret. “That is the kind of consort I strive to be. Flowers bloom in order to bear fruit. Those flowers must not seek to be appreciated on their own merits. I possess no talents of my own, after all.”

The last sentence was one Keigetsu had ad-libbed due to her own feelings of inadequacy. She wasn’t sure if she ought to be proud or pissed that *this* was the line that drew the most convinced nods from the crowd.

Fig still in her hands, Keigetsu went back down on her knees, this time lowering her head in a deep bow. “Though I lack beauty of my own, I can surely bear fruit that will carry on the most exalted blood. The flower that I am will become one with the fruit and bring happiness to the people. To do so is to fulfill my greatest duty as a flower. When the time comes, I will take pride in myself at last.

“That,” she finished, “is my resolve as a consort.”

For a few moments, a hush fell over the stage.

Before long, there came the sound of applause. When Keigetsu looked up, she found that the first to start clapping had been Gyoumei. His mother shot him a look of reproach for his bad manners, to which he responded with an unabashed shrug of his shoulders. He and Kou Reirin could be so alike sometimes.

This earned a dry chuckle from Kenshuu. Perhaps of the same mind, the man seated in the center of it at all eventually joined in the applause without bothering to rebuke the prince.

Swept up in the moment, the rest of the crowd erupted into a chorus of claps. The audience seemed impressed by her clever staging that mirrored the fig’s own change in color, as well as the unique speech that had accompanied it.

Shocked to see such generous praise pouring in, Keigetsu hastily rose to her feet.

It’s nothing for me *to be proud of. It was all Kou Reirin’s idea,* she told herself as she descended the stairs, but she felt a surge of relief and excitement nonetheless.

By the time a court lady had ushered her to the waiting area assigned to the Shu clan, her heart was still pounding in her chest. Said waiting area was lined with partition screens corresponding to each clan, and the Kin, Ran, and Gen Maidens were each accompanied by their respective consort. In the case of the Kou Maiden, whose guardian had moved to the emperor’s side as the facilitator, and the Shu Maiden, whose guardian was absent altogether, their head court ladies were waiting for them in place of a consort.

“That was incredible, Lady Keigetsu! I mean it! I’m impressed! I never imagined you’d deliver such an impeccable speech under the circumstances. The extra touch with the jacket took me by surprise too,” Leelee exclaimed in a hushed voice as soon as the Maiden took her seat.

Keigetsu turned her face aside. “It wasn’t my own skill. You realize that, right? Kou Reirin came up with everything.”

“Still. See that? The other clans were totally blown away. They never thought you’d take command of the venue and push on with the rite after an accident like that.” Her delighted outburst tapering off, Leelee dropped the volume of her voice even lower. “So…Lady Reirin *is* all right, isn’t she? And you? You’re not hurt, are you?”

Her amber eyes shook ever so slightly. She assumed from the fact that Keigetsu had waltzed back in without batting an eye that nothing too terrible had happened, but even so, she couldn’t stifle her agitation.

“If this were a Maiden Court ceremony, His Highness would’ve turned the tent inside out in an instant, but none of us were allowed to interfere,” the court lady went on, chagrined.

Keigetsu averted her gaze. Her eyes were already back on the tent. “She’s fine. That should be obvious.”

In that exact moment, the entrance flap to the tent lifted, offering a glimpse of Kou Reirin’s face. Keigetsu immediately strained her eyes to get a better look.

She’s fine. She is *fine…right?*

As much as her own opportunism disgusted her, she finally felt concerned about Reirin now that she’d been released from her own source of stress. She hadn’t been hurt, nor had she seemed the least bit rattled, but there were no usable flowers, garments, or cosmetic tools left for her to work with. Keigetsu had already used the move of fudging her way through with the figs provided as snacks. How in the world was Kou Reirin planning to get through this predicament?

As she watched Reirin take a few steps out of the tent, Keigetsu furrowed her brow, dubious. In a rare display from the Kou Maiden, she appeared to be wearing a black ruqun. But Keigetsu gulped when, upon closer inspection, she realized that wasn’t the original color of the cloth but a product of various charcoal and ink stains. She hadn’t been able to tell in the dim light, but the girl’s ruqun was a complete mess.

Reirin was wearing a short, white jacket, her face hidden behind her sleeves and shawl. Yet even those were caked in soot toward the bottom.

The hem of her skirt fluttered with each step she took. Were the flecks of red she scattered in her wake blood?

A shiver running down her spine, Keigetsu rose halfway from her seat. The sentiment seemed to be shared by those around her. The sight of the prince's "butterfly" in the shabbiest attire she'd ever worn served as a reminder of just how serious the accident had been. Everyone lifted their heads to watch her, completely forgetting to bow.

Was her face unscathed under those sleeves? Was the outer robe hidden beneath her jacket even *more* sullied and damaged? No doubt she hadn't been able to apply her makeup to satisfaction under the circumstances. Would they be greeted with the sickly Maiden's ashen face or mangled skin the moment she lowered her sleeves and shawl? Each step forward Kou Reirin took, the greater the crowd's anxiety inevitably grew.

Upon assuming the stage, she leisurely strode to its center and knelt in one sigh-inducingly beautiful motion.

"I, Kou Reirin, Maiden of the Kou clan, extend my greetings to Your Imperial Majesty, the glorious emperor of Ei."

She gave a deep bow, then eventually rose to her feet, lowering her sleeves in the process. The sight she unveiled drew a loud gasp from the crowd.

Contrary to their gruesome expectations, her face laid bare looked nothing less than beautiful.

"This attire embodies what I believe a consort—a flower of the inner court—ought to be."



Though the hem of her skirt was smeared with charcoal, there wasn't a smudge to be found on the upper garment she'd hidden underneath her jacket and shawl. No—the way the stains tapered off in a gradient from the hem up to her waist almost made it look like she'd *deliberately* dyed her garment with ink. Even those alarming droplets of red turned out to be nothing more than a garnish on her gorgeous figure.

Her garment grew cleaner and cleaner as one's gaze traveled up from the floor. Above the pure white robe sat a beautiful face with skin like a fresh dusting of snow. Her makeup was light, but the crimson that accentuated the corners of her eyes and forehead like an afterthought gave her an otherworldly air of sanctity.

"Goodness… Lady Reirin tied up her hair."

What's more, rather than wear her hair down in its usual style, she had piled it high on top of her head.

To tie up one's hair and expose the nape of the neck was a sign of womanhood. Thus, as a general rule, the consorts were the only ones in the inner court to wear their hair in updos, while the Maidens kept their hair down out of respect to their own immaturity. In fact, up to that point, the self-confident Kin Seika was just about the only Maiden who had ever worn her hair up.

Yet there stood the ever humble Kou Reirin, exposing her nape for the first time atop a grand stage. The audience was astonished. Had a talentless Maiden put up her hair in a manner unbefitting her age, no doubt the crowd would have showered her in sneers for forgetting her place. In that moment, however, it was enraptured sighs that filled the square, not words of reproach.

"How resolute she is!"

It spoke to how regal Kou Reirin looked with her hair gathered up in a high bun.

Her stance was so imposing one would never have imagined it from her usual gentle demeanor. She dominated the scene with ease from a place divorced from the secular world—and she was as beautiful as a celestial maiden.

She stood onstage and smiled like a bud unfurling into a lovely blossom.

“That is to say, I am the lotus.”

It was a mystical flower that rose from the mud, unsoiled in the process.

Its stem straight as a rod, a single, pure lotus flower burst into bloom upon the stage.

How do you like that, everyone?

Keeping a smile on her lips, Reirin slowly looked out over the audience from the stage.

The emperor sat upon the throne in the center, with the empress and Gyoumei seated on either side of him. Further toward the edge sat the consorts and Maidens of each of the clans. There were the shaman, the retainers, the military officers, and the court ladies too.

Reirin overwhelmed them all as she stared at each one in turn. As she did, she studied their facial expressions without dropping her guard for a second. She looked for anyone either rattled by the sight of her dignified bearing or gnashing their teeth in frustration. Whoever behaved strangely was almost certainly the culprit who had knocked down the pillar.

I’ll be sure to pin them down, she thought with conviction.

It was then that she registered two curious figures in her sights: Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran. Or would it be more accurate to say Seika and Houshun?

The consorts were staring up at her in chagrin, while the Maidens had gone pale in the face beside them. Although she didn’t know the details of what had transpired, Reirin etched the four women’s faces into her memory.

She’d be sure to get the truth out of them sooner or later.

Of course, that was neither here nor there at the moment. There would be no flair in simply standing around, so she twirled on the spot, her shawl unfurling in the breeze. She extended her arms to the Heavens, only to spread them slowly outward.

There came a stifled cheer from the audience. Even without the actual flower in hand, the mere motion was enough to turn Reirin into a vision of a lotus blooming onstage.

Having gained complete command of the crowd, Reirin turned back to the emperor to give her speech.

Crash!

A thundering *thud* sounded from behind the stage, causing the entire audience to swivel their heads in unison.

With one of its steel pillars broken, the tent had been leaning to one side. The remaining pillars had at last crumpled under its weight, sending the whole canvas careening to the ground.

“Eeek!”

“Whoa!”

Dust swirled in the air, and a chorus of screams rang out. Just as the rite had reclaimed its proper solemnity, it seemed the proceedings had been disrupted once and for all. But then…

“Before I give my speech…”

Someone raised a dignified voice so as to pin the people in place with her words.

It was Reirin. A smile on her face, she cast a slow glance around the crowd, who had looked back to the stage the second she spoke.

She then kneeled quietly before the emperor, as if commanding all those present to calm themselves through her attitude alone. “Allow me to offer an explanation, Your Majesty.”

Determining that she couldn’t press on with the rite without first addressing the matter of the tent, she decided to explain the situation before giving the speech on her flower. Influenced by the Maiden’s solemn demeanor, the flustered audience shut their mouths and sat straight at attention.

As calm returned to the stage, Reirin bowed with her hands folded before her chest. “Earlier—and just now, as well—the tent where we awaited our turn

collapsed. I offer my most sincere apologies for startling everyone, Your Majesty in particular."

"Your apologies are unnecessary," came a voice from the throne for the first time thus far. It was a deep, calm voice—that of Gyoumei's father, Kenshuu's husband, and the emperor of the kingdom, Genyou.

Genyou was a slender man with a tranquil aura, so most who laid eyes on him would conjure images of the surface of a still lake. He had the bearing of an authoritative scholar more than a fierce emperor. Still, much like there is a certain magnitude to one who speaks the truth, he had an air of quiet gravitas.

Softening his almond-eyed gaze, he said, "Tell us what happened. I will see to it that the matter is dealt with at once."

In other words, if someone had done harm to a Maiden, he would put the rite on hold to see them apprehended. He was the highest authority in all of the kingdom, one who could upend the lives of consorts and Maidens alike with a flick of his finger. Reirin could have cowered before him, or she could have taken the opportunity to bemoan her plight.

Yet she did neither. She simply smiled wider than ever and replied, "A small miracle took place."

"Explain."

"The tent prostrated itself in the glorious presence of Your Majesty," Reirin began. When the emperor was stunned into silence in spite of himself, she indicated the tent in an elegant gesture. "Your authority is absolute, and all must bow and pay their respects in your presence. And yet, the tent stubbornly refused to kneel when the shaman began her prayer, standing steadfast even as we inside pressed our foreheads to the ground. Such utter disrespect."

Playfully cocking her head to one side, she went on, "But at long last, the stubborn steel pillars have buckled to their knees before your might. My prayers for them to lay prostrate from inside did not go unheard, I see. But the timing was rather unfortunate. As the one who prayed for the miracle, I must apologize that its rumbling came at an inconvenient time and caused a disturbance here."

The emperor was at first dismayed to hear her speak of something as crude as a tent like it was her troublemaking little brother. However, it didn't take long for him to pick up on her implication and give a small chuckle. "In short, this was no catastrophe?"

"Correct."

"Nor was it a scandal? Not even an accident?"

"How could anything so inauspicious occur during the Rite of Reverence, a ceremony performed in the presence of Your Majesty, to which even the wondrous shaman is invited? The tent prostrated itself, overcome by your virtue. That is all."

Reirin came up with a heavy-handed justification, even throwing around the shaman's name to do it. Borrowing someone else's authority was a trick she'd learned from Keigetsu during their last excursion. It was an immoral act, to be certain, but she wasn't ashamed to have added it to her repertoire.

Because no matter how inept I am, I'm still a villainess.

A villainess wouldn't choose her means. There was something almost refreshing about such greed for survival.

Narrowing her eyes, Reirin shifted her gaze. "All those who fail to show the proper respect in Your Majesty's presence must be made to bow, even if it means removing their kneecaps to do it. That's all there was to it."

The subjects of her stare were Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran.

Anyone versed in the parlance of the inner court would pick up on the hidden implication in her words: *It would be no concern of mine if the scoundrels who defiled a solemn ceremony with their schemes were sentenced to have their kneecaps crushed.*

As she lifted her gaze from the ashen faces of the consorts, Reirin slowly scanned the venue. She spotted Keigetsu pitching toward her. She saw Leelee clamping a hand over her mouth, her cheeks flushed red, and Tousetsu wearing a look of relief. There were the worried faces of Gyoumei, the Eagle Eyes' captain, and her brothers too.

Reirin met their gazes with a small smile. She made a special point of offering a little nod to Keigetsu, who was clearly on the edge of her seat.

Don't worry.

Knowing how dutiful Keigetsu was, no doubt she'd fretted over what Reirin was going to do after she'd taken the fig for herself. But it was going to be fine. Those of the Kou clan could overcome any predicament so long as they had someone to protect. They could endure any pain.

As a matter of fact, it was seeing Keigetsu at her wits' end that had helped Reirin settle on which flower to choose—on what sort of person she wanted to be.

"I wish to be the lotus that blooms in the inner court," she firmly declared as she turned back to the emperor. "A flower that breaks through the mud untainted. A strong, pure flower that blooms with sludge as its sustenance."

Jealousy. Envy. Malice. A maelstrom of ugly emotion swirled about the garden of women, always looking to claim new victims. Still, no matter how much sludge descended upon her, she would absorb it all as nourishment and bloom with composure.

No one would ever witness the disgrace of her flailing in the mud.

"However ugly a plot I may face, I will be sure to bloom into a beautiful flower. Your Majesty and your men have the affairs of the state to attend to. I shall not allow the garden behind you to become a distraction."

Back in the tent, Reirin had gone out of her way to further stain the hem of her skirt with charcoal. Meanwhile, she'd left her upper half a solid white, using the crimson squeezed from the flattened petals to paint her forehead and the corners of her eyes.

It was a way of making her point: No matter how muddy the ground near her feet, she would keep a pure, beautiful smile on her face. She would make use of even scattered coals and crushed flowers to adorn herself.

"That is my resolve as a woman in charge of the inner court—as one entrusted with her husband's back."

For the finishing touch, she flashed her most gorgeous smile yet and bowed.

The venue fell silent for a time, staggered by her presence. Even Gyoumei, who had broken the rules to vindicate Keigetsu with his applause, was too overcome with emotion to do anything but stare at her, entranced.

“Now that,” the emperor said, breaking the silence, “is quite promising.”

The smile in his voice snapped the crowd from their reverie. It was the first time the emperor, who had listened to the rest of the speeches in silence, had complimented one of the Maidens.

“Incredible!”

“There’s no one like Lady Kou Reirin.”

“She’s more than just elegant. She is the prince’s butterfly who rules over the flower gardens!”

As if to make up for the long stretch of silence, the crowd broke into an enthusiastic flurry of whispers. A round of applause no one knew who had started swelled to a crescendo in no time, and for a while, shouts of praise echoed loud enough through the square to shake the stage beneath her feet.

Keigetsu sat in her seat, waiting impatiently for Kou Reirin to descend from the stage.

What was she supposed to say? What sort of face was she supposed to make?

Excitement coursed through her whole being until she was overcome with the urge to scream. Right then, she was confident she could finally come out and say, “Thanks for saving me.”

Or would she do better to act the part of an accomplice, lifting one eyebrow and flashing a smile laden with meaning? That’s it. That was the right answer. After weathering an abominable plot to bring down their tent with nothing but their own wits, the two girls might as well have been comrades-in-arms.

Kou Reirin, you are just…

Unlike in the tent, the waiting area seats were spaced a good distance apart.

Keigetsu cleared her throat a few times and fidgeted in her seat, hoping to compete with the excited crowd for the other girl's attention. Unfortunately, no matter how long she kept at it, Reirin didn't spare her a glance.

Looking the part of a celestial maiden bedecked with an ornamental hairpin, Kou Reirin maintained a relaxed gait as she went down the stairs. The moment her foot left the bottom step, however, she gave the tiniest of wobbles. Before Keigetsu even had time to question it, Reirin headed straight for the Kou clan's waiting area and took her seat.

"Huh? Doesn't Lady Reirin look a bit tired?" asked Leelee.

"She does…"

Heedless of Keigetsu's open consternation, the first to remark upon Reirin's strange behavior directly was Tousetsu, her head court lady. "Are you all right, Lady Reirin?!"

A second person spoke up—and it wasn't who Keigetsu had been expecting. "Pardon me, Lady Reirin. Is your foot all right?"

Lo, the one to rush to Reirin's side was Kasui, whose waiting area was positioned even farther from her than Keigetsu's.

Gen Kasui?

Keigetsu was surprised to see the Maiden of the Gen clan approach Reirin out of the blue. It was true that Kasui gave off the impression of a conscientious girl despite her taciturn nature, and she *did* seem like the type to show concern for her fellow Maidens. Still, she wasn't much for socializing and spent most of her time lost in her own thoughts, so Keigetsu never would have imagined her running to the Maiden of another clan in a situation like this.

There was a rare hint of panic on Kasui's features, which were usually devoid of all expression.

"I'd say burning her to death is a bit—"

The look on her face reminded Keigetsu of the time she'd pitched forward in her seat during the Unso tea party.

Gen Kasui had reacted poorly to the idea of death by fire. Keigetsu had always

seen her as the impassive type, but perhaps even *she* had a sore spot of some kind.

Oblivious to Keigetsu's confusion, Kasui knelt near Reirin's feet, looking as upset as she ever had. "I knew it… It was difficult to tell from a distance, but the hem of your skirt is singed. Was it the coals that did it? What on earth caused that pillar to collapse?"

Keigetsu's heart raced upon hearing the words.

The hem of her skirt…got burnt?

Of course it had. Why hadn't she noticed? At the time, Reirin had shielded Keigetsu and thus taken the brunt of the coals from the brazier. Rather than shake them off right away, she'd first stopped to make sure her friend was all right.

The coals that fell on Keigetsu had only ruined her garment, but the ones that pelted Reirin had likely eaten through her robe and scorched the skin underneath.

"My, I apologize for worrying you. It's nothing serious."

Keigetsu was even more shocked to hear that, despite her abashed response, Reirin didn't deny Kasui's observation. She really *had* been burned.

"We're both alive and well. We're not even bleeding."

That's right. She'd said that she "wasn't bleeding," not that she wasn't hurt.

With no concern to how Keigetsu sat there stunned, Reirin and Kasui carried on with their conversation.

"You shouldn't downplay a burn. It can become quite serious. You ought to get medical attention from the apothecary at once."

"Goodness, Lady Kasui, you're overreacting. The truth is, I happen to be in possession of some miracle hemp. There's nothing to worry about."

"Miracle hemp?"

"Oh, erm… I suppose it's not a household name. It's an herb effective at combating infection, and in my experience, it's even more potent than cassia."

Kasui had always been as aloof as any other Gen woman. Was she being so talkative now because she was conversing with Kou Reirin? Maybe she had a unique aversion to burns?

Or was that the normal reaction, and *Keigetsu* was the only one too stupid to notice Reirin's burns until now?

"I'm surprised by the breadth of your herbal knowledge."

"I've been sickly since I was a little girl, so it's only natural that I've become an expert. I've discovered some new medicinal properties while experimenting with everything I had on hand, but when it comes down to it, it was all a product of chance."

Reirin went on speaking serenely.

Indeed—she could converse with anyone in a friendly manner.

She had no shortage of talented friends with fine personalities. She didn't need to waste her time talking to a nuisance of a deadweight like Keigetsu.

"I thank you for your concern, Lady Kasui, but we are in the midst of the rite. Please return to your seat."

Just as she urged Kasui to head back, Reirin spared Keigetsu a glance at last. Her gaze held a smile.

"The first trial turned out to be quite a fun one."

It was clearly meant for Keigetsu's ears. Yet her friend couldn't bring herself to respond with the smile of an accomplice.

I can't believe this.

Why? Because the calf to which Tousetsu scrambled to press a cloth had looked red and swollen.

As if the girl's snow-white skin wasn't easily damaged as it stood.

As if the slightest of stimuli wasn't all it took to bring on a fever that could see her collapse on the spot.

"You'll be all right."

"You'll do fine."

Keigetsu couldn’t count the number of times Reirin had said those words to encourage her.

Yet the girl in question hadn’t been “all right” in the least.

I can’t believe this…

Something tingled in the depths of her heart. Keigetsu wasn’t sure what to call the numb sensation.

Knowing that a trembling voice might escape her lips if she weren’t careful, she kept her mouth fixed into a thin line.

“My, that girl has the devil’s own luck. And she threatened me with her gaze, didn’t she? What a she-devil she’s turned out to be. So much for a ‘butterfly.’”

Meanwhile, from her seat in the Kin clan’s waiting area a short distance away, the Pure Consort clicked her tongue in the shadow of her fan.

“It’s too bad we couldn’t finish her off today. Security is bound to get tighter. You’d best not try anything during the second trial tomorrow. Got it, Seika?”

“…”

For her part, Seika didn’t say a word, her gorgeous face as pale as ever. Her eyes were glued to the brief glimpse she’d gotten of Reirin’s painfully swollen calf.

“Gracious, my little Houshun! That was quite the bold move. Knowing how sly you are, I’d assumed you’d try something like poisoning her cosmetics. You certainly took me by surprise with this one.”

The Ran consort, Hourin, was likewise whispering in her Maiden’s ear from behind her fan.

“But you took it too far, you little idiot. Tomorrow, let’s prioritize getting our claws into the judges. Why, the nerve to threaten *me*! That Kou Reirin is quite the villainess.”

The consort’s malicious mutterings and her Maiden’s staunch silence were

the spitting image of the Kin clan duo.

Noting the other's behavior, both consorts looked up in unison. The moment they locked gazes, the pair exchanged a couple of phony smiles.

"This is turning out to be quite the tumultuous Rite of Reverence, isn't it, Virtuous Consort Ran?"

"Indeed it is, Pure Consort Kin. My heart goes out to Her Majesty as the facilitator. I can only hope tomorrow's trial will proceed without a hitch."

"You said it."

The vixen and the raccoon dog were locked in a battle to outfox one another. Still, when it came to their desire to dethrone the empress at the first opportunity, the two women were on exactly the same page.

"Was Lady Reirin's foot all right, Kasui?"

"Yes."

In the Gen clan's waiting area, the consort and her Maiden conversed without bothering to make eye contact, maintaining perfect posture as they sat in their chairs.

"Her gentle appearance notwithstanding, Lady Reirin is the type to grin and bear it, much like the empress herself. If the Kin vixen and the Ran raccoon dog have no interest in showing her consideration, shall the Gen clan send her some cassia? We can order Shin-u to see it delivered."

"No." Kasui tersely turned down the Worthy Consort's suggestion. "It seems she has no need for it."

Her hard, black eyes were fixed on Reirin.

"She knows of miracle hemp."

For all the times they had been likened to a starry winter sky, a boundless fire now raged within Kasui's eyes.

Chapter 3:
Reirin Takes a Dip

HAVE YOUR BURNS HEALED at all since last I wrote?

I've grown accustomed to life here in the imperial capital. Thus far I've only been to the Palace of the Darkest Edge, where the Worthy Consort lives, but since I'm here I'd like to look around wherever I'm permitted.

The inner court is adorned with all manner of magnificent furnishings, and each step I take is enough to draw a fresh sigh of wonder. There's quite a bit of inspiration to be taken from the sophisticated designs, so I'd like to get a peek at the pottery or embroidery units, if I'm able.

Speaking of getting a peek, I hear the shaman is visiting the main palace for a rite. Word has it that she possesses powers of the divine and has performed countless miracles. As a fellow woman, I take pride in the fact that she has served the kingdom for so long regardless of gender. I'd love to hear what she has to say. I pray that I, too, can eventually be of service to the nation as one of its Maidens.

The women of the inner court, court ladies included, are all so glamorous and full of life. I am constantly reminded that this is no place for a social recluse of a Gen woman. Nevertheless, I have little choice but to fulfill my solemn duty and cultivate the talents the Great Ancestor has bestowed upon me.

Though I am a poor speaker, I enjoy imprinting all manner of objects with the designs that pop to my mind. I can only hope that one of my creations will someday provide comfort to His Highness. We of the Gen clan are warriors skilled at forging our weapons, but in a sense, we could be considered a clan of even more superlative craftsmen than the Kins.

I will create a dazzling work of gold instead of forging an iron sword and, in doing so, shine a light on the people's hearts.

Granted, I cannot say if that would meet our clan's expectations.

I know you detest our parents for their ruthlessness and ambition, but I believe they have wishes and worries of their own. Hence, I'd like to do all that I can as our Maiden.

This has turned into a rather lengthy letter. I'll write again soon, so be a good girl until then.

Love,

Your Big Sister

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The second trial of the Rite of Reverence began with a much more solemn atmosphere than the previous day.

This was in part because, instead of getting abducted straight out of bed, the girls had arrived at the designated space in full formal dress. However, the biggest reason of all was that security had been tightened in light of the previous day's cave-in. Since a major ceremony was still in progress, any sort of large-scale investigation was to be put on hold for the time being, but the number of guards had been doubled so as not to allow any more unforeseen disasters.

In particular, to ensure that none of them took a plunge into the surrounding waters, the emperor and his accompanying shaman and retainers were surrounded by a several-layered human wall of military officers and Eagle Eyes.

Indeed—the second trial was being held in the innermost depths of the main palace, at the water's edge of the Violet Dragon's Spring.

The Violet Dragon's Spring was a small spring tucked away behind a series of forests and waterfalls. Legend had it that its surface was as clear as a mirror and reflected the truth, and that its water held the power to heal all wounds in an instant. It was the sacred ground a sage was said to have bequeathed unto the kingdom once upon a time.

Hence, that day, the shaman's seat was placed even higher than that of the empress (who was the facilitator), and she offered a prayer to the god of purity enshrined in the spring prior to the opening address.

Shamans were the only officially ordained priests in all of Ei, where the imperial family was worshipped as the descendants of the dragon.

In the beginning, it was said that the entire continent, including the Kingdom of Ei, was spun from the breath of the Great Ancestor. The once-solitary god had added the god of agriculture and the god of mortality to his ranks, and the pantheon gave birth to humanity to relieve their boredom. The gods sent a dragon to the earth to serve as their guide, whose descendants became the

imperial family.

As those of the dragon's bloodline, the imperial family wielded power that rivaled the gods in the form of their dragon's qi, but from time to time, there emerged those among the masses who could hear the voices of the divine. These were people whose untainted souls allowed them to communicate with the gods—in other words, those in possession of the divine gift.

Those were the shamans.

Most shamans served in shrines dedicated to the Great Ancestor, and there was no distinction made between men and women. They were quasi-bureaucrats who belonged to the Department of Divinities in charge of divine rituals, and their duties included predicting fortunes and offering prayers at ceremonies.

The old woman currently reciting a prayer by the water's edge was an experienced shaman who had served the main palace for more than thirty years. Her name was Anni. She covered her mouth with a white cloth so as not to breathe upon the earth formed by the Great Ancestor. Wearing a headdress embroidered with an intricate pattern and a small mirror around her neck, she had a unique sense of presence and sanctity.

As she rattled off a prayer in her raspy voice, an imposing aura radiating from her petite form, the whole audience—Maidens included—bowed their heads and focused their minds.

My! Just look at all the lovely ice needles that have formed. How satisfying would it feel to crunch one underfoot?

Well, not quite. One person in attendance was the very picture of happy-go-lucky.

Kou Reirin, the girl known for her irreproachable conduct, was making such idle observations about the grounds of the Violet Dragon's Spring beneath her solemn expression. As Shu Keigetsu and Leelee already knew, while Reirin's delicate good looks gave her an air of elegance, her true nature was rather down-to-earth and primitive.

Today, too, as she languidly lowered her long lashes and pretended to listen

to the prayer in earnest, she was actually lost in carefree thought on the inside.

I've never been to the Violet Dragon's Spring before. I didn't realize it was such a lovely place so rich in nature. Part of the water's surface is frozen over… Would it be possible to go fishing for pond smelt, I wonder? I suppose there aren't any fish.

As she kowtowed in the direction of the spring, she got caught up in thoughts of fishing.

Oh… There's a yuzu tree. The fruit is starting to change color, I see. Perhaps I should climb the tree later and pick a few fruits from the branches.

While she paid her respects to the forest, she hatched a secret plan to harvest the fruit on its trees.

Unfortunately, whenever she wasn't in Keigetsu's body, she could only execute one or two of every ten plans she conceived. Precisely because her body was such a burden, she hoped to at least be free to let her mind run wild. With her leg still aching from its burn, she spent more time than ever imagining herself stretching her wings and prancing about.

Ah… I've finally gotten a chance to live on my own for a time, yet I ended up spending all of yesterday mixing herbs. What a sad state of affairs.

Once the first trial of the Rite of Reverence had ended and she'd returned to her guesthouse in the Palace of the Golden Qilin, she'd been assailed with a wave of the pain she'd been doing her best to ignore. It was only a light burn, but in Reirin's case, leaving even the most minor of symptoms untreated was a recipe for a high-grade fever. She'd had no choice but to brew antibiotic and fever-reducing herbs as a precaution, and before she knew it, the day had come to a close.

As a consequence, she'd missed her chance to ask Houshun about the true meaning of what she'd said or to interrogate Seika about what had transpired.

The one thing I know is that the Pure Consort and the Virtuous Consort were both behaving suspiciously, she thought as she kept her head hung in ongoing prayer.

The poison in her liquid face paint and the collapse of the pillar had both

clearly been traps targeting Reirin. Keigetsu had wondered why these things always happened to *her*, but in reality, it was more likely she'd just gotten caught in the crossfire. Of course, that in itself was the hardest part to stomach.

Much as it frustrates me to have dragged down a hard worker like Lady Keigetsu…now that security has been increased, I'm sure they'll avoid making any rash moves for the time being.

As a general rule, Reirin grew livid with rage whenever someone important to her came under attack, but she couldn't have cared less about becoming a target herself. After all, living in fear of an attack was nothing but a waste of strength—she merely had to dodge the assault when it came and strike back at her assailant. She had both the fighting spirit and luck to ward off all harm.

What matters most is that I take care not to let Lady Keigetsu get caught in the middle of it again.

Reirin was quite concerned for her friend, who, in contrast to her own strong luck, always seemed to draw the short end of the stick. Just as Keigetsu herself had once said, the girl certainly seemed prone to casting herself into the throes of misfortune. To this point, she'd somehow ended up shouldering a great deal of the crises Reirin herself had been meant to face.

Upon casting Keigetsu a sideways glance, she found her friend's expression stiff and her spirits low. That dejected look had been stuck on her face ever since the previous trial, and Reirin had grown concerned that something was weighing on her mind. She'd hoped to sit down and have a proper conversation with Keigetsu yesterday, but her burns had prevented her from doing so.

"Now then, Maidens. Allow me to reveal the second trial of the Rite of Reverence."

While Reirin was engrossed in her various thoughts, the ritual prayer came to an end, and Empress Kenshuu at last stepped out before the Maidens. Perhaps because she was standing before the emperor and his vassals, or perhaps due to the "miracle" of the tent's collapse the other day, she wore a stony-faced expression.

Kenshuu explained the task in an austere tone, as befitting one with the rank of empress. "Respect for the gods and ancestors is an indispensable quality in a

consort. Thus, your next task is to dedicate a commemorative art to the shrine of the sacred Violet Dragon's Spring. You are free to write a verse, paint a picture, or produce a combination of both."

When the empress gave the signal, a gaggle of main palace court ladies with their faces obscured gracefully carried over a few small tables stocked with brushes and inkstones.

They were permitted to paint before the emperor, or they could face the spring and brandish their brush with a prayer in their heart. The ultimate objective was to pick whatever spot they desired near the water's edge and finish their piece before a stick of incense burned out.

There was only a single sheet spread out over each table. Toward the bottom of the high-end, glossy rice paper, there was a pattern identical to that on the shaman's headdress stamped in some sort of dark red pigment that resembled vermillion ink.

"Once you've completed your work, you are to show it to His Majesty before handing it to the shaman to present to the shrine. Know that your finished product will be offered to the god of purity that dwells within the Violet Dragon's Spring, and draw your strokes with care. Furthermore, the emblem on the paper is a holy symbol impressed by the shaman herself. Do not touch it under any circumstances."

In short, this was one of the calligraphy and painting competitions that had been so common in past Rites of Reverence, with a test of their religious faith as an added twist.

A commemorative art differed somewhat from the typical ink wash paintings that tended to adorn hanging scrolls. There was a much stronger element of prayer involved. For instance, one might add a light effect to the painting to honor the Great Ancestor's majesty, or the artwork could be accompanied by a story or poem.

In this particular instance, with the Maidens having been instructed to commemorate the Violet Dragon's Spring, the most elegant approach might be to paint a clear spring and supplement it with a psalm. Those without confidence in their painting skills could stick to writing something, and those

without confidence in their writing skills could stick to painting.

Each Maiden nodded her head in understanding of the task at hand, then set out along the banks of the Violet Dragon's Spring in search of the perfect spot. A sunny patch where their fingers wouldn't be in danger of freezing, or above all else, a place with a good view to better capture the qualities of the spring was most desirable.

It was at this point that Reirin attempted to call out to Keigetsu, but the moment the Shu Maiden noticed as much, she looked away and briskly departed the scene. Reirin was sorely tempted to chase her friend down and fondle her to bits, but upon realizing the Shu Maiden might be immersed in the assignment, she hesitated to distract her.

Instead, she looked to see if she could detain Houshun or Seika for questioning, but they had already moved along. Determined to rein them in as soon as she saw them next, Reirin gave up and decided to fulfill the task at hand. She took a look around the spring and quickly settled on a spot.

Since this wasn't a contest of precision, Reirin wasn't all that concerned with finding a place with a good view. After setting up her table and inkstone in a sunny spot where she could relax, she went for a walk around the area with the outward excuse that she wanted to "get her thoughts in order." She simply *had* to savor this opportunity to experience the joys of nature unaccompanied.

She crunched the frost underfoot to her heart's content, then picked a yuzu fruit and savored its fragrance.

Once she was feeling a little tired, she returned to her table and leisurely readied her brush. She had yet to so much as grind her ink, but it wasn't like she was playing around. She was simply twirling her brush to keep her hands busy as she carefully worked over her concept.

She wasn't playing around. Certainly not.

Oh no! I wasted too much time playing around. Pull yourself together, Reirin. As a Maiden, you must take this rite seriously… Speaking of getting serious, I wonder if I could crack the ice if I threw a stone at the spring with all my might…

She attempted to focus, only to find herself distracted by trivial matters.

After all, there were no court ladies around to exclaim, “That’s dangerous!” as soon as she came close to the spring, nor was her cousin there to say, “What are you doing, Reirin?” and stop her the moment she started searching for a rock. It was only natural, then, that she’d want to chuck stones against the thin sheet of ice and enjoy its music, or even set a single shoe onto its surface.

There was still time to spare, judging by the stick of incense burning beside the emperor. Nodding to herself, Reirin compromised by picking up her brush and paper before going for yet another walk around the spring. She wanted to find a spot where the ice was particularly thick.

It was then that she heard a screech coming from an overhanging of rocks near the water’s edge. “I *told* you to get me a fresh sheet of paper!”

The one yelling at the court ladies was none other than Keigetsu. Her table was set out near her feet, and it looked like she’d already begun her calligraphy work.

Unfortunately, she appeared to have spilled ink on her paper.

“My fingers are so cold that my hand slipped. I want to start over. Go fetch me some new paper.”

“The paper used for the commemorative art is a special one blessed by the shaman in advance. Don’t you see the holy emblem? As such, there *are* no extras,” one of the court ladies who had laid out her table responded, curt.

“We were told not to touch the holy emblem, but no one said anything about there being no spare paper!” Keigetsu did her best to plead her case, but the veiled court ladies swiftly turned on their heels, demonstrating not a hint of sympathy for her. “Hold on! Wait! It’s *your* fault for not preparing a backup!”

“Lady Keigetsu?”

As Keigetsu stamped her feet in frustration, Reirin called out to her from behind. The other girl turned around with a start, only to avert her gaze just as quickly.

Smiling and doing her best not to provoke Keigetsu, Reirin extended a hand toward her. “Are you in need of a spare sheet of paper? If you’d like—”

“Leave me alone.” Keigetsu batted away the offered hand hard enough to make a crisp *smack*. “This has nothing to do with you.”

“But, Lady Keigetsu…”

Reirin went wide-eyed in spite of herself, at which Keigetsu pulled her lips into a cruel smirk. “Why did you come here? Were you worried about me? Well, aren’t *you* relaxed? Right, whether I spill my ink or mess up my poem, I suppose it has no bearing on the girl who’s already claimed the top rank.”

Apparently, she was in a bad mood. She was being decidedly belligerent.

What differentiated this from past instances was that she didn’t look Reirin in the eye and fix her with a glare as she insulted her. Half of her loathing was directed at Reirin, but the other half was likely directed at herself for not reining in her aggressive impulses. Upon closer inspection, her eyes were tearing up like she was at her breaking point.

“Lady Keigetsu.”

“You want to lend me a hand again? Pass. I can’t stomach that phony, pushy personality of yours.”

“Lady Keigetsu, listen.”

“Oh, or did you come to laugh at me? You heard me screaming, so you came to see the show. Fair enough! There’s no boost to the ego quite like watching someone wretched—”

“Here.” When Keigetsu persisted in her ramblings, Reirin cut her off by shoving something she’d fished from her sleeves into the girl’s hands. “You can have this.”

“Huh?” Keigetsu scowled and looked down at her hand, only to go goggle-eyed at what she found there. “What is this?!”

“A cursed doll. Please think of it as a good luck charm.”

The item Reirin had pushed onto her was a wooden doll carved in the shape of a baby girl. The length of its body was jabbed with needles.

“A c-c-cursed doll?!”

“As I just said, it’s a good luck charm. I once received this doll from Leelee, and I’ve treasured it ever since. It’s adorable, a comforting presence, and an excellent needle holder. If you walk around with *this* on your person, you’ll never have cause to worry if your robe frays. Besides,” Reirin added with a bashful smile, “the truth is, I moved the needles around yesterday while thinking of you. I pushed them into acupuncture points that help to relieve depression. Take a jab at yourself using this as your model, and you’ll be sure to find some peace of mind. So it’ll be all right! You needn’t be so frustrated!”

“*None* of that sounds all right!” Keigetsu exclaimed before she could stop herself, then slumped her head as soon as she realized what she’d done.

Here she’d been wrestling with a sensitive inner conflict regarding Reirin, but this ridiculous exchange made her feel like her worries had been pointless. Standing before this smiling girl who defied her every expectation, she found herself deflated enough to wonder what on earth she’d been so upset about.

No matter how much I agonize, insult her, or cause trouble, it’s all just a “love bite” as far as she’s concerned.

Her magnanimity—or simplicity, rather—served to alleviate Keigetsu’s abundance of guilt.

“Forget it,” she muttered listlessly. There was a note of exasperation in her tone, but none of the bite from moments ago.

“Did you spoil your paper?” Reirin asked once more.

This time, Keigetsu opted to be honest. “Yeah. I have no talent for painting, so I thought I’d write a long poem. But I was so flustered that I dropped my brush… I can’t believe I managed to ruin it before I even wrote the first letter.”

There were blots of ink scattered all across the top of the paper Keigetsu was pointing to. It wouldn’t be possible to cut off only the smudged part. The paper was emblazoned with the holy emblem, so she couldn’t swap it out for a different sheet either.

“I thought about integrating the smudges into my letters, but I started getting frustrated when I couldn’t figure out a way to make it work. The court ladies were no help.”

Feeling ashamed of herself, Keigetsu unconsciously tightened her grip on the hem of her garment.

“Oh dear,” said Reirin, as if this were no big deal. “Then you ought to switch papers with me.”

“I couldn’t!” Keigetsu protested.

Reirin placed a hand to her cheek, a blank look on her face. “Whyever not? I don’t mind using a sheet of paper with ink splattered across it. In fact, that would suit my purposes better.”

“It would *what*?! Liar. You don’t have to go that far to cover for me.”

“I was planning to paint a picture in the first place, and I hoped to depict a splash along the surface of the spring. The ink splattered across the page is just what I was envisioning.”

It was vital for ink wash paintings to be drawn in a natural and effortless manner, but it would’ve been difficult to depict a water spray in a way that didn’t look calculated. Reirin claimed that, from her perspective, a “spray” formed by a fluke would be ideal and she would be most grateful if she were allowed to use it.

“Seriously? You’re going to draw a splash in such still waters? You better not be saying that for my sake.”

“Too much realism in art takes all the fun out of it. This is the spring in which the dragon dwells. If the point is to honor his glory, don’t you think the god of purity would appreciate a more dynamic illustration? I’d rather make a splash!”

There was a bit too much enthusiasm in her explanation to write it off as an attempt to not worry a friend. Needless to say, it was a good deal for Keigetsu, so she ultimately decided to take her at her word and accept the offer.

“Well, in that case…I’ll take you up on that.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Oh, but as a warning, I scented my paper with a touch of yuzu. I apologize if you dislike the smell or if it’s harder to write on as a result.”

“You scented it?”

“Yes. The ink used for the holy emblem must be a special kind. Its scent was bothering me, so I attempted to mask the smell.”

“Oh? Your senses must be sharp.”

Though Keigetsu hadn’t picked up on the scent of the emblem’s ink, when she brought her nose close to the paper and took a whiff, she could indeed get the zesty smell of citrus wafting from the page.

Reirin had soaked the sheet in yuzu juice on a whim, thinking, *If we’re going to the trouble of offering this at the shrine, I might as well make it something even more certain to please the god of purity*. Even that small, thoughtful gesture confronted Keigetsu with the difference between the two of them.

“If anything, it’s a perk,” Keigetsu mumbled as they traded papers, frustrated with her own inability to come out and express her gratitude.

But when Reirin once again tried to throw the doll into the deal, the other Maiden pushed it firmly back into her hands. “No thanks.”

“Hm? You needn’t hold back on my account. This doll will be sure to bring you happiness in both body and soul. As one well versed in your character and physique, I’ve been careful to select the points that—”

“Please stop, I’m getting the creeps! Plus, if the shaman sees this, we could be executed for possession of a magic tool. Just put it away.”

Reirin’s face fell at the firm rejection. “How could you say that? Yes, perhaps it might *look* like a cursed item at a glance, but surely the wondrous shaman could see that it holds nothing but virtuous wishes for a friend’s good health.”

“Who could possibly see that?!” Keigetsu cut down her argument in a single stroke, then lifted the corners of her mouth in a sardonic smile. “Besides, that old woman who claims to be a shaman doesn’t have a trace of the divine gift. She may have everyone else fooled, but not me.”

It seemed getting her hands on a fresh sheet of paper had restored her composure to the point of sneering upon those she didn’t like.

“Really?”

“Really. Gosh, I guess the average person can’t even tell *that* much.” Keigetsu

puffed up with pride, her mood improving when Reirin's eyes went round with surprise. "Listen here. There are two main types of power that surpass human understanding: the dragon's qi and the divine gift."

This was the sort of knowledge Keigetsu had acquired through self-study.

The dragon's qi was a gift the Great Ancestor had bestowed upon the kingdom's founder—who was said to have been a dragon—and as such, it was passed down only through the imperial bloodline. Its strength had faded over the ages, but it had once been a mighty power that could control both the weather and the human heart at will.

The divine gift, meanwhile, was the ability to communicate with the Great Ancestor, innate to those with pure souls such as priests and priestesses. They could listen to the voice of the gods to divine fortunes, sometimes even borrowing the gods' power to perform miracles.

Incidentally, the Daoist arts were a discipline devoted to acquiring the divine gift by balancing the forces of yin and yang through rituals and incantations. However, the previous emperor had placed a ban on the arts, claiming that it was impious for those with impure souls to attempt to gain the divine gift—in other words, a power on par with that of the Great Ancestor—for their own selfish gains. The Daoist arts were equated to dark sorcery, and the powers gained from them were dubbed "magic" as opposed to "the divine gift."

Yet the way Keigetsu saw it, regardless of whether they were innate and no matter what they were called, the powers were no different from the divine gift once acquired. The only difference between shamans and cultivators was whether they had developed their divine gift early on under the supervision of the state or acquired it later in life through clandestine efforts.

If she had to guess, that former emperor simply hadn't wanted people going around obtaining powers akin to his dragon's qi at their own discretion and out of his sight.

"Goodness. Does that mean you and the shaman—or Lady Anni, rather—both possess the same power?"

"We *would*, if she were the real deal. But as far as I could tell from listening to that prayer, she doesn't have a shred of the divine gift. I bet she's bluffed her

way through her career performing plausible enough rituals, divining plausible enough fortunes, and reciting plausible enough prayers," Keigetsu spat, recalling how arrogantly Anni had looked down upon the Maidens throughout the rite.

During the opening prayer, she'd been too caught up in her irritation with Reirin to care, but on further reflection, it was annoying to have an old hag who didn't even possess the power required of her position judging her performances.

"But Lady Anni's fortunes often come true, and she's performed numerous miracles with her wealth of knowledge about medicinal herbs. Hence why His Majesty has held her in such respect for all these years."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. I'd wager he's kept her close out of habit because she's handy to have around. Besides, if reverence for her divine gift is what's allowed that shaman to hold on to her job, her glory days are coming to an end."

"Why?"

"The imperial palace *has* the real deal now: Prince Gyoumei," Keigetsu replied, her voice filled with true reverence. "His Highness's dragon's qi is the genuine article. When it comes down to it, both Daoist magic and the divine gift are little more than cheap imitations of the dragon's qi. I'm a practitioner, so I understand how incredible his aura is. With a real deal like him around, it won't be long before she's exposed as a bogus holder of the divine gift."

At that, Reirin glanced up and let out a small gasp, but Keigetsu was too busy sneering to notice.

"Um, Lady Keigetsu—"

"She can act big while she's still under His Majesty's patronage, but it's all over for her once His Highness takes the throne. I mean, who needs shamans anymore? He can perform his *own* miracles with his dragon's qi."

"E-erm, Lady Keigetsu, let's stop talking about this…"

"I bet she's panicking on the inside. If she doesn't have the divine gift, she'll have to get by on her political clout. Ooh, from that angle, maybe her pompous

attitude is all a bluff to keep people from looking down on her."

She knew it made her nasty, but Keigetsu loved disparaging people behind their backs. It was just plain fun, and it made her feel better about herself.

Just as she'd broken into a grin and begun to relax, she heard someone abruptly clear their throat behind her, startling her enough to make her jump. "Eep!"

When she turned around, the muscles of her face went tauter than ever.

The very shaman in question—Anni—had come right up behind her.

She wasn't sure how much of their conversation the shaman had overheard, but judging by the steely look in her eyes, she'd at least caught the bad-mouthing toward the end.

"I'm sorry," Reirin awkwardly murmured from behind Keigetsu. The apology wasn't directed at the shaman but at Keigetsu for failing to stop her.

Keigetsu herself had gone white as a sheet, all her earlier bravado nowhere to be found. She made the excuse to herself that she'd only spoken the truth, but her mind was swirling with belated concerns about whether this would damage her evaluation.

To make matters worse, she always *had* been weak to those in power.

"O Keigetsu, Maiden of the Shu clan…" Anni began in a dark, raspy voice.

Was she about to denounce Keigetsu out of spite? Was she going to disqualify her from the judging process, claiming a composition by such a foul-natured girl wasn't worth appraising?

Yet contrary to Keigetsu's expectations, Anni cast a sudden glance toward the Heavens and muttered, "Divine punishment shall befall you."

"Huh?"

The woman went on to threaten her in a solemn tone of voice. "I see a vision of foul flames shooting across the sacred spring. O arrogant little girl who casts doubt on the divine gift—*you* shall invite ill omen upon this sacred rite."

Though Anni's voice was brittle, it carried well and resounded with a

mysterious sort of force. People turned to look at her, startled, and it was clear to see that their subsequent whispers were spreading the ominous prophecy like wildfire—all the way to the other Maidens seated at their distant tables, the court ladies, and the emperor.

Yet the subject of the threat only stared back at her blankly. Keigetsu feared curses because she knew they were real, but for that same reason, she wasn't the least bit scared of hexes uttered by a phony shaman.

"Ex*cuse* me?"

"Hear this: The Great Ancestor sees all. Repent and seek forgiveness for your sins."

With that, the shaman turned back from whence she came, leaving Keigetsu with a vacant look in her eyes. The Maiden was most afraid that she'd tattle to the emperor, but Anni instead plopped down upon the earth without making a single accusation. She closed her eyes, ostensibly in meditation.

"Erm… That was a threat, wasn't it?" Reirin nervously ventured from behind her friend.

Keigetsu nodded back with a conflicted look. "Yeah. Though I'm sure it was just a bluff." At length, she gave a shrug of her shoulders. "She doesn't have the gift of prophecy."

A made-up curse wouldn't work on her. It was no different from someone yelling, "Everyone who makes fun of me should stub their little toe on a dresser!" It would've hurt a lot more if she'd refused to conduct her evaluation, so Keigetsu counted her lucky stars that the old woman wasn't the type to go for more pragmatic attacks.

That was her impression of the whole encounter.

I'm glad it ended with a childish threat.

At least, that was what she believed at the time.

The moment the incense stick ran its course, gongs sounded all around the Violet Dragon's Spring. The noise signaled the Maidens to take their finished

compositions and head back one by one to where the emperor awaited them by the water's edge.

"Line up in the order you finished and present your commemorative art to His Majesty."

At Empress Kenshuu's command, the Maidens lined up and went down on their knees, holding out their finished products with both hands. Thus did they wait for the emperor, shaman, and retainers to come inspect their work.

The Maidens couldn't conceal their trepidation at the prospect of having the kingdom's highest authority come within point-blank range. Or perhaps their limbs trembled because kneeling and holding out both arms was quite the physically taxing pose for a group of heavily clad girls.

This pose is rather tough on the biceps, I can tell. My muscles are rejoicing.

In the midst of it all, Reirin was as laid-back as ever. The emperor had doted on her since she was a little girl, so she'd shown him much cruder letters and drawings than this in the past. It also helped that he was the sort of man who—as one might guess from his mild demeanor—would appraise how much thought and care had gone into a work over its technique, so Reirin wasn't nervous in the least.

If anything, she was exhilarated to see her arm muscles being tested in the smallest of ways.

I'm glad Lady Keigetsu finished in time too.

Casting a glance to her right, she saw that Keigetsu, who had returned just as the gongs had ceased to ring—in other words, she was the last one to make it back—held out her piece with trembling hands. She seemed quite nervous, but Reirin was relieved to see that she'd at least finished writing her poem.

I was worried she would lose her composure after the shaman threatened her…but she doesn't seem the least bit bothered. What a curious girl.

She almost giggled as the thought crossed her mind. Keigetsu was easily frightened, and she always jumped to imagining the worst-case scenario the moment anything went wrong, raising a big fuss about how she was going to be killed or tortured. Thus, Reirin had feared that she'd start shaking and crying

when the shaman fixed her with a glare, but she appeared to be shockingly unfazed.

Keigetsu had once locked herself in her room just because Tousetsu had alluded to torturing her with insects, yet now she was completely unperturbed by the shaman's threat disguised as a curse. Reirin struggled to comprehend how she could be so cowardly and so bold at the same time.

But that was precisely what fascinated her.

She's such an interesting girl. I'm so blessed to have her as a friend.

She reflected on how deeply she loved Keigetsu.

Reirin could only hope that the efforts of her clumsy, earnest companion would someday be appreciated by those around her. The days she'd spent toiling to help her friend find acceptance had been some of the most wonderful and rewarding she could imagine.

I don't care who goes after me. But I won't allow anyone to harm Lady Keigetsu.

Still cast downward, Reirin's eyes flitted to her left.

In order from first to last were Ran Houshun, Kin Seika, and Gen Kasui. Neither the two girls on Reirin's radar nor Kasui displayed any malice of note; all three Maidens held out their calligraphic works with solemn expressions.

"M-may it please Your Imperial Majesty… The surface of the Violet Dragon's Spring is as clear as a mirror, and a gentle breeze blows across the sacred grounds. I have written a poem in honor of its majestic beauty. I pray you find it to your liking."

Houshun, the first to present, had written a poem celebrating the beauty of the spring. It was on the short side, but she had utilized the blank space in a striking way, and it was clear even from a distance how elegant the brushwork was.

"'*The still water's surface melds with the Great Purity—the raging water's surface becomes one with the skies.*' I see. This single stanza conveys quite the majestic landscape." The emperor seemed to unconsciously read the words

aloud as his eyes ran over the page. His gaze then softened a touch. “This is quite the powerful poem from a Maiden of such small stature. Excellent work.”

In lieu of hiding her face behind her sleeves, Houshun buried it in the paper and bowed her head low. “I…I am honored to receive your praise.”

“Each brushstroke is brimming with piety. I’m certain the god of purity will be pleased.” The shaman likewise nodded with satisfaction as she took the rice paper from Houshun.

Evidently, the emperor was in charge of evaluating whether the compositions were exceptional works of art, while the shaman was in charge of evaluating the level of faith they conveyed.

“May it please Your Imperial Majesty, I have painted the frozen surface of the lake and the clear stream that runs beneath it.”

Next up was Seika, who presented a painting accompanied by a short poem.

The poem read, *“The warmth beneath the water’s frozen surface keeps the fish swimming.”* Her writing wasn’t as skillful as her dances, but her painting had all the aesthetic the Kin clan prided itself on.

“I see. The waters take the form of sharp ice to stand strong against the outside cold while offering warmth to the fish that dwell within. You saw the ideal form of a monarch in the spring. The subject matter is well thought out.” The emperor nodded, quick to pick up on her intended meaning.

Seika prostrated herself, exuding unbridled pride. “I am honored.”

Once again, the shaman nodded and said, “The god of purity will be pleased,” as she accepted Seika’s painting.

“May it please Your Imperial Majesty, before the grandeur of the Violet Dragon’s Spring’s, man becomes one with nature and is lost for words. Thus, I have painted exactly what it is I see.”

Kasui presented a painting without a poem.

The lines of the painting were few, and at a first glance, it even looked somewhat dreary. An uneducated observer might have come to the wrong conclusion that she had scribbled a rough sketch for lack of time. However, its

very minimalist style and the lack of accompanying words did wonders to stimulate the viewer's imagination.

It was as if each and every one of its scant lines was filled with infinite meaning. The way the painting evoked both reticence and a quiet passion at once made it the perfect likeness of a Gen woman.

"You understand the essence of painting well," came the emperor's short review.

Upon accepting the artwork, Anni gave a quiet nod and said, "Splendid work."

"May it please Your Imperial Majesty, our brushwork on this occasion is to be offered to the god of purity. As such, I prepared both a painting and poem to express my gratitude to the deity who provides us clean water."

Yet the biggest gasps of admiration came when it was Reirin's turn. The emperor, shaman, and vassals alike all stopped in their tracks to gaze in wonder at her painting, which was sprawled generously across the entire sheet of paper.

"Oho…"

Its flowing lines depicted the spring, the rocky terrain, and lush greenery. Though it only used shades of black ink, somehow the texture of the icy spring surface and the hues of the leaves as they glistened and reflected the winter sunlight seemed to leap off the page. In particular, the glittering droplets of water extending from one part of the spring—indeed, it looked like a sheet of spray, not blots of ink—seemed to allude to the path of the dragon as they sprang up from the water's surface toward the skies.

In just the right place in the margins, there was a traditional four-character idiom that read "reflection upon water's source." It meant "When you drink water, think of where it came from." The proverb was used as a reminder to be thankful for one's blessings, and in this instance, it was likely also meant to convey gratitude to the ancestor who had once endowed them with the spring.

Everyone—the emperor included—was stunned by the Kou Maiden's exceptional artistic talent as well as her ability to express her thanks to the ancestors in a mere four flowing letters.

“Magnificent. Many have praised the sacred spring for its majesty, but few Maidens would express their heartfelt gratitude. Your virtuous and sincere heart shines through the page.”

“I am most flattered by your kind words.”

Demonstrating the fruits of her daily training, Reirin performed a flawless bow with her slender form.

The water of this spring is so refreshing. Never for a day have I forgotten my plan to chill a watermelon in its waters in the summer.

Such were the thoughts that ran through her head as she kept it lowered in a demure bow.

That’s right: The reason Reirin had chosen to express her gratitude over extolling the spring’s grandeur had nothing to do with her virtue. It was simply because she valued the Violet Dragon’s Spring for its taste more than its sanctity.

“There is nothing more pleasing to the Heavens than a virtuous heart. The god of purity will be delighted.”

For better or worse, the shaman failed to catch on to her true intentions, instead accepting Reirin’s painting with a look of admiration.

“M-m-may it please Your Imperial Majesty…”

At last, it was Keigetsu’s turn. Her nerves had reached their peak, not to mention that she was tired from holding the same pose for so long, so she was a quivering mess as she began her explanation.

The shaman standing beside the emperor was openly scowling at her. Faced with a distaste so strong it was communicated through a face half-covered with cloth, Keigetsu didn’t feel *fear*, but she certainly felt panicked. If the shaman ratted her out for her earlier bad-mouthing, it would have a significant impact on her evaluation.

Besides, who *wouldn’t* feel inadequate following up an honor student like Kou Reirin?

“Th-the beauty of the Violet Dragon’s Spring defies description. It would be

difficult to capture such an awe-inspiring landscape in a mere painting. Thus, I decided to write a series of verses instead."

"It defies description, but you chose to describe it…" the emperor couldn't help but mutter at the incoherent mess that had become of her introduction.

It wasn't malicious enough to be described as a snicker, but feeling ridiculed nonetheless, Keigetsu was almost at the point of tears.

"I-I put my heart and soul into writing this poem."

What she thrust forward was indeed a poem of considerable length. It didn't have the fluidity of Houshun's calligraphy, nor did it carry the same punch as Reirin's use of a classic idiom. The density of the ink was inconsistent, and the writing was smudged in a handful of places. The content itself was juvenile, like a child repeating the same praise of someone they liked over and over.

Still, her enthusiasm came through in how tightly the letters were packed together.

"I'll acknowledge the effort," said the emperor, scanning the poem. Then he swiftly turned on his heel.

In his place, the shaman who had been standing to his rear stepped up and made a rough grab for Keigetsu's calligraphy, perhaps less than thrilled.

That was when it happened.

Fwoosh!

Keigetsu's sheet of rice paper abruptly burst into flames.

"What?!"

"The paper's on fire!"

The crowd panicked and backed away as flames slowly engulfed the paper from the edges inward.

"Protect His Majesty!" came Gyoumei's sharp command, at which the military officers snapped to their senses, surrounded the emperor, and kept him away from the flames.

The Eagle Eyes likewise rushed to encircle the Maidens. Among them, Captain

Shin-u plucked the paper from the shaman's hand as she was waving it about in an effort to extinguish the flames. "Pardon me!" he shouted before swiftly casting it into the spring.

Yet still the flames did not subside, blazing atop the spring's icy surface for some time. Only when water seeped from cracks in the melted ice and wet the sheet did the fire fizzle out at last, leaving about half of the paper intact.

Once a tense silence had settled over the area, Anni pointed a finger at Keigetsu, her eyes flashing. "This is divine punishment."

The declaration delivered in the old lady's croak of a voice had an ominous ring to it.

Interrupting Keigetsu when she opened her mouth to ask questions, the old shaman continued to denounce her without leaving room for argument. "Shu Keigetsu's arrogance and impiety are clear for all to see. The god of purity has cast down flames of rage, refusing to allow this insincere string of flowery words to be offered at his spring."

Her strong assertion drew a buzz from the crowd. The Maidens whipped around to look at Keigetsu, shocked, and the color drained from Kasui's face in particular.

"I knew that Shu Keigetsu would bring an ill omen upon this sacred rite. When you spoke ill of me earlier, the Great Ancestor delivered unto me his prophecy."



“Wh-what are you talking about?!” Keigetsu choked on her words. She was distraught by this unexpected turn of events. “I-It’s not an ill omen!”

Keigetsu *knew* that the paper had not caught fire as a result of the dragon’s qi, the divine gift, or any other sort of supernatural force. She didn’t sense a trace of it. However, she hesitated over whether she should assert as much. The Daoist arts were a taboo in their kingdom. Since Keigetsu wasn’t a shaman, her possessing a magic similar to the dragon’s qi was nothing short of a crime.

“That’s not…what started the fire. You’re wrong. It wasn’t a bad omen.”

She slowly backed away, her gaze darting to and fro. Upon realizing that her panic was making her look even more suspicious, her distress grew and grew.

She was the sewer rat of the Maiden Court, after all. She was a belligerent woman who would disparage those she didn’t like—far from the picture of piety. It was already known to some that her father had been an aspiring Daoist cultivator. That was why everyone had been so quick to believe Houshun’s lies about her exploiting an “aphrodisiac” during the Unso tea party.

“You have brought calamity upon these grounds,” said Anni, pointing her finger once more.

Keigetsu wanted to protest that it wasn’t true, but once she’d noticed the suspicion in the crowd’s gazes, that alone was enough to make her heart hammer in her chest too hard to speak.

It was those same cold, scornful looks.

“You brought an ill omen upon us. You’re an evil witch who defiled a sacred rite with your wicked heart!”

“I-I’m not…”

Save me. Someone help me. Cries for help churned about inside her as she stood there stock-still.

Her back to the wall, Keigetsu instinctively turned to look at Kou Reirin beside her—and went wide-eyed at what she saw.

“Pardon me.”

Reirin had slipped right past the stern-faced Eagle Eyes and was inclining herself toward the spring. Before anyone could step in to prevent her from this surprising course of action, the dainty Maiden stepped onto the water's surface without a moment's hesitation.

Then, she began to walk steadily across the ice.

"Ngh…"

As soon as she reached the edge of the ice, she knelt and reached out a hand. It was then that everyone realized what she was attempting to do.

She was trying to pick up the paper floating on the surface of the spring—the work of calligraphy that was said to have been a bad omen.

Gyoumei and Shin-u blanched.

"Reirin!"

"What are you doing, Lady Reirin?!"

Upon noticing their reaction, Reirin turned her head and offered them a placating smile. "I don't believe combustion is sufficient cause to label something a bad omen. I'd like to see it for myself. Oh, it's not safe to come over here, Your Highness. I must ask that all those who fight for a living stay back as well. This spring is a sacred ground, so we mustn't allow a hint of bloodlust to come—"

It was then that she heard a small creaking sound, and a soft *"oh"* escaped her lips.

Splash!

A beat later, her slender body was sucked into the spring below. The ice had broken.

"Reirin!"

"Lady Reirin!"

"It's too dangerous, Your Highness!"

"It's taboo for a military officer to enter the spring, Captain! The same goes for you, Lord Keikou, Lord Keishou!"

Their faces pale as ash, Gyoumei, Shin-u, and Reirin's two brothers all made to dive into the spring, only to be stopped by their pages and subordinates.

As soon as she had a grasp of the situation, Empress Kenshuu yelled, "You go, Tousetsu! Rescue Reirin at once!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Sooner than the empress could finish giving the order, Tousetsu sprung from the court ladies' waiting area in a panic.

In the short time it took her to reach the water's edge, fear consumed the crowd. Keigetsu clamped a hand over her mouth, her throat seizing up.

This was an ice-covered spring in the dead of winter. Just dipping one's fingers into the waters would be enough to chill them to the bone. There was a chance that submerging her entire body might send a sickly girl like Reirin into cardiac arrest. Plus, there was no way a sheltered Maiden—one not even of Gen lineage—would know how to swim. Her thick winter robe would cling to her whole body, dragging her petite frame down to the bottom of the spring.

Kou Reirin!

She thought of the blank look on the girl's face when the ice had cracked underneath her. The way her lithe form had disappeared into the depths, like she was a water nymph melting into the spring.

The sight of her outstretched arm grasping at the air only to sink in vain was too firmly etched into Keigetsu's mind to forget.

"Lady Reirin! I'm coming to save—"

"Upsy-daisy."

Just as Tousetsu was about to dive into the waters, a wave crashed against the shore.

It was none other than Reirin herself, one arm planted against the shore as she lifted her head out of the water.

"Lady Reirin!"

When Tousetsu nearly pitched forward in surprise, Reirin calmly asked, "Can

you help me up?” Soon enough, she’d made it safely back to shore. Though her graceful demeanor was still perfectly intact, her face was as white as paper and her lips were blue.

Yet as she crouched on the shore, she just wrapped her arms around her body and gave herself a squeeze, exhaled a long breath, and then looked up with a smile on her face. “I apologize for letting you all see me in such a disgraceful state.”

“Reirin! This is no time for that! Someone bring her a towel and jacket. Have firewood—” Gyoumei began to order, his face flushed with upset, but Reirin stopped him.

“With all due respect, we are in the midst of a solemn rite,” she said. “The shaman has yet to appraise Keigetsu’s calligraphy.”

Her gentle gaze penetrated Anni with a dignified will.

The shaman frowned, wearing her confusion plain on her face. She’d already declared Shu Keigetsu’s paper to be a bad omen. What was this girl talking about? And why *now*, after she’d nearly drowned?

“What…?”

“You claimed that Lady Keigetsu’s calligraphy was a bad omen, Your Eminence—that the god of purity was enraged by her insincere verses. However, I don’t believe that to be the case.” Reirin met Anni’s dubious look with a smile, then slowly unfurled a certain something she’d been clutching to her chest all this time. “Behold.”

The ink of the calligraphic work was smudged past the point of recognition, but that was precisely what allowed some of those present to notice something else: Upon that paper stained black with diluted ink, there had emerged a character rendered with fluid brushstrokes.

As if its lines alone had repelled the ink, the character for “longevity” had faintly risen to the page.

And the word was written in magnificent enough handwriting to captivate the beholder too.

“What is this?!”

“It’s a blessing. Lady Keigetsu’s devotion to the god of purity manifested as writing,” Reirin explained to the crowd, smiling. When she caught the girl in question staring at her blankly, she tactfully added, “That’s one theory. Or perhaps the god of purity was so delighted that he bestowed a word of blessing upon Lady Keigetsu’s paper.”

Yes, back when Reirin scented the paper with yuzu, she had written the character for “longevity” in its juices, figuring it would be boring to dribble it over the page willy-nilly. The citrus juice was invisible once it had soaked into the paper and dried, but wetting it had caused the letter to reappear.

That was the real reason the shade of the ink in Keigetsu’s calligraphy had differed in certain places.

I never expected this to happen…but I’m glad I could take advantage of my silly doodle.

Reirin quietly thanked her brother Keishou for dabbling in ciphers once upon a time. As was she grateful for the Kou clan fortunes, which had allowed the children to experiment with splattering fruit juices over expensive sheets of paper.

“I can’t believe a letter suddenly manifested on the page…”

“It’s a miracle!”

It wasn’t a big deal once you knew the trick behind it, but seeing the character for “longevity” surface under such bizarre circumstances had taken the crowd by surprise.

Unbeknownst to Reirin, the storyteller’s beauty—so like that of a celestial maiden—had also gone a long way toward making the audience believe in miracles.

As sighs of awe escaped the crowd, Reirin saw her chance to win them over once and for all. “Lady Keigetsu spent more time than anyone else pouring her soul into a poem for the god of purity. Her passion was strong enough to manifest as a flame and set the paper ablaze. Moved by the sight, the god of purity must have summoned her paper to the spring, devoured the poem

whole, and returned the favor with the character for ‘longevity.’”

Reirin knew that the more confident she sounded in situations like this, the better. No one would be able to tell her hands were shaking from the cold if she balled them into fists. Her pallid face would look hale and hearty if she kept a smile on her face and took her time speaking the words. No matter the situation, Kou Reirin had always put those around her at ease that way.

It was a total pack of lies, of course, but her measured tone of voice was beginning to overwhelm the audience into believing her.

“In short,” said Reirin with her most graceful smile yet, secretly girding her loins, “this isn’t a bad omen. It’s an auspicious one, Your Eminence.”

“Wha…”

“Come now.” Dripping water in her wake, she cornered the flustered, wide-eyed shaman with a smile. “Please pass down the proper judgment. Nothing portentous could occur on your watch, could it?”

An almost painful silence settled between the Maiden and the old woman.

The shaman couldn’t take back what she’d said so easily. Because her words conveyed the will of the Great Ancestor, they could contain no falsehoods. Unfortunately, in their excitement, the crowd had already bought into the idea that the mysterious appearance of the letter was a good omen. Due to Kou Reirin’s skillful storytelling, the mood was even shifting toward *Anni* being the source of any ill omen rather than Shu Keigetsu.

To make matters worse, the emperor and crown prince spoke thus.

“Enough, Anni. Get the evaluation over with and bring this rite to an end. How long do you plan to make a wet Maiden stand around in the cold?”

“If you would allow me to speak, Your Eminence… I also believe it is safe to say the flames consuming Shu Keigetsu’s paper were a good omen.”

If the two men of the most exalted rank were pressing her for a decision, not even Anni could go against them.

Shooting Reirin a look that could kill, the prideful shaman corrected herself in a hoarse croak. “You would be correct. My fear that the worst might happen to

His Majesty got the better of me, but this is indeed a good omen." Then, her hands trembling with rage, she snatched the wet sheet of paper from the Maiden. "I shall offer this calligraphy and the auspicious omen it bears to the god of purity's shrine."

"Good," said the emperor with a curt nod, and with that, the second trial of the Rite of Reverence was complete.

"Good show, ladies and gentlemen. Let us disperse. The next task will be relayed to each palace via the court ladies. Gamboge golds, bring Reirin a robe, hot water, and firewood at once!" the facilitator, Kenshuu, announced without a moment's delay.

Finally permitted to care for their mistress, the gamboge gold court ladies descended upon her with all the speed of wild animals.

"Lady Reirin! Please take off that wet robe!"

"I've warmed this robe with my body heat! Wear this instead!"

"No! First we must dry your hair!"

"Eagle Eyes! What are you standing around for? Bring her firewood at once, even if you must raze the forest around us to do it!"

"Are you with us? How many fingers am I holding up?!"

The commotion was reminiscent of a disturbed beehive. Seika, Houshun, and especially Kasui were all eyeing Reirin like they wanted to talk to her, but their court ladies eventually ushered them back to their respective palaces.

Responding to each of her own court ladies with, "Thank you very much," "I'm sorry to have worried you," or "Two fingers," Reirin poked her head out from the crowd in a fluster. "Um, Lady Keigetsu! Please wait!"

There was something she wanted to say to Keigetsu before she left. Quickly pulling on the robe she'd borrowed from a gamboge gold, Reirin rushed out in front of her friend.

"I apologize for overstepping my bounds back there. But I'm truly glad I could spare you those unfair accusations."

For a start, she apologized for coming to Keigetsu's defense without

consulting her first. She *had* meant well, but since she knew Keigetsu didn't deal well with the unexpected, she figured it was best to apologize for startling her through her spontaneous actions.

"Still, it truly is curious that your paper burst into flames. Unlearned as I am, I'd like to look into what caused it."

She did her best to insert cheer into her voice, but Keigetsu didn't respond. Figuring she was a nervous wreck after coming under fire from the shaman, Reirin felt a tinge of sympathy for her friend.

"Um… I was truly shocked by the bizarre accusations she leveled against you. But you've been cleared of all suspicion. Please rest assured."

Given what a sensitive girl she was, she must have been despairing that everyone was out to get her after coming under attack two days in a row. Then again, the tent cave-in had most likely been targeting Reirin, and since the flames had burst out of the paper originally handed to Reirin, it was possible even *that* had been meant for her too.

Reirin tried to reassure Keigetsu that she had nothing to worry about. "This has been quite the tumultuous Rite of Reverence, but if I may be so bold, I'm doing everything in my power to tackle the challenges head-on. I'll be sure to protect you no matter what, so please—"

Before she could finish that sentence with "be at ease," there came the *smack* of Keigetsu batting away Reirin's outstretched hand.

A closer look revealed Keigetsu's face to be as stiff and pale as if she'd just swallowed a block of ice whole. "Listen, you…"

"What's wrong? Are you cold?"

"Why, you little…!" When Reirin furrowed her brow in concern, Keigetsu at last began to scream, the dam of her emotions broken. "What kind of question is that?! *You're* the one who looks like a dead woman walking! You're out of your mind!"

The gamboge golds stirred at this outburst too excessive to be a simple show of concern.

“Erm… Perhaps?” said Reirin, attempting to pacify her friend with a smile.

This only seemed to fuel Keigetsu’s rage. Her voice cracking, she yelled, “Quit smiling like an idiot! Do you understand what just happened?! You just fell into a spring in the middle of winter!”

“T-true, but I didn’t *fall*. I merely dove in to get your paper…”

“How could you be so stupid?! I never asked you to do that!”

“Erm, you didn’t *ask*, no…” Keigetsu had a face like thunder as she spat out shriek after shriek. Taken aback, Reirin resorted to making feeble excuses. “But wouldn’t you have been in a difficult position if I didn’t?”

The moment she heard that rebuttal, Keigetsu recoiled like she’d touched a flame.

After a long stretch of silence, she spoke in a voice low enough to graze the ground below. It was a complete one-eighty from her demeanor to that point. “Forget it.”

“Lady Keigetsu?”

“Leave me alone,” she spat, then fixed Reirin with a glare. “I’m sick of you!”

“Lady Keigetsu, what are you—”

“What am I, some toddler who just learned to walk?! You always end up carrying me through everything! You think I can’t do anything without your help, is that it?! Yeah, you think I’m a joke!”

As soon as the scream left her mouth, Keigetsu realized that wasn’t quite right. Kou Reirin wasn’t making light of her. She wasn’t that haughty a person.

All the same, it was an undeniable fact that Keigetsu was beneath her.

The sewer rat of the Maiden Court was childish, talentless, and emotional. No matter how hard she tried, she could never act like Kou Reirin.

Thus, the benevolent butterfly couldn’t help but offer her a hand.

Just like she would for a helpless infant. All while making astonishing sacrifices and taking it all in stride.

“Lady Keigetsu, I didn’t mean to—”

“Shut up! Just shut *up*!”

As Keigetsu covered her ears, unsettling scenes played back in her mind one after another.

She saw Kou Reirin shoving her out of the way without the slightest bit of hesitation and shielding her from the pillar’s collapse. Reirin had expressed concern for Keigetsu first thing, neglecting to so much as mention her own injuries. No matter how distraught Keigetsu became, she’d smiled at her and told her everything was going to be all right, even handing one of her would-be rivals the plan to use the fig.

She saw Kou Reirin effortlessly pacifying her when she was sulking from embarrassment. She’d even offered to trade papers the instant she saw Keigetsu’s ink-stained sheet.

Even after the shaman—an authority figure who channeled the divine—denounced Keigetsu, she’d never once thought of abandoning her. She had strode right out over the icy spring, and then…

Splash.

She’d thought her heart was going to stop.

When Kou Reirin made it back to the shore, she’d looked as pale as a corpse. There was no way a frail girl like her could withstand such frigid temperatures, yet she’d still smiled without a care in the world. She’d spoken serenely so as to alleviate the worries of those around her.

Unfortunately, Keigetsu had seen through her facade.

She’d noticed the way Reirin discreetly clenched her fists.

She’d noticed her fighting to suppress the shivers that welled up from her very core.

She’d noticed that when Reirin hung her head, she bit her lip in a bid to get her blood flowing, but still not a hint of color had returned to her cheeks.

She’d noticed the tremendous strain the girl was putting on herself.

“You can do everything…”

Her voice wavered despite her best efforts. Tears blurred her vision.

In that moment, Keigetsu felt sincerely wretched. Kou Reirin would push herself past her limits to make any wish of hers come true. Yet all *she* could do was twiddle her thumbs and depend on her.

“And I can’t do anything…”

No, worse—she kept pushing this girl to the brink of death.

“That’s not true, Lady Keigetsu.”

“How so? It’s just a fact! You told me before that you were too sickly to do anything. You’re full of it! Whatever the situation, you always end up stealing the show! Even in that ailing body of yours!”

The burning sensation in the depths of Keigetsu’s heart reared its head again—that fire that had continued to smolder even after it was smothered with ashes. Not even the blessed rain of Kou Reirin’s gentle, comforting words could appease her. In fact, the flames only grew fiercer still, threatening to lick her entire body in their greed.

Back when she saved the untouchables during their trip, she’d believed there were things only she could do. That velvety, rich sensation—call it confidence or self-esteem—now shattered to pieces in a storm of her raging emotions.

“Calm down, Lady Keigetsu… Please don’t cry.”

“It’s *your* fault!” Keigetsu yelled, scrubbing the tears from her eyes as soon as they were pointed out to her. “You’re the one making me cry! You’re the one making me miserable!”

“Huh?”

Just as Reirin had leaned forward to wipe her friend’s tears, she froze.

Tousetsu attempted to intervene, unable to sit back and watch this. “That was uncalled for, Lady Shu Keigetsu. I must ask that you retract your words.”

“Shut up, Tousetsu!” Keigetsu snapped without missing a beat. “You gamboge golds sure are something else. Your mistress does something reckless enough to get herself killed, and you’re all just fine with that? Why don’t any of you stop her? Why don’t you tell her that this is crazy?! That she’s out of her mind?! You

good-for-nothings!”

That part was her taking out her anger on the nearest target, plain and simple. After all, the court ladies weren’t responsible for Reirin’s rash behavior *or* for failing to stop it. The one who had pushed her to those lengths and then failed to admonish her was Keigetsu herself.

Nevertheless, Tousetsu flinched and recoiled from her teary-eyed insult. “Lady Shu Keigetsu…”

“You’re all nuts! I’ve had enough! I hate you. I don’t even want to see your face!”

In the face of Keigetsu’s outburst, even the woman known as the glacial court lady was mumbling in shock. Reirin, for her part, had gone white as a sheet, her lips pressed into a thin line. Keigetsu couldn’t stand to see her looking pale enough to collapse at any moment.

“Don’t ever speak to me again!”

She turned on her heel and bolted.

“Lady Keigetsu! Wait!” Leelee, who had been watching this play out in a cold sweat, hurried after her mistress.

Just then, screams ricocheted in the background.

“Lady Reirin!”

“Keep it together!”

“You there, Eagle Eye! Carry the Maiden out of here!”

Based on the shouts she heard, Keigetsu immediately realized Reirin had fainted.

And that realization made it even harder to breathe.

Keigetsu didn’t stop or look back, instead covering her ears with clenched fists.

No…

An invisible hand constricted her heart. It was like her entire body was being dragged into the ground.

Just as Kou Reirin had sunk into the spring earlier.

No! No! No!

She'd never known such a murky, oppressive feeling. Her old hatred for Reirin didn't even compare. It was a fierce emotion, one that clung to her whole body like a heavy weight.

It was almost enough to make her want to tear the very flesh from her body—yes, even to kill herself.

In a desperate attempt to shake the court ladies' screams and the sight of Reirin's pallid figure from her mind, Keigetsu ran like hell.

Chapter 4:
Reirin Gets into a Fight

I'VE BEEN WRITING LETTERS every day since I arrived at the capital, but I'm afraid tomorrow might see that streak broken. I had originally planned to spend the day sitting in on the pottery unit, but it seems the shaman will be paying a confidential visit to the inner court and holding a meeting to distribute talismans to the palace women.

The shaman is quite tolerant, so she's allowing even the menial workers to join the gathering so long as they are truly devout. I'm thinking about attending as well; I'll have the time, since the Worthy Consort will just so happen to be out tomorrow.

Since the meeting will be held whenever is most convenient for the shaman, I'm not certain when it will begin. I thought I'd warn you now that I might not have the chance to write. I'll have a mirror delivered to you instead. Think of it as me.

I love how true you are to your feelings, but you can be overly needy at times. Try not to cry if you don't get a letter.

This is a good opportunity for you. We'll have to live apart eventually, so you mustn't spend your days tagging along in my shadow. Don't forget to enjoy your own life.

Love,

***

“Please warm your fingers on this teacup, Lady Reirin.”

Underneath a pavilion tucked away in the well-manicured winter gardens of the Maiden Court, Tousetsu and her fellow gamboge golds huddled around Reirin in quick succession.

“I’ll bring the brazier a little closer.”

“We covered all sides of the pavilion with a canvas…but is it still too cold? Perhaps I should pilfer another brazier from the Eagle Eyes’ office.”

The whole point of a garden pavilion was to enjoy the surrounding atmosphere without walls to obstruct it, yet a bulky canvas had been draped over all four sides, making it no different from a tent in practice. All the same stationery, furnishings, tea sets, and fruits from her room in the palace were set out atop the rustic stone table. The hard stone chairs were covered with plump pillows and cushions. To top it all off, a large brazier had been brought in to heat the space to the warmth of an early summer day.

“No, it’s plenty warm. Please don’t trouble yourselves further.”

“Tomorrow we’ll trade out the canvas for fur, so it should be even warmer. Oh, I’ll peel the mandarins for you, Lady Reirin! Leave removing the pith to me too!”

“No, that’s quite all right. Perhaps I’ll hold off on the snack and grind my ink. I’d like to write a letter.”

“I can do it! Is it too hard to hold the brush, Lady Reirin? I’d be happy to guide your hand!”

“…Could you please give it a rest?”

Though Reirin sat on the chair in the center of it all with perfect posture, she was apparently an infant who couldn’t so much as lift her own head in the eyes of her court ladies. Her smile grew stiffer and stiffer as the women scrambled to give her a hand with every little thing, but as far as Tousetsu was concerned, this was inevitable.

“We must do *something*. You’ve only just made it back from the brink of death.”

That’s right—after falling into the spring and passing out during the second trial, to little surprise, Reirin had developed a high-grade fever.

Fortunately, she’d regained consciousness quickly enough, but the Rite of Reverence was still underway, and the Maidens were meant to stay in guesthouses unaccompanied by their court ladies for the duration. Forbidden from nursing her back to health, the court ladies had paced outside her residence for two days and two nights. No sooner had they gotten a glimpse of their convalescent mistress’s face through the window than they’d absconded with her into the Maiden Court courtyard.

The Maiden Court was a communal space. It wouldn’t be a violation of the rules for the Maidens and their court ladies to come into contact *there*.

“The brink of death? You’re exaggerating. I merely ran a slight fever. I was much more lucid than I usually am. It was like one long, cozy nap undisturbed by nightmares. Perhaps it was fortunate that I fell into the sacred Violet Dragon’s Spring of all places,” said Reirin, making excuses to her court ladies, who had turned the pavilion into the perfect “sitting room.”

Yet Tousetsu and her subordinates stubbornly refused to stop looking after her. “You have no idea how worried we were. We’re fortunate that the final trial was set to take place ten days after the second, but it was concerning to think that your life alone in the guesthouse would carry on for that long.”

“We beg of you, Lady Reirin, please spend your daylight hours here in the lead-up to the final trial.”

“Even the other Maidens have given up on living alone and evacuated to the Maiden Court.”

Indeed, soon after Reirin had been carried off to her guesthouse in the Kou Palace, Kenshuu had announced that the final trial would be held ten days later. At first it had seemed like a show of nepotism, but it turned out that had been the plan from the start.

The set date happened to fall on the emperor’s birthday.

“On the occasion of the Supreme One’s birth, demonstrate your respect for the emperor by presenting him with a gift to honor the celebration.”

That was the task Kenshuu had given them for the final trial of the Rite of Reverence. In other words, the ten-day gap was a grace period to prepare a suitable gift.

Thanks to that, Reirin had been given the chance to rest and take the time to heal, but for the gamboge gold court ladies prevented from caring for her for an even longer stretch of time, it also had its drawbacks. Perturbed to find their time in the guesthouses dragging on longer than expected, the Maidens of the other clans had followed Reirin’s example and decided to stay in the Maiden Court. According to Tousetsu’s report, both the Kin clan and Ran clan had begun to set up camp under two distant garden pavilions.

Even so, the only ones fussy enough to throw up a canvas and have several court ladies wait on their Maiden were the Kou clan.

Finding this unbearable, Reirin forced all the court ladies aside from Tousetsu to retire, then heaved a small sigh. “Is it really all right to stay under a pavilion like this? The entire purpose of living in the guesthouses was to prevent the Maidens from colluding with their court ladies, relatives, or peers.”

“To skirt as close as possible to breaking the rules without crossing the line is yet another talent required of a future consort. I’ve been sure to refuse all get-well gifts and offers of help from your brothers. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Reirin’s eyes glazed over. “Ah… Yes, please *do* continue refusing my brothers’ visits…”

Deeply concerned for their beloved sister after her drowning scare, the two men had apparently taken advantage of their status as Reirin’s brothers to raid the Palace of the Golden Qilin. Much like the court ladies, however, Kenshuu had forbidden them from setting foot inside the guesthouse.

Their faces flushed with worry for the little sister they so adored, they had come flying like arrows as soon as Reirin was escorted to the gardens—while dragging a huge pile of get-well gifts behind them, of course.

“Hey, Reirin! You’re still looking awfully pale! Softshell turtle is just the thing for a time like this! Have a pit viper, a swallow’s nest, and a shark fin too! Do you have enough herbs in stock? If it’s for my darling sister, I’ll run to Mt. Kou and pick the place bald in a heartbeat! Just say the word!”

“Oh, you poor thing, just look at how haggard you are… While it obviously only makes your ethereal beauty stand out all the more, I can’t just leave you like this. Forget about the final trial—you ought to spend the next week in bed. Fret not, *I’ll* come up with a little something for His Majesty.”

First the elder Keikou had spoken, followed by the younger Keishou.

“That’s quite all right. Please don’t make such a fuss.” Reirin had flatly refused them both with a smile, but they’d then switched tracks to scolding her and making an exaggerated show of dabbing at their eyes.

“Give me a break, Reirin. You just fell into a spring in the middle of winter. How could you accuse us of overreacting?”

“He’s exactly right. I know you were feeling a righteous rage, but you pushed yourself too far. I can’t blame Lady Keigetsu for being so upset with you. Do you have any idea how scary that was for *us*?”

And so on and so forth.

Even Tousetsu, who was usually quick to show the Kou brothers the door, hadn’t seemed to be on her Maiden’s side this time. Times of sickness were Reirin’s favorite periods in which to train, yet Tousetsu hadn’t even permitted the other gamboge golds to bring over her training implements. In the end, she’d been forced to endure a lecture from her brothers until they left with, “We’ll give you a break, since we don’t want to make your condition worse.”

He can’t blame Lady Keigetsu for being upset with me, hm?

Reirin glanced around the comfortably furnished pavilion in a daze. She furrowed her brow into the smallest of frowns as she watched the occasional red flame peek out from the brazier with a crackle.

Now that her brothers had given her such a scolding, she was starting to believe she was at fault. She was a good girl at heart, so if her relatives went red in the face admonishing her, she felt she ought to internalize the lesson.

She wanted to, at least…but something didn't sit right with her this time.

I mean, I didn't push myself that *hard.*

That was the first objection to cross her mind.

It wasn't like she had drowned. She'd run a fever, sure, but she wasn't dead. All she'd done was spend a brief moment drinking from the gorgeous river in her mind's eye before making it back to the land of the living. If she'd done the same thing in Keigetsu's body, it wouldn't have been an issue at all. At worst, she'd have suffered a head cold for a single night.

Therein lay the problem: She'd experienced life in the healthy vessel known as "Shu Keigetsu," so she knew that hadn't been a life-endangering stunt.

Why was everyone getting so mad at her, then?

Besides, Reirin thought as she pulled the inkstone closer and began to grind her ink, *I only did that to help Lady Keigetsu.*

"You're the one making me cry! You're the one making me miserable!"

She put a little too much strength into her fingers as she tilted the water jug.

Reirin hadn't meant to make Keigetsu miserable. To tell the truth, she still didn't understand why her friend had been so hurt by her efforts. Here she'd been expecting the girl's expressive eyes to go wide with delight, just like when she'd given her those makeup tips.

It's a puzzle to me… This really is difficult.

Back during her stay in Unso's village, she'd learned how complex the human heart could be. Nevertheless, the hostile villagers had ultimately opened their hearts to her after she persistently acted in good faith and helped them.

So why was Keigetsu acting as though her efforts were harmful?

Stop that, Reirin!

When she noticed her hands had stopped working to grind the ink, Reirin whipped her head back and forth. She'd seen how Keigetsu was sobbing. The fact of the matter was that Reirin had hurt her. If she'd made her friend cry, that made her the one in the wrong. In which case, she needed to apologize,

even if the whole ordeal wasn't sitting quite right with her.

Nodding to herself, Reirin decided it was time to take action.

It's all right. I'm approaching the situation calmly.

In hindsight, it wasn't all that unusual for Keigetsu to hurl abuse at her. Her shrieks were cries for help, and her insults were love bites.

"I hate you."

No sooner had Reirin told herself as much than Keigetsu's tearful denunciation flashed across her mind, and she went stiff as a board. A moment later, she huffed a soft sigh and forced her hand to keep moving.

Keigetsu had once said "begone" as she'd pushed her from a high tower. When friendship had blossomed between them despite legitimate damage being done in the past, it didn't make sense for her to dwell on such a silly, harmless statement.

It's all right. I'm not bothered in the least.

Reirin knew how to act in times like these. She had to step back and apologize. That would soothe Keigetsu enough to meet her in the middle. That was how it always worked.

Just then, the coals in the brazier popped as if to make their presence known.

Her flame spell…

If she was lucky and her wish carried through the flame, she might be able to talk to Keigetsu right away. The thought crossed her mind, but Reirin discarded it after a moment's consideration.

A letter would be better.

Even if the flame call did connect, that would involve a direct exchange of words. It was possible Keigetsu's emotions would get the better of her and she'd berate Reirin all over again. Not that that would bother Reirin even the slightest, teeniest bit, of course—yet, for some reason, she didn't feel like hearing it at the moment.

I ought to give my arm muscles a workout too.

Convincing herself with that logic, Reirin said to the head court lady beside her, “Can you unfurl a sheet of paper for me, Tousetsu? I’m going to write Lady Keigetsu a letter of apology.”

Tousetsu, meanwhile, went wide-eyed with surprise at her mistress’s command. “You are? After all the insults she hurled at you?”

From her perspective, the one at fault in that argument—no, the insults had been too one-sided to even call it that—had clearly been Keigetsu. It was true that Reirin’s actions must have worried her. When Keigetsu scolded her, even Tousetsu realized that she had become too numb to her own mistress’s recklessness.

Still, that didn’t excuse the things she’d said. It was beyond ungrateful to screech and berate the person who had gone to such lengths for her sake without so much as a word of thanks. If Tousetsu had been in Reirin’s shoes, she would have plucked Shu Keigetsu’s selfish little tongue right from her mouth.

“Yes. I *did* make her cry, after all. I have to be the one to apologize,” Reirin said mildly.

Tousetsu let slip a sigh of admiration. *What a magnanimous girl she is.*

The way her mistress held down her sleeves and gripped her brush was the definition of graceful, and she didn’t look a thing like a piteous recovering patient. Kou Reirin truly was the Maiden of the Kou clan, the bloodline that reigned over earth. Her heart was bigger than the very continent, and the screams of an overemotional woman weren’t anywhere near enough to make her waver.

“I’m impressed that you can remain calm and composed even after being told things like ‘I hate you’ or ‘I don’t want to see your face.’”

Drip.

A large drop of ink spilled from Reirin’s brush at that remark.

Not imagining for a second that the girl who was hailed as a master calligrapher would make such a blunder, Tousetsu nodded to herself and went on talking. “I’ve been called the ‘glacial court lady,’ but even I would flinch were

I to receive such a firm rejection as ‘Don’t ever speak to me again.’ I must hand it to you for not being fazed in the least.”

Drip, drop, drip.

When the odd noise persisted three times in a row, Tousetsu at last looked back up, incredulous. The sight that greeted her made her eyes go round.

“Hee hee. You’re blowing this out of proportion, Tousetsu.”

Her typical—yes, *unbothered* sort of rueful smile plastered on her face, Tousetsu’s mistress was spilling a stream of ink from her brush.

“Um… Lady Reirin?”

“It’s not that I’m especially forgiving. Lady Keigetsu’s insults are like the playful bite of a cat, so there’s no point in fighting back. That’s all.”

“Ah, of course…”

Tousetsu broke out into a cold sweat, her eyes darting between her smiling mistress and the paper getting more and more drenched in ink by the second. Given her mistress’s skill with the brush, she’d never seen her make this sort of mistake. Was this an expression of anger at Tousetsu’s comments, then?

If so, why was she keeping the smile on her face?

“Indeed… It’s a love bite… A love bite…”

It finally dawned on Tousetsu that the smile on Reirin’s face was an empty one—and that the hand of hers holding the brush was trembling ever so slightly.

“L-Lady Reirin?”

“Oh, what’s this? This paper is stained with ink, Tousetsu.” The moment Tousetsu leaned forward, sensing danger in the air, Reirin dropped her gaze to the paper and put a hand to her cheek in bemusement. “Was this a prank? Who would do such a thing?”

As she watched her mistress stare at the besmirched sheet of paper in genuine bewilderment, Tousetsu had an epiphany.

She’s…absolutely bothered!

Evidently, that “I hate you” from Keigetsu had done a number on Reirin.

However, she’d never taken such a blow from one of her personal relationships before. Torn between the reason that told her to stay calm and the instinct that urged her to express her extreme melancholy, her body had chosen a bizarre method of output for her emotion.

“Erm, Lady Reirin, you—”

“Good day, Lady Reirin. Can we have a word?”

Before Tousetsu could lean in to say something, there came a sweet purr from outside the canvas-covered pavilion. Stretching far enough to get a look outside revealed the Pure Consort standing there dressed in a gaudy fur jacket. She was accompanied by her Maiden, Kin Seika, who looked none too pleased to be there.

“When we heard Lady Reirin was out in the courtyard, we just *had* to come see her. How has she been since then?”

It seemed they’d come to check up on Reirin, who was making her first public appearance since falling into the spring.

Hmph. “Check up on her” is one way of putting it. I’d assume her true goal is to perform reconnaissance or rub salt in the wound.

Given Pure Consort Kin’s nature, Tousetsu coolly determined that the purpose of her visit was a nefarious one, but it wouldn’t do to let even the most repugnant consort stand out in the cold.

“Your concern is appreciated, Pure Consort Kin, Lady Kin Seika. Please come this way.”

The head court lady gave a meticulous bow before inviting the pair inside the pavilion, stifling the disgust creeping into her expression. Kin Seika was the honorable sort, and Tousetsu had a favorable impression of her as a worthy opponent for her mistress, but she couldn’t stand the consort who so loved to shake her ample bosom and cozy up to those in power with an ingratiating purr.

Sure enough, upon taking one look around the makeshift sitting room, the Pure Consort made an exaggerated show of surprise, remarking, “My, your

court ladies truly do love to dote on you like a newborn baby.”

Of course, it was a snide remark that emphasized the “newborn baby” part over the doting.

“Their obliging, earthen nature makes the Kou court ladies a bit too fussy at times… It’s quite embarrassing.”

As a Kou woman with a strong thirst for independence, there was nothing more shameful than being confronted with her own helplessness. Hearing the genuine humiliation in Reirin’s voice, Tousetsu instinctively searched for a dishrag as she prepared the tea, keeping her face schooled into a deadpan expression.

Perhaps she would wring a good helping of its juices into the guests’ teacups.

“It goes to show how beloved she is. I’m truly relieved to see you’re doing well. I apologize for intruding upon your rest,” Kin Seika added as she sat down, narrowly convincing Tousetsu to hold herself back. The gloomy look on her face was alarming, but at least *she* seemed genuine about her concern for Reirin.

Tousetsu shuffled the calligraphy set stained deep with distress somewhere out of view, then served the guests tea with a look of nonchalance.

Upon serving Reirin her own cup, she chanced a glance at her expression. She was relieved to find her mistress smiling her usual tranquil, beautiful smile. If she could keep that going, the Pure Consort would have a hard time shaking her up.

“It’s not an intrusion in the least. I’m grateful you’ve gone to the trouble of stopping by,” Reirin replied serenely. “Please help yourself to some of these sweets.”

“Why, thank you, Lady Reirin. We should have brought a little something of our own. I feel just terrible,” said Seika, accepting the hospitality with what seemed to be genuine shame. At length, she murmured, “We really did have to make sure you were all right. This has been a very turbulent Rite of Reverence for you, Lady Reirin. In the first trial, the pillar…” For some reason, she stumbled over her words there, then gave a light shake of her head to get herself back on track. “The pillar collapsed, and you got hurt. In the second trial, you were

submerged in a spring in the middle of winter. After we left, I heard Shu Keigetsu yelled that she didn't want to see your face. But I'm glad you seem to be—"

Just as she was about to say, "doing well," Seika went speechless.

Though Reirin's smile had not faltered, she had let the mooncake she was about to pick up slip through her hand. The girl in question didn't seem to have noticed, however; she kept smiling, her fingers posed like she was still holding the cake.

"Um, Lady Reirin…?"

"It's mooncake divination!" Tousetsu bluffed in a solemn tone, quickly picking up the fallen pastry from the side. "It's a game we play in the Palace of the Golden Qilin. One drops a mooncake on the ground, and the cracks that form indicate either good or bad luck. Oh, now this is an auspicious fortune! I see good things in your futures."

It obviously wasn't true, but she couldn't let the other clans catch on to her mistress's distress.

"M-mooncake divination? Um, right…"

"Hmm…"

Seika only gave a stiff-faced nod, but Pure Consort Kin—who was second to none when it came to spotting people's weaknesses—narrowed her gaze with malice. It seemed she'd picked up on exactly which part Reirin had reacted to.

"It's just as Seika says. We of the Kin clan were *so* worried. We found Shu Keigetsu's verbal abuse particularly distressing. I simply can't believe the sorts of things she screamed about a Maiden as kind and exemplary as you! That you were a good-for-nothing? That she hates you? That she didn't want you speaking to her again? Gracious."

"My, is that what the rumors are saying?" Reirin picked up her teacup, that composed smile still pasted on her face, but the sight drew an automatic shout from Tousetsu.

"That's not where your mouth is, Lady Reirin!"

She had tilted the cup close to her chin, tea pouring down in a silent stream.

“Oh…?”

“Lady Reirin!” Tousetsu moaned in despair as she grabbed a hand towel.

Seika’s eyes widened.

“Oh dear.” Pure Consort Kin, for her part, let a smile cross her lips for the briefest of moments before turning a disingenuously concerned look on Reirin. “Shu Keigetsu’s insults must have taken quite a toll on you. Her arrogance is simply intolerable. I’m so sorry you had to deal with her, Lady Reirin.”

“Not at all. It’s my own fault for causing Lady Keigetsu to worry,” said Reirin, just barely managing to keep her expression intact.

“Oh, Lady Reirin, you silly dear!” exclaimed Pure Consort Kin, her face falling in an even more exaggerated manner. “I suppose a kind girl like you is easily deceived. Surely you don’t believe Shu Keigetsu is so noble as to feel concern for you!”

Reirin’s long lashes quivered ever so slightly. “Huh?”

By this point, Reiga’s eyes were watering from a surging emotion she passed off as pity. “As a consort, I have a rather objective view of the Maidens, so I know the truth. Shu Keigetsu is a lazy girl who likes to take advantage of those around her. She’ll lean on whomever she can use, and when that doesn’t work out, she’ll rake them over the coals. It’s a trait common among those from the southern territory.”

The way she skillfully invoked the five elements to make her point showed her Kin clan roots, those who prided themselves on their skill as merchants.

“Shu Keigetsu has been relying on you for months now. But you’ve taken damage multiple times in a row trying to protect her. At the rate things were going, she was bound to be criticized for asking too much of you—so she chose to toss you aside instead. She dodged the responsibility by claiming she never asked you to do any of that.”

“Lady Keigetsu…wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh, but she would! Do you have any idea who she’s been turning to since

she gave you that dressing-down? Why, our Seika here! Just the other day, she came by to ask for advice on the gift for the final trial."

"Huh?"

Neither Reirin nor Tousetsu believed most of what the Pure Consort had to say, but they reacted in spite of themselves the moment she dragged Seika into the conversation.

Kin Seika was regarded as the second best of the Maidens, boasting gorgeous looks and incredible skill in the art of dance. She could be haughty, but she was the honorable sort. There was some credibility to the idea that Keigetsu, who was "sick" of Reirin, had started hanging around Seika out of spite.

Plus, Seika hated lies. If she nodded her head, it would mean the Pure Consort was speaking the truth.

"Honestly, it's downright appalling. Just a few days ago, she was counting on you for every little thing, and now she's turned around and started hounding Seika. If this were a matter of romance, Shu Keigetsu would be what I believe we call a 'hussy.' That's the reason we had to escape to the courtyard." As the muscles of Reirin's face went taut, the Pure Consort turned to the Maiden beside her with a sneer. "Isn't that right, Seika? Shu Keigetsu is wagging her tail at the Kin clan now, isn't she? And she's been talking about Lady Reirin behind her back too, calling her pushy and phony and all sorts of nasty things."

Seika stared back at the Pure Consort, at a loss for words.

What is she prattling on about?

Shu Keigetsu had never come by the Palace of the Metallic Shade or spoken to Seika even once. Ever since her fight with Reirin, she'd been moping in her guesthouse in the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion.

Besides, it was clear from the way she looked at Reirin that she admired the prince's butterfly. Keigetsu had a lot of inferiority complexes where the Kou girl was concerned, and it seemed that had built to an explosion this time around, but it was obvious to Seika that the Shu Maiden wasn't the shrewd sort of person the Pure Consort had described. She and Reirin were bound by a stupidly simplistic friendship far removed from the rationality and calculation

that Reiga prided herself on.

“No—”

“Be honest, Seika. Otherwise, Shu Keigetsu is going to take our kind Lady Reirin for a fool. We can’t have her heading into the final trial so distracted, now can we?”

When Seika frowned, the Pure Consort dropped the pitch of her voice a fraction and squeezed her hand.

“As a consort, I’d be very sad if the girl hailed as the top contender for empress couldn’t give her all.”

“Hrk…!”

Intelligent as she was, Seika picked up on her meaning immediately. The Pure Consort’s words weren’t meant to be taken at face value. Rather, she was implying the exact opposite: She was telling Seika to exploit the rift between the girls to mess with Reirin’s head and prevent her from putting her best foot forward in the final trial.

She’d go that far?

Flustered, she stole a glance at Reirin. The “butterfly” was looking far feebler than she had mere days ago. She’d dropped a pastry on the ground, and she’d even spilled her tea. It was the first time Seika had ever seen the upstanding, noble girl make such a blunder. It was clear that her argument with Keigetsu had pushed her over the edge.

And Seika was supposed to rattle her even further? Just to give herself an advantage in the trial?

Lady Reirin is a graceful and delicate butterfly. She suffered burns, and she just recovered from a fever. If I push her any further, I’m certain she’ll end up falling ill.

The task of the final trial was picking out a gift. Most of the effort had to be made during the preparation period rather than the day of the event. Reirin didn’t have time to pass out if she wanted to make an embroidery or some other craft, and she’d need to practice if she decided to offer a dance or song.

The period before a rite was when one most needed to be in good physical and mental shape, and she was supposed to be messing with Reirin's head?

"Not to mention," said Reiga, tilting the fan near her mouth as if to spur her hesitant charge onward, "Lady Reirin has already suffered burns and nearly drowned. You wouldn't want to see her hurt again in the final trial, would you, Seika?"

The true meaning behind her "kind" words was thus:

If you don't act now, I'll make her suffer even more in the final trial.

"…"

"It was called 'mooncake divination,' no? I do wonder what *your* fortune would look like, Lady Reirin. I truly have to pity you after the string of bad luck you've had. I certainly hope nothing worse happens next time."

Seika's ears were ringing. She was dizzy with anger and misery. How could a daughter of Kins, those who valued beauty and knew what pride was all about, be forced to tell such an underhanded lie?

But…

She recalled the painful burns she'd caught a glimpse of during the first trial. The sight of Reirin dripping wet and pale as a ghost during the second.

If the alternative is letting something even worse happen to her…

Kou Reirin was the embodiment of supreme beauty. She was a proud girl, as delicate as a work of gold and ethereal as a butterfly. Anything was better than seeing her fall into one of the Pure Consort's cruel traps and get hurt even worse.

Maybe…it would be wiser to encourage her to back off…

What was so bad about pushing her away from a sewer rat like Shu Keigetsu, anyway?

Seika clung to her own excuses, pretending not to notice that a torn sheer cloth sat on one side of the scales.

"Isn't that right, Seika? Shu Keigetsu has been all over you lately, hasn't she?

And far from worrying about Lady Reirin's well-being, she's done nothing but speak ill of her! She even tries to butter you up with, 'I'm sick of Lady Reirin, you're much more reliable, Lady Seika.' It's simply nauseating."

"…Yes."

In the end, Seika nodded her head.

Her heart was racing like mad. Her breath came in gasps.

This was the first time she'd ever told a lie.

"She told me she hates Lady Reirin. How shameless."

She could only hope that her obvious discomfort would help Reirin see through the lie. On the other hand, Seika knew deep down that her discomfort—her obvious awkwardness—lent more credibility to the story.

"I see," Reirin said quietly.

Seika had to stop herself from screaming as she watched those gorgeous, gemlike eyes lose their luster.

Oh no…

What had she done? How ugly a lie had she just told?

"Lady Reirin—"

"Well, I'd say we've detained a recovering patient for far too long. My apologies. We'll see ourselves out. Do take care of yourself."

Before Seika could thrust herself forward, Reiga sprang to her feet. She proceeded to leave the pavilion with a flourish of her luxurious fur robe—while dragging Seika along by the arm, of course.

"Get it together, Seika. Your lies are as half-baked as the rest of you, I see."

"Let go!"

"Oh well. Your known distaste for lies *did* make the story more believable."

As Seika struggled against her, the Pure Consort first made sure there was no one else around before dropping her hand.

A smile rose to the lips she'd so painstakingly painted in rouge. "Hee hee. I

imagine Kou Reirin has never been hated by anyone before. It seems the first time came as quite the shock. Here's hoping that left a bit of a mark. Well, I can't imagine being hated by a sewer rat is *that* big a deal, but we have to make every move available, hm?"

Disinterested as she was in friendship, she didn't seem to realize just how heavy a blow she'd struck against the girl. She was simply delighted to have gotten a rise out of the unflappable Kou Reirin at all.

That joy was short-lived, however, as the cold soon assailed her entire body, leaving her shivering. Perhaps she would have done better to set up her base in a sunny pavilion like the Kous. Because they'd prioritized a good view, the spot where Reiga and the Kins had hidden themselves was perpetually shady around this time of day. Tomorrow, she figured she ought to follow the Kou clan's example and cover all four sides of the pavilion with a canvas—no, perhaps fur for an even more extravagant touch.

"Whatever the case, that's bound to keep her brooding for a bit. It's all thanks to the lie you told. In the meantime, we'll prepare the best gift imaginable for His Majesty. How does an enamel mirror sound? Or would a rosewood pedestal be better? Perhaps a crystal vase, jadeware, or silk fabric…"

Reiga rubbed her upper arms for warmth, her mind racing with ideas. As consort of the wealthy Kin clan, she naturally had every intention of meddling in the Rite of Reverence.

Upon reaching the pavilion where the Kins had temporarily set up residence, she at last looked back at the Maiden behind her.

"What are you dawdling for, Seika? You're one of *us* now."

With that, she dragged Seika, who had lingered behind in pale-faced shock, into the dimly lit pavilion.

Meanwhile, a painful silence had fallen over the pavilion where the Kous had set up camp.

"Um, Lady Reirin…" Tousetsu carefully began as she put away the tea set. In a rare sight, sweat poured down the face that had so often been described as

doll-like. “About what the Pure Consort said just now… Well, ah, she *is* the Pure Consort.”

Tousetsu never had been good at resolving emotional matters. No matter what she said, she feared it would touch on a sore spot for her mistress. A poor speaker, she struggled to choose the right words.

“That is—”

“There you are, Lady Reirin.”

It was then that a voice came from outside the pavilion. There weren’t many people around the inner court who spoke in the deep tones of a young man.

“Captain!” Sure enough, upon lifting the canvas, the one Tousetsu found kneeling outside the tent was Shin-u, gorgeous captain of the Eagle Eyes. She raised her voice as though this appearance of a third party was a boon from the Heavens, only to hesitate. “Is this an investigation into the matter of the collapsed pillar or the burning paper? My apologies. My mistress is not in the best of health, so a long conversation—”

Shin-u breezily interrupted Tousetsu’s halting protest. “Don’t worry. I’m only here to deliver a letter from His Highness. But he requested I be careful not to inspire jealousy in the other Maidens, so I’d like to come inside. I won’t stay long.”

With that, he let himself into the pavilion. After ensuring that he’d closed the flap tightly behind him, he cast a glance around the room.

“Hmm… The temperature, furnishings, and comforts are all up to standard. This seems like a good place to rest.”

It was impolite for a man to scrutinize a woman’s living quarters, no matter how makeshift a setup it was. Tousetsu gave him a roundabout scolding, but he brushed it off with, “Orders are orders.”

Once he’d completed his inspection, he sat down across from Reirin, evidently deeming the environment acceptable. “Since he’s been forbidden from checking on you for the past few days, His Highness has grown worried enough to start stalking around his room like a bear. Once I report to him that you’re getting proper rest, I’m sure he’ll return to being human.”

He had slipped in some awfully rude remarks in that blasé tone of his, but it didn't appear to come from a place of malice.

As straight-faced as ever, he held out a sheaf of papers to Reirin. "This is a letter from His Highness. He'd rather you prioritize resting, so he said he doesn't need a reply."

"My."

Reirin accepted the letter with the same old gentle look of a celestial maiden. But after flipping through its pages with a smile, she gently set it aside. Her smile did not change.

"Thank you very much."

"Um. You're supposed to read it."

"I did. In broad strokes, he asked me not to be reckless."

"Aren't those strokes a bit *too* broad?"

Even Shin-u couldn't hide his consternation. This was a handwritten letter from the crown prince, that which any Maiden would covet. He hadn't expected her to jump for joy or anything, but he didn't think she'd offer such a weak response. The thick letter strung together such beautiful sentences that even Shin-u—who wasn't much for rhetoric—was in admiration, and it boasted such elegant penmanship as to earn the praise of calligraphy masters. Yet she had skimmed it in less than the blink of an eye.

What's going on?

Kou Reirin wasn't the type to care about the prince's favor, no, but neither was she the sort to skim a letter someone had poured their heart and soul into. In a rare display, Shin-u studied her expression carefully, attempting to puzzle out the inner workings of her heart.

Eventually, he came to the conclusion that something was off about the prince's butterfly. Though Kou Reirin's eyes held a gentle smile beneath her long lashes…those ebony irises of hers were glazed over.

"What's wrong, Lady Reirin? Are you not feeling well?"

"Yes," Reirin all but spat after a moment's silence, her smile growing wider. "I

feel simply dreadful.”

If her voice was that of a celestial maiden, then that celestial maiden was almost certainly armed and dangerous.

Taken aback by her unusually belligerent demeanor, Shin-u rose to his feet. “That won’t do. Let’s call for the apothecary. It hasn’t been long since that reckless stunt of yours. Though your fever has subsided, things could get dangerous if we’re not care—”

“There is not the slightest bit of danger.” The moment he was about to turn on his heel, Reirin called him to a halt with her rebuttal. “I’m in perfect condition. Fit as a fiddle, even.”

“But, Lady Reirin… Just look at how haggard you are.”

“No matter what anyone else says,” she said, her eyes narrowing with sudden fury as she looked up at Shin-u, “I am *fine*. If I say I’m all right, then I am. I have not done anything reckless—not even the slightest bit!”

She didn’t want to hear a hint of a scolding from anyone. Gyoumei’s letter was brimming with sincerity and packed with concern, and it wasn’t as though Shin-u had delivered a one-sided rebuke either. Still, their simple choice of the word “reckless” had caused the rising waters of her emotions to overflow.

“Really now. Everyone has the *gall* to treat me as foolhardy.”

She hadn’t realized it herself, but this was what was known as “lashing out” on the streets.

Inexperienced at conveying her raging emotions for what they were, she was at a loss for what to do. Ultimately, she brought her hand down against the table in an awkward motion.

“Lady Reirin…?”

“Captain. The truth is, Lady Reirin is upset that Shu Keigetsu rebuked her for her recklessness and said she hates her.”

“I am not!”

Smack!

Perhaps having gotten the hang of it, the sound rang out sharper than before.

“I am simply furious with Lady Keigetsu for failing to understand my goodwill!”

“But, Lady Reirin. Speaking as an outsider, Shu Keigetsu had a point! Or, rather, she was only concerned—”

“She was *not* concerned! She doesn’t care about me!”

Whack!

The third time around, the table gave an alarming creak.

Reirin’s eyes went wide, surprised by the sound, before she chewed gently on her lip. “It’s not fair…”

“Lady Reirin?”

She hadn’t shed tears. Still, there was a hint of scarlet upon her porcelain-white cheeks and the tip of her nose.

Embarrassed, Reirin averted her gaze. “I haven’t done anything reckless. I was only trying to help. She has no right to be upset with me, yet still she subjected me to that one-sided dressing-down, and now she doesn’t even seem to care.”

“Come, Lady Reirin. You know the Pure Consort always exaggerates.”

“But Lady Seika admitted it,” she murmured, dismissing Tousetsu’s attempts to pacify her.

Shin-u was struggling with how to react. This was the first time he had ever seen the calm and composed Reirin act as childish as any other girl of fifteen years.

“I’ve had enough.”

Reirin’s soft words of farewell filled the silence that had fallen over the pavilion.

“I’m done with Lady Keigetsu.”

They were the same words she had once directed at Gyoumei, her patience lost when he had refused to lend her the Bow of Warding—but these carried an infinitely more despondent ring.

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Puffs of white breath escaping her mouth, Keigetsu odiously broke the silence. “I’m so sick of life in the guesthouse.”

Sensitive to the cold, she scanned the lonely winter gardens before pushing forward with hurried steps.

“Hello? I’m a Maiden! Why should I have to live a wretched life in a cramped guesthouse without a single person to wait on me? It’s enough to make me go for a walk around the courtyard for a change of pace. Oh, it’s so nice to get a breath of fresh air!” Contrary to her words, she didn’t seem all that interested in savoring the beauty of the gardens. Her gaze darted to and fro, until she eventually turned back to Leelee, who was walking behind her. “You hear me? I came to the courtyard for a walk. I’m not here to see Kou Reirin or anything.”

“Uh-huh.” Leelee looked completely fed up. This had to be the umpteenth time she’d heard that excuse. “I don’t really care, so let’s hurry and get this apology to Lady Reirin over with.”

“I *told* you, that’s not why I’m here!” Keigetsu shouted on reflex. Deep down, she was worried that things were going to get truly dire if she didn’t apologize to Kou Reirin soon.

There were only six days left until the final trial. In other words, it had been four days since she’d lashed out at Reirin during the second trial.

By this point, Keigetsu had cooled down from her emotional screaming fit at the Violet Dragon’s Spring. At the time, she’d honestly felt that she didn’t want to see Reirin’s face again, but the calmer she became, the more she was forced to admit that she had no right to be upset. Though it was true that Reirin’s reckless behavior had given her a fright, that was no reason to berate her.

It was Keigetsu’s own problem if she felt inferior to her talented friend. That was the conclusion she had slowly but surely reached after holing up in her guesthouse and punching her pillow over and over again.

Besides, the final task of choosing a gift was a nightmare for someone as thoughtless as Keigetsu, and she was becoming more desperate the closer the deadline loomed near. She’d always relied on Kou Reirin when she was in

trouble. Even now, she was astounded to find herself automatically wondering, *What would Kou Reirin do?*

And she'd had the gall to claim she'd never asked for Reirin's help?

It was a simple fact that Keigetsu had depended too much on Kou Reirin, and there was no one but herself to blame for the girl's rash actions.

By the day before yesterday, she'd already begun to think, *The next time I see Kou Reirin, I'll apologize*—but alas.

Why won't Kou Reirin come talk to me?!

Keigetsu chewed her lip in impatience and irritation.

No matter what unreasonable verbal abuse she had endured from Keigetsu, even in the face of an attempt on her life, she had always opened the door to dialogue with a friendly smile. Whenever Keigetsu lapsed into a grumpy silence, the other girl would take the initiative to break the ice. It would be difficult for a Maiden to visit another clan's palace during the Rite of Reverence, sure, but the Shu Palace had the newfound common area of the storehouse.

I've yet to see her around the storehouse. Plus…my flame calls won't get through.

She shot a baleful glare at the torches lit around the courtyard to keep the area warm.

When Keigetsu cast her magic, there were two conditions that had to be met for her flame call to connect. First, both parties had to be facing a flame. Second, both parties had to wish to speak to one another—or at least not actively *refuse* the conversation.

In short, the more the person on the other end of the flame wanted to communicate, the easier the spell was to cast. In the past, Keigetsu had managed to establish contact with Kou Reirin without much trouble, but this time around, she could never sense the girl's presence beyond the flames no matter how long and hard she stared into them.

Did that mean Reirin was so sick she didn't even have the strength to look at the fire?

That was Keigetsu's first thought, but according to Leelee, Reirin had moved out to the courtyard just the day before. Too concerned to let her live in the guesthouse by herself, her court ladies had carried her off to a brazier-equipped pavilion, where she'd been spending her days ever since.

In other words, she was sitting in front of a fire at all times.

That means she's actively rejecting my flames.

This shocking truth had Keigetsu too anxious to sit still.

Kou Reirin was magnanimous enough to forgive the girl who had targeted her life, but perhaps this particular incident had been too much for her to stomach. Of course it had. If someone ever berated *Keigetsu* for trying to help them, why, she'd be tempted to push them right into a brazier.

While Keigetsu had no idea how she was going to open the conversation, she decided she'd start by going to see Reirin. If she paused for even a moment, she'd be tempted to turn back to the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion, so she walked at a steady pace to keep her momentum going.

Where in the world is Kou Reirin's pavilion?

As she strained her eyes to see into the bushes, she caught a glimpse of a pavilion draped with fur on all sides. She assumed that had to be what she was looking for, but right before she reached it, she noticed a miniature Ran dragon crest sewn into a corner of the pelt.

"What?! This isn't it!" she complained before she could stop herself, clicking her tongue.

"Oh? So this walk of yours *does* have a destination," Leelee pointed out from behind her, clearly exasperated.

Keigetsu denied the accusation, growing defensive. "D-does not! I just came to get a closer look because the fur looked so stunning!"

No sooner had she stroked the fur before her than the part of the pelt hanging from the opposite pillar rustled. "Please excuse us," came the voices of the indigo blue court ladies as they exited the pavilion.

Keigetsu and Leelee immediately slapped a hand over each other's mouths

and crouched down on the spot.

“Wait, why do *we* have to hide, Lady Keigetsu?”

“It just felt like the appropriate reaction. Besides, you’re the one who ducked first, Leelee!”

“Well, it’d look like we were up to no good if someone caught you messing with the fur.”

“*You’re* the one the court ladies don’t trust.”

These two were, after all, the infamous sewer rat of the Maiden Court and a foreign court lady with a past record of violence.

“Forget it,” Leelee conceded after a moment. “This is a pointless argument.”

“Fair.”

Both huffing in self-derision, Leelee and Keigetsu agreed to cease their hushed attempts to gouge each other’s wounds.

“Well then, my little Houshun. Now that the indigo blues are gone, let’s get down to business.”

Just then, the pair blinked when they heard a saccharine voice coming from beyond the fur pelt. Apparently, Virtuous Consort Ran was inside.

It would have been awkward to be discovered at this point. Thinking as much, Keigetsu and Leelee ended up eavesdropping on the conversation by sheer coincidence.

“Your showing in the Rite of Reverence has been middling thus far. I’m a little disappointed, but I have good news for you. Kou Reirin has fallen to pieces just ahead of the final trial, the most important stage of the rite.”

“…!”

Keigetsu and Leelee exchanged glances upon hearing Reirin’s name out of the blue. Despite her demure looks, it seemed the Virtuous Consort was a mean-spirited woman at her core. The way she’d spat out the name “Kou Reirin” oozed with undisguised malice.

“It seems her preparations for the trial aren’t going well after she got sick

from that dip in the spring. There's tension between her and Shu Keigetsu after the tongue-lashing she got too. Well, I'm sure a fight with that sewer rat wouldn't be enough to get anyone down, but it's the first time Kou Reirin has ever run into trouble in one of her relationships. It's a rare opportunity to spread scandal about her."

They couldn't see her face, but it was obvious she was grinning from her tone of voice.

"Say, my little Houshun. Kou Reirin is well on her way to dropping out of the competition. If we can just oust Kin Seika, you'll emerge as the leading candidate."

Houshun, who was presumably sitting across from her, didn't say anything. Keigetsu imagined she must have been making her usual gesture of hiding her face behind her sleeves. She was a shrewd, impudent baby squirrel. No doubt that underneath her sleeves and her guise of diffidence, she was sneering at the Virtuous Consort's cutesy act.

"What…do I have to do?"

Yet when Houshun's voice echoed after the silence, Keigetsu had to furrow her brow into an incredulous frown. It had far more of a wobble to it than she'd expected.

What?

Was Ran Houshun playing the part of the easily frightened and naive Maiden even around the Virtuous Consort? Still, that wouldn't explain the genuine fear in the way her voice cracked.

"Oh dear, no need to look so scared! I learned you're an obedient girl after the first trial. You knocked down the pillar and attempted to kill Kou Reirin, just like you were supposed to. Granted, you took it a little too far. Security was tightened as a result, and we lost our chance to try anything during the second trial."

A gasp escaped Keigetsu's lips, and in that moment Houshun's shoulders must have trembled.

"Ha ha!" came the Virtuous Consort's high-pitched laugh. "Goodness, I'm not

mad at you! If you can't kick the others to the bottom, you'll just have to rise to the top. So, my little Houshun, can you prepare the sum I've written here by tomorrow night?"

Keigetsu heard the sound of the consort thrusting something toward Houshun through the thick fur pelt. No doubt there was an exorbitant number written on it, as the Maiden feebly replied, "I can't…"

"Don't give me that. This isn't a request. We're going to receive talismans from the wondrous shaman. We have to pay her at least this much. You've been getting a decent stipend as a Maiden, haven't you?"

"But we'll get in trouble if the Eagle Eyes find out we've resorted to bribery…"

"What are the Eagle Eyes going to do? All they care about is ensuring the Rite of Reverence is a success. I've already brought them over to our side. Besides, all we're doing is providing a donation as thanks for the lovely talismans." Immediately after snapping out her cover story, she revealed her true intentions in a sickly-sweet voice. "Tomorrow night, we're hosting a secret banquet for Lady Anni. That Kin vixen tried to get the jump on us, but I sniffed out her plan and proposed that we cohost it. Which of us will do a better job indulging Lady Anni's love of luxury, I wonder? The answer will determine the results of the final trial. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Houshun kept quiet. Or perhaps she'd muttered an inaudible protest.

The next moment, there came the abrupt *thud* of someone slamming the table, followed by a gasp.

"Oh, enough of that, little Houshun. I know you're a capable girl. I think *quite* highly of you, I'll have you know."

"…"

"You can be such a handful sometimes. Shall I give your nails a little trim to help you find your nerve?"

"No!"

It was strange. Taken at face value, it sounded like a conversation between a caring consort and her demure fledgling, but the combination of the noises

interspersed throughout and the strain in Houshun's voice lent it an oddly oppressive atmosphere.

"I'll have it ready. I promise!" Houshun insisted.

The Virtuous Consort's smile was almost palpable. "Will you now? Glad to hear it." Then, a chill in the voice of the woman who had always used her innocence and decorum as her selling point, she added, "It's a small price to pay to become empress."

Ran Hourin swiftly lifted the fur on the opposite side of the tent and departed the pavilion in good spirits. Keigetsu and Leelee scrambled to make themselves smaller, holding their tongues until she disappeared into the distance.

"I can't believe it…"

The two girls eventually exhaled a long breath in unison. The sheer amount of malevolence packed into that conversation had blown their minds.

The Rans had been the ones to knock down the pillar in the first trial. In all likelihood, Ran Houshun had carried it out on the orders of the Virtuous Consort, who found Kou Reirin to be a nuisance. Not only that, but the consort was also planning to bribe the shaman—one of the judges of the final trial—to get a leg up on the competition.

And it wasn't just the Rans. The Kins were in on it too. The Pure Consort and the Virtuous Consort were plotting to sabotage the Rite of Reverence, an opportunity for the Maidens to better themselves, for their own personal gain.

"She's awful," said Keigetsu. "And that shaman turned out to be a real hustler, didn't she?"

"Never mind that. We need to inform the Eagle Eyes right away."

"There's no point. Didn't you hear what Virtuous Consort Ran said? The Eagle Eyes haven't even bothered to investigate the cave-in, using the excuse that we're in the middle of a rite. Even if we tip them off, they won't help us. The most they'll do is report back to the Virtuous Consort."

The Eagle Eyes were a mishmash of eunuchs. As an outsider brought into the court, their strait-laced captain was an exception to the rule, while the majority

took a rather laissez-faire approach to their jobs. It was hard to imagine them making an enemy of a consort.

“If we’re going to inform anyone, it ought to be Her Majesty or Prince Gyoumei… Wait, no, they’re both staying in the main palace at the moment. I guess that just leaves Kou Reirin herself.”

“Not on my watch,” came a tiny voice out of the blue.

Upon turning around with a start, Keigetsu found Ran Houshun standing behind her. After the Virtuous Consort had slipped out the opposite side of the fur pelt, she’d emerged from the pavilion herself. Now, she was fixing the Maiden and her court lady with a vacant stare.

“Could you please mind your own business?” she muttered, the color faded from her cheeks. She seemed to have abandoned her usual small animal act, but she wasn’t taking the brazen tone that characterized her true self either.

“I heard your whole dastardly scheme. You’re in no position to tell me to stay _”

Quiet, Keigetsu almost finished, only to swallow the word mid-sentence.

There was definitely something off about Houshun.

“Hey…”

Ran Houshun was supposed to be a cunning, formidable girl. Her round, droopy eyes were always watering, she’d hide her mouth behind her sleeves, and her shoulders would jump at the slightest scare. These were all things she did to keep up her “timid Ran Houshun” act. But what was reflected in her eyes now as she stood there, pale-faced, her arms hanging listlessly at her side… looked like genuine fear.

“Don’t tell me…you’re being threatened?”

Perhaps that look of hers was yet another trick in her book. Since it was only recently that Keigetsu had learned of Houshun’s true nature, it was hard to know what the girl could be thinking.

Still, she recognized the look on Ran Houshun’s face. Once upon a time, it had been the face she’d get a glimpse of every time she looked in the mirror.

It had been *her* face, back when she'd been manipulated by Noble Consort Shu, given up hope on the world, and found herself driven into a corner.

"That can't be true, right? You're too crafty for that. You'd never be outdone by someone as shortsighted as the Virtuous Consort," Keigetsu mumbled, losing confidence.

All of a sudden, Houshun giggled. She made her trademark gesture of lifting her sleeves and hiding her face.

"Ran Houshun…?"

Not a second later, the younger girl snapped her head to attention and scowled as hard as she could. "You're awful, Lady Keigetsu."

"Huh?"

"Miss Reirin's never been anything but good to you. How could you turn around and talk about her like that? 'A nuisance'? 'Vile'? Now that's just harsh."

"Ex*cuse* me?"

What in the world is she talking about?!

Houshun put Keigetsu on blast in an exaggeratedly loud voice, heedless of how the latter had lost the plot. "But I'm guessing that for all your complaints, you know you'll never get through this rite without Miss Reirin's help? Still, it's beyond shameless to try to butter *me* up just 'cause Lady Seika turned you away. Let me be clear: I have no interest in holding your hand through the Rite of Reverence."

Keigetsu was getting more confused by the second.

In the face of her bewilderment, Houshun squared her shoulders in apparent disgust. "Blame me for your own problems all you want. Hey, why not spread some rumors about me being a conniving monster while you're at it? I bet you could get your least favorite honor student to fall for it."

"What are you tal—"

"Lady Keigetsu!"

Just as Keigetsu was starting to find this eerie, Leelee tugged at her sleeve

with a hushed cry, prompting her to turn around.

And then she gulped.

“Oh no. Did you hear all that, Miss Reirin?”

Houshun was looking past Keigetsu. Behind the plants a short distance from the Ran pavilion stood none other than Kou Reirin herself. She was accompanied only by Tousetsu, and it seemed the pair was in the middle of a stroll.

“Kou Reirin!” Keigetsu shouted without thinking, assailed by an intense wave of panic.

Yet as if her cry had fallen on deaf ears, all traces of expression vanished from Reirin’s face—it became clear just how frighteningly beautiful she was when she looked like that—and she turned her head in a huff.

“Tousetsu. I’d like to give my legs a good workout, so let’s walk up that hill over there.”

Reirin left without so much as a backward glance at Keigetsu.

She ignored me?!

This was a first. Keigetsu stood rooted to the spot, too stunned to chase after her.

A beat later, she almost screamed when it dawned on her how Houshun had staged the scene. She’d made it look like Shu Keigetsu thought Kou Reirin was a nuisance, but because she lacked the skill to head into the Rite of Reverence on her own, she’d chosen to curry favor with Ran Houshun instead. Worse yet, it seemed she’d been instantly turned down and held a grudge against Houshun over it.

The Ran Maiden had fabricated an entire conversation from scratch just to create that impression.

“You’ve been holed up in your guesthouse the entire time, so I’ll bet you two haven’t heard the rumors flying around the Maiden Court over the past few days.” As Keigetsu went stiff, Houshun sidled up to her with a venomous smile. “They’re saying that Shu Keigetsu, ingrate that she is, tossed Kou Reirin aside

and is doing her best to cozy up to Kin Seika. Oh, and as of just now, there's a second rumor that you've moved on to buttering up Ran Houshun."

"Wha…"

"That'd be enough to offend even someone like Miss Reirin, it seems. She's immeasurably kind, but she's cold as ice once she's decided she hates someone. I can't tell you how many times she's slammed a door in my face. She's seriously merciless. Though that has an appeal of its own," the girl added with a giggle before tilting her head in Keigetsu's direction. "Can *you* withstand that level of rejection?"

There was unfathomable cruelty and a hint of madness in her smile.

"My guess is no. She won't ever hear you out, not even if you wedge your foot in the door."

"You…"

"Go ahead and tell her that the Rans brought down the tent. She'll just assume you're acting on a grudge."

That had been Ran Houshun's goal all along.

"That's not true," Keigetsu choked out. "As soon as we talk it out, she'll realize this was all just a charade and—"

"Talk it out? She's never going to speak to you again." Houshun was quick to dismiss her argument. Erasing the smile plastered on her face, her eyes bored into Keigetsu. "You were lucky enough to have someone willing to risk her own life to come to your aid. Yet *you* pushed her away for your own worthless pride."

"Ran Houshun…!"

"Goodbye, Lady Keigetsu," Houshun spat, turning her back on the other girl. "I'm sure Miss Reirin will never associate with you again, but that doesn't mean you can come crying to me."

With that, she took off toward the Palace of the Indigo Fox without a single court lady to accompany her. Keigetsu watched her go in a daze. The words the girl had spoken were etched into her mind like a curse, and she couldn't stop

thinking about them.

“Don’t fall into her trap, Lady Keigetsu. We have to go tell Lady Reirin.” Leelee gave her mistress’s sleeve another tug to pull her back to reality. “I mean, this *is* Lady Reirin we’re talking about. She wouldn’t fall for that blackhearted squirrel’s act. If we tell her what happened, we’ll be able to clear the air in no time. Right?”

Keigetsu turned around listlessly as she processed the comforting words her attendant had pitched. “You…think so?”

“I do. She’s the sort of person who can get past an attempt on her life with nothing but a ‘dearie me.’ At worst, even if she *does* believe those lies about you bad-mouthing her, I bet she’s not that mad about it. She’s a nice person, and I can’t imagine her ever shutting someone out completely.”

“Yeah… I guess.”

For a short time, Leelee had served Reirin closer than anyone; the words were extra persuasive coming from her. Keigetsu managed a stiff nod.

It was true that, in contrast to her own emotional nature, Kou Reirin was composed and never sweated the small stuff. She might grow grumpy for a spell, but so long as the other party put their best foot forward and explained themselves, she’d understand where they were coming from.

“You’re right.”

Everything would be fine. Once Keigetsu showed the tiny bit of courage needed to take the next step, the matter would be resolved in a flash.

At the time, Keigetsu and Leelee honestly believed that.

***

She rose before the bell announcing the hour of the rabbit could ring, got changed, applied her makeup, and styled her hair. Next came an hour of meditation, followed by breakfast. Once she’d chewed the food well and cleared her plate, she put the table away. After that, she would train in the four arts, stopping for a break once every two hours. She’d eat lunch, go for a stroll, and resume her training. Last came dinner, wiping herself clean, meditating,

and going to bed.

That had been Gen Kasui's daily routine ever since moving into the guesthouse.

It seems most of the other Maidens have given up on this lifestyle.

Kasui had heard the rumors that the Ran, Kin, and Kou Maidens had all taken refuge in the courtyard pavilions.

Just earlier, one of the kitchen maids who had come to clear her lunch table had asked, "Aren't you going to head to the gardens, Lady Kasui?" She must have found it strange that a Maiden who was so accustomed to having dozens of court ladies wait on her planned to keep living alone without the slightest fuss. It was true that those of the Gen clan didn't like to have others hanging off of them, but that didn't mean they were the self-sufficient sort either. If anything, their lack of interest in food or clothes made it easy for them to abandon those efforts altogether. For generations, the Maidens of the Gen clan had surrounded themselves with the fussiest court ladies imaginable and left it to them to handle their daily needs.

Yet as Kasui cast a glance around the guesthouse, still frigid in the afternoon hours, she thought, *I can't afford to give up my time here.*

She strained her ears and made sure there were no signs of anyone in the vicinity. The next thing she did was set out one of the wicker baskets she'd brought with her to the guesthouse—and take out the steel ore robe packed deep within it. The color was a shade lighter than charcoal black and a shade darker than ashen gray. It was the color worn by middle-ranking Gen court ladies.

Kasui changed into the court lady uniform with a practiced hand, removed all her accessories, and restyled her hair. She concealed the striking mole under her eye with makeup, and in its place, she applied a mixture of rice paste and rouge from the corner of her other eye to her temple. It had the look of a burn scar, and it would distract everyone's attention from the rest of her features. For the finishing touch, she hid her face behind a round fan, as the higher-ranking court ladies so often liked to do.

The girl reflected back in the mirror was the spitting image of a middle-ranked

Gen court lady, unremarkable save for the scar running across her face.

She would have preferred to disguise herself as a charcoal black court lady to better explain the regal way she carried herself, but it would have been harder to blend in with the high-ranked court ladies when they were so few in number. On the flip side, she'd look out of place if she tried to play the part of an ashen gray. Kasui nodded to herself, determining that she'd made the right choice going with steel ore.

Upon slipping out of the guesthouse, she exited through the gates of the Palace of the Darkest Edge, playing the part of an errand girl. If she continued straight south and headed for the center of the Maiden Court, she'd end up in the courtyard. The Kin and Ran clans were lingering there at the moment, no doubt hatching all sorts of schemes to drag the weakened Kou Reirin off her throne. The consorts of those two families were particularly ambitious.

Kasui, for her part, had no intention of joining them. It didn't matter to her how the rankings of the Rite of Reverence landed. The power struggle could be left to those who cared about the outcome. Kasui had other reasons for becoming a Maiden.

It all went back to that atrocious incident three years ago. She had come to the inner court to find out the truth behind it.

I can finally make my move…

She headed in a direction slightly west of the courtyard. It was the area where the Eagle Eyes' office, the storehouses, and various other departments that contributed to the upkeep of the inner court were located.

Realizing she was subconsciously holding her breath, she fought to steady her breathing. She placed a hand to her breast to soothe her restless mind, only to clench it upon hearing a sound like the rustling of paper.

Watch over me, Bushou. I'll be sure to find a clue today.

The Maiden was known to disappear for two hours on her daily "strolls." She had two objectives she hoped to fulfill along the way. One was to search for records or witnesses who had been around at the time. The other was to get in contact with the shaman, Anni, who had been deeply involved in the incident

three years ago.

Alas, a week had passed since she'd started living in the guesthouse, and Kasui had yet to find a clue that could help grant her wish.

Perhaps I should stop bothering with the council unit for a time.

Walking at a brisk pace, Kasui reflected on what she'd achieved so far. First, she'd gone to the council unit, where the records of all events that had taken place in the inner court were kept. But even after sneaking into the archives and turning the entire set of past records upside down, she hadn't managed to find what she was looking for.

Disguised as a court lady or not, she was bound to look suspicious if she visited the council unit too many days in a row. Thus, she'd next decided to take turns wandering the ancestral shrine and guest rooms in hopes of fulfilling her second objective: encountering the shaman, Anni. Unfortunately, since Anni tended to travel unaccompanied by pages and with little fanfare, she hadn't managed to catch so much as a glimpse of her.

She's sure to visit the inner court at least once during the Rite of Reverence, Kasui told herself, tightening her grip on the fan she was using to hide her face.

The shaman spent most of her time hidden away in a sacred ground, the exact name of which was unknown, and rarely even came to the main palace unless there was an event being held. However, when she stayed in the capital for a prolonged period of time, she'd sometimes take the initiative to hold a small-scale service in which she gave out talismans to the women of the inner court.

If I could just meet with her and ask some questions…

In truth, Kasui had wanted to approach Anni during the rite. If she let this opportunity pass, the old woman would disappear right back into her undisclosed sacred ground. Neither would Kasui herself have many more chances to spend time unchaperoned by her court ladies.

Unfortunately, the shaman never left the emperor's side. The one time she'd walked around to check on the Maidens during the second trial, she'd gotten into an argument with Shu Keigetsu before Kasui could make contact. After that

fiasco, there was no hope of conversing with her under the radar.

Kasui was growing impatient.

I saw fine fruit wines and vegetarian ingredients being carried into the kitchen I just passed. Those were clearly meant for the shaman. I imagine a banquet is going to be held soon.

Posing as a court lady, she'd asked the servants where the wines were headed, but the women had no idea. It seemed any details regarding the time, location, and purpose of the banquet were being kept strictly under wraps. Things were getting fishier by the minute.

Supposing there's a consort trying to win the shaman over with a banquet, personality-wise, it would most likely be Ran's or Kin's. Perhaps I should try sounding out both of their Maidens… No, it would look too suspicious if I started up a conversation out of the blue.

Kasui deeply regretted that she'd never bothered to have an intimate conversation with the other Maidens before. She wasn't a sociable person by nature, and she'd assumed that the girls wouldn't know anything about the "incident" given their ages, so she'd given up on interacting with them early on.

As a consequence, she had no idea how to make conversation with Shu Keigetsu or Kou Reirin either—and she had something she wanted to ask both of them. Regrettably, Shu Keigetsu had been holed up in her guesthouse in the Shu Palace, Kou Reirin had fallen ill after her drowning scare, and Kasui hadn't had the nerve to venture into another clan's territory.

There were only a few days left before the Rite of Reverence was over. There was no time left to hesitate.

Lady Reirin is staying in the courtyard. It should be easier to approach her there than in another clan's palace. I'll be certain to pay her a visit either today or tomorrow. But first, I must track down the shaman. If only I could extract information on the banquet from the other clans' middle-ranked court ladies…

Her lips pursed in the shadow of her fan, Kasui brainstormed ways to sneak into the other clans' palaces. Which group would be easier to infiltrate: the resplendent Kin court ladies or the predominantly petite and reserved Ran

court ladies?

First things first, I must procure another clan's court lady uniform. I wonder if I can talk someone into loaning me one, like I did for this steel ore robe. Or would it be faster to knock them out and steal it?

Kasui was sensible as members of the Gen clan went, but at the end of the day, she was still a Gen; she wouldn't hesitate to resort to violence to achieve her goals.

"Where are you going?"

As she walked, lost in thought, someone called out to her from behind. Kasui looked up with a start.

"My apologies." She rushed down to her knees, assuming the appropriate attitude for a steel ore court lady. "It's a pleasure, Worthy Consort Gen."

The one who had approached her was none other than Gen Gousetsu.

"Do you require anything of me, ma'am?" asked Kasui. She bowed her head low, keeping up her court lady act, only for the consort to put a swift end to her efforts.

"I asked where you were going, Kasui."

It seemed one brief look at her face—no, a look from behind—had been all it took to give her away.

Kasui tightened her grip on the fan she'd rested on her knees, but eventually found her nerve and lifted her head. "I was going for a walk."

"Disguised as a steel ore court lady? Having gone to the trouble of making yourself a fake burn scar?"

Even Kasui realized how pathetic her own excuse was.

Not long after she had lapsed into silence, she heard Gousetsu huff a soft sigh. "No matter. I'm sure it's difficult to wander as you please as a Maiden. You could use a little recreation from time to time."

She was so quick to accept the explanation that Kasui had to frown in disbelief.

“But there will be an outcry if you set foot in one of the other palaces in a disguise. Keep to the Palace of the Darkest Edge.”

Kasui found herself staring long and hard into the consort’s face. Why? Because the woman wasn’t overlooking the suspicious disguise out of the kindness of her heart. She simply didn’t want Kasui to wander outside their grounds; *that* would have presented a much more serious issue. That was what it sounded like she was thinking.

“Come.” Growing impatient when Kasui fell silent again, Gousetsu dragged her along by the arm. “Let’s head back.”

“…”

Upon noticing that the obedient Maiden refused to move from the spot, the Worthy Consort scrunched her shapely brow into the slightest of frowns. “Kasui.”

“No.” Kasui’s response was quiet but firm. “I’ve been waiting for the chance to investigate on my own for so long, Worthy Consort Gen.”

Gousetsu didn’t bother to scold her any further. She pulled Kasui along without entertaining her protests. Neither did Kasui try to argue back again. She shook herself free of the consort’s grasp without another word.

The consort tried to grab her by the scruff of the neck, but the Maiden crouched down to avoid it. The consort made a grab for her robe, only for the Maiden to snatch her hand midair. A kick for a leg sweep. A fist for a fist.

All those who carried the blood of the Gens, the clan of warfare, were skilled martial artists.

The Gen women’s fight was a silent one. Neither was going all out, but both of them meant business. The way things were headed, one of them was bound to end up gravely injured.

One very small sound put a damper on the battle as it steadily grew to a fever pitch. It was the rustle of a sheaf of papers dropping from the disheveled breast of Kasui’s garment.

“Ack!”

Snapping to her senses, Kasui crouched down in a panic, heedless of the opening it made in her defenses.

Gousetsu managed to pick the papers up before she could. Her eyes swiftly ran over the pages, and the look on her face hardened. “What is this?”

Kasui reached a hand for them, but Gousetsu twisted out of the way, refusing to let her reclaim what she’d lost. “What is this letter?”

“Please give it back.” Kasui’s voice hitched for the first time.

It was clear in the way she moved that she’d lost her composure, and the hands she blindly reached for the letter scratched and tore at the thin paper.

“This is a good opportunity for you.”

The letter fluttered down atop the gravel. Its words were written in the neat handwriting of a woman.

“We’ll have to live apart eventually, so you mustn’t spend your days tagging along in my shadow.”

The phrasing was terse. It was almost like Kasui’s manner of speech put to page. All women of the Gen clan were equally inarticulate, however, and that applied even to the letters on the page.

“Don’t forget to enjoy your own life.”

The majority crafted together bland strings of sentences—while packing a love too strong to capture in writing into the neat letters. These letters were written not by Kasui but by her older sister, Bushou.

“This is the final letter my sister Bushou sent me from the imperial capital.” Kneeling atop the gravel, Kasui picked up the scraps of the letter with trembling hands. Clutching it close to her chest, she gritted her teeth and said, “Bushou was originally meant to become our Maiden. She came to the imperial capital to receive initiation in advance of her admission to the court, and she sent me back letters each and every day. Yet soon after this letter departed the capital, there was *the incident*…”

Her hands clutched the shredded paper hard enough to shake. A wave of rage rippled through Kasui’s emotionless eyes.

“From that day onward, everyone tiptoed around her, and all traces of her existence were erased after her death. Her clothes, her accessories, and her various creations were destroyed, and all the letters that had already arrived were burnt. The only things I managed to save were this letter and mirror, which she never got around to sending, and…”

As she was unaccustomed to putting her emotions on display, the Maiden’s throat seized up.

“The will she left behind, scrawling illegible words over the page in her disabled state. She excelled at painting and calligraphy, and she was even skilled enough to design a family heirloom, yet in her final moments—”

“Kasui, it is forbidden to speak her name,” the Worthy Consort said to her Maiden, whose eyes welled with tears. “We cannot abide the fact that the Gen clan, those who share the same blood as His Majesty, would produce such a despicable traitor.”

“She was no traitor!” Kasui’s shout was more of a strangled cry. “Bushou would never do such a thing! Surely you realize that?! My sister was a kind woman. She was a far cry from our parents, who only saw their daughter as a pawn in a power struggle. She wanted nothing more than to shine a light on the hearts of her husband and her subjects. She was set up!”

“Calm yourself.” In contrast to Kasui’s shouting, Gousetsu’s voice was perfectly even. “She was indeed a promising young woman. Hence, I invited her to the imperial capital for her initiation prior to her term. Yet she harbored rebellion in her heart, and she brought a blade into the inner court. It is because she possessed a wicked soul that she lost her life to the flames of the Trial by Fire, a ritual in which only sinners are meant to burn.”

“You’re wrong!” Kasui balled her hands into fists, refusing to back down. “It wasn’t a blade. It was an ornamental sword. Bushou only wished to show her handiwork to the potters. Her intentions were misconstrued, and as a consequence, she was branded a criminal and locked inside a guesthouse even after she was sent back to the northern territory.”

“…”

“Forsaken by her family and denied the healing herb of miracle hemp, Bushou

was tortured by mysterious burns that refused to heal…until she finally died." The torn letter crinkled in her clenched fists. Kasui's eyes flashed with an intense hatred. "My own parents refuse to look into what happened. There must have been a reason for it. There must have been someone who denounced Bushou as wicked. There must be someone who ordered the shaman to conduct the Trial by Fire. Or perhaps the shaman herself…"

The Worthy Consort thrust herself forward to silence her charge. "Kasui."



“Yes, speaking of that shaman. Anni.” Kasui slowly rose to her feet. “She surprised me during the second trial. She made it look like Shu Keigetsu’s paper had caught fire all because the girl insulted her. I saw her rub her hands against the page in a suspicious way. Indeed, she lit that fire herself. There was never anything wicked about Shu Keigetsu’s calligraphy.”

Images of the second trial flashed across black eyes that glowed with a quiet determination. The rice paper that had burst into flames. The bad omen and subsequent judgment that Anni herself had passed down.

That hadn’t been a miracle brought about by faith. It had been the arrogant shaman taking the law into her own hands. The moment Kasui witnessed that, doubts had begun to flood her mind. Could something similar have taken place in the inner court three years prior?

“Shu Keigetsu and Kou Reirin got into a fight immediately afterward, so everyone’s attention shifted there. But what if Kou Reirin was sick in bed because Anni, having taken offense to a perceived insult, slipped her a poison of some kind?”

“You’re overthinking this, Kasui.”

“Three years ago, I assumed the shaman had carried out the trial under someone else’s orders. I figured that ‘someone’ must be the mastermind. But what if the shaman herself was the one to set it up? What if Bushou was subjected to the Trial by Fire because she incurred the shaman’s wrath? Yes, perhaps the shaman took revenge—”

“Kasui!” came Gousetsu’s terse roar amid Kasui’s ramblings.

The rare shout of the soft-spoken Worthy Consort packed the punch to knock her conversation partner flat. When the consort saw her Maiden’s shoulders jump, she let her gaze drop briefly to the ground before lifting it once more. By the time her obsidian eyes reflected Kasui’s image, all traces of expression had disappeared from her face.

“Do not violate the taboo.”

“…”

“All traces of her existence have been wiped from the Gen clan and the world at large. You never had a sister. I’ll dispose of these letters later,” the consort declared with a tone of finality. For a while, Kasui hung her head in silence. “Let’s go.”

“Worthy Consort Gen.” Just as the consort had turned on her heel and begun to walk off, Kasui called her to a stop in a quiet voice. “You always come running when I attempt to set foot on another clan’s grounds. But that’s not because you’re worried I’m too sheltered to be on my own, is it? You’re keeping an eye on me. You don’t want me finding out something I shouldn’t know.”

Gousetsu’s shoes ground to a halt with a *crunch*. Upon noting that, a dark smile rose to Kasui’s lips.

“Of course. The only one this fixated on uncovering the truth of Bushou’s death would be me, her little sister. It was in your best interests to keep me close at hand as your Maiden and keep an eye on me. Say, Worthy Consort… what are you hiding from me?”

“Kasui.”

“An inconvenient truth? Were you also involved in the incident, by chance?”

“Of course not,” Gousetsu said curtly.

“Then why won’t you let me investigate?!” Kasui snapped. “All the records of that day have been erased due to the gag order. All the court ladies who were present have been forced to resign. I have no options left but to go around asking questions!” She took a large stride forward, noisily scattering gravel in her wake. “Doesn’t it frustrate you, Worthy Consort? Doesn’t it make you furious?! How can you expect me to sit still after we lost the one warm, sincere woman among us coldhearted Gens?!”

“Calm down. What good is there in letting your misguided thirst for vengeance drive you off the right path? If you don’t believe she was wicked, then consider it a tragedy. It was nothing more than an unfortunate accident.”

“No! It was no accident. Someone ordered the shaman to put her through that harrowing Trial by Fire. Or perhaps the shaman herself was the culprit. Whoever it was, I won’t let them get away with it.”

For all that she rarely expressed such violent emotion, Kasui's fists were trembling.

"Kasui. The shaman was only doing her job. She even covertly administered treatment after the ritual. Your sister didn't die because of the trial. She died because of the misfortune wrought by her soul."

"You're wrong! Big Sister, she—!" Kasui called her sister by a familial title without thinking, then, as if embarrassed she'd referred to her in such a juvenile way, switched to calling her by her name. Her voice shook with the effort to hold back her tears. "*Bushou* did nothing wrong. Someone set her up, and she was killed in the Trial by Fire."

Gousetsu put a pacifying hand on her shoulder. "Incorrect. She died because there wasn't enough miracle hemp on hand at the time."

"Well, in that case… I'll make the one who bought up all the miracle hemp answer for their sins!" yelled Kasui, sharply brushing the hand aside as if to reject the consolation.

She wanted to cling to her hatred. She wasn't used to crying or wailing. Emotions that raged only for the target of her fixation rampaged through Kasui's body with nowhere else to go.

"Sometimes, I find it hard to breathe…" A murmur cut through her labored breathing. "I feel such hatred and such despair. I don't care about anything else. Glory, rank, duty, all of it… It all feels so empty."

"Kasui…"

"Is that not true of you, Worthy Consort? Are you truly as calm as the still waters? If so, I will never be like you." Still clutching the scraps of the letter to her chest, Kasui wobbled back a step. "If I can't have revenge…I won't know what to do anymore."

She kept repeating "I won't know what to do" in a vanishingly small voice.

"Kasui." The Worthy Consort gazed quietly upon the Maiden who refused to engage with her. It was impossible to read emotion from the woman's unmoving expression. That went even for Kasui, a fellow member of the Gen clan. "You mustn't let emotion consume you. Think only of how to prosper as a

Maiden. Keep your head down and stay where I can see you.”

Her monotonous voice sounded like it could have been either compassionate or neglectful of the girl before her. She could have been keeping the bird inside its cage either to protect it or lock it away.

“You are not permitted to roam the inner court unattended. Stay in either the Gen Palace or the courtyard for the duration of the Rite of Reverence. Otherwise, you will be dealt with accordingly,” the Worthy Consort said, leaving no room for argument. And with that, she walked off without so much as a backward glance.

Chapter 5:
Reirin Escalates

KASUI,

Forget about the miracle hemp.

Don't cry.

Live a happy life.

I love you.

Love,

***

Fur pelts had been draped over all four pillars of the pavilions, and it looked like several braziers had been carried inside. Atop those sat iron kettles emitting clouds of white steam. Nearby were pots filled to the brim with water, baskets full of fruit, and even a simply constructed hearth. Each of the clan-occupied pavilions, which were meant to be little more than temporary shelters during the daylight hours, had been better outfitted with each passing day until they'd been transformed into miniature estates.

When Leelee pinpointed the Kou clan's shelter among the cluster of comfortably arranged pavilions, she heaved a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness. She's in the courtyard.

Then again, it was tough to say whether that was truly a good thing. Her nerves ran high as she thought about the mission entrusted to her. Clutching a hand to where a crinkling sound came from her breast, Leelee cautiously approached the pavilion.

How many years has it been since I helped mediate a fight? I need to make sure I do this right.

Indeed, Leelee was on her way to deliver a letter from Keigetsu to Reirin.

It was only yesterday that Keigetsu had been threatened by Houshun after overhearing the Rans' insidious plot. Though she had been upset for some time afterward, she had made up her mind to convey the situation to Reirin, thanks to Leelee's persistent encouragement.

Still, after that one-sided dressing-down she'd dished out—not to mention the fact that she'd just witnessed Reirin ignoring her—it would have been too much to ask Keigetsu to go see her in person. Basically, she had chickened out.

Since a flame call would require her to look the other girl in the face, she was likewise reluctant to use that method. Eventually, she'd talked herself down to writing a letter. Though Leelee had scolded her mistress for being so weak-kneed, in the end, she'd opted to respect Keigetsu's wishes. Reirin was only

human, after all. She probably had bad days just like anyone else. Keigetsu must have been worried that showing her face when she wasn't wanted might rub her friend the wrong way.

As Keigetsu had begun stringing together a series of excuses, Leelee spent the night alternating between scolding and encouraging her, until she'd finally coaxed her mistress into writing out an apology and a request to discuss what the Rans were plotting. Once the letter had at last been completed around noon, Leelee had run off to deliver the message.

How can it take one person so long to say, "I'm sorry"? What is she, five years old? Leelee disparaged Keigetsu in her mind to ease some of her own tension. Pavilion or not, it was still nerve-racking to set foot in another clan's territory.

Well, it shouldn't have been. Leelee told herself that over and over again.

I mean, this is Lady Reirin we're talking about. The situation won't have gotten out of hand.

Kou Reirin was a boundlessly benevolent person. Once upon a time, Leelee had brought down a knife on her, and she hadn't even gotten mad. She'd just cradled her close and said, "I'm sorry for not noticing sooner." She was like that even toward people who went after her own life. Supposing she *had* felt a brief flash of anger toward Keigetsu for lashing out at her, so long as the other girl offered a proper apology, she'd be sure to laugh it off and forgive her with, "Oh, what am I going to do with you?"

The depths of Lady Reirin's magnanimity far exceed the average person, thought Leelee, unsure whom she was supposed to be convincing of this. And it was as the thought crossed her mind that she made it to the pavilion at last.

In a case of good timing, Reirin had just parted the wall of a fur and taken a graceful step outside, perhaps looking to get a breath of fresh air. As usual, she boasted the beauty of a light snow that could melt at the slightest touch.

"My!"

With a blink of her long lashes, Reirin cast a glance over her shoulder. Leelee froze up the moment their eyes met, only to feel a wave of relief when she saw the other girl break into a smile.

“Did you come for a visit, Leelee?”

“Ah, yes… More or less.”

Thank goodness. She’s smiling. She was the usual Kou Reirin—the Maiden who would offer kind words to even the court ladies.

“It’s so cold out today. Would you like to come in and sit by the fire?”

“N-no, I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“Oh, don’t hold back on my account. I was just about to brew your favorite tea.”

“No, I really couldn’t…”

Her gentle way of speaking and warm demeanor were the same as ever. Assuming that she was back in a good mood, Leelee felt relieved enough to cut to the chase.

“Well, I haven’t come for a *visit*, exactly. I came to deliver a message from Lady Keigetsu—”

“Hunh?!”

Just then, an almost dark grunt escaped Reirin’s lips. Leelee was taken aback.

What?

Was it her imagination, or had an extremely vulgar exclamation escaped those lips known for producing a bell-like tinkle? No—she could’ve sworn she’d heard the sound of the raging north winds mixed in there too.

“I’m sorry, Leelee. What did you just say?”

Given that Reirin was still wearing her trademark gentle smile, Leelee came to the conclusion that she’d just been hearing things.

“Erm… I’ve been entrusted with a letter from Lady Keigetsu—”

“Hunh?!”

No, that wasn’t right. That oddly menacing voice was definitely Reirin’s.

Uhhh…

As Leelee went stiff, Reirin put a hand to her cheek in an oh-so-relaxed

gesture and tilted her head to one side. “My apologies. I couldn’t hear what you just said. Particularly the part with a name.”

“Wha…?”

“Come here, Leelee,” Tousetsu called out to the dazed redhead in a fluster, having followed her mistress out of the pavilion.

Leelee was stunned to hear what the calm and composed head court lady next whispered into her ear, her face taut with tension.

“You mustn’t mention Shu Keigetsu’s name in front of Lady Reirin.” Tugging Leelee along by the sleeve, Tousetsu added in a voice too quiet for her mistress to overhear, “Lady Reirin is furious with Lady Keigetsu like never before.”

“She’s *what*?”

“She has been like that ever since she heard the rumor about Shu Keigetsu spreading the word that she hates her. Whenever someone speaks Lady Keigetsu’s name, she blocks it out as hard as she can.”

The situation’s gotten totally out of hand!

Evidently, her heartbreak following their quarrel at the Violet Dragon’s Spring had warped into anger somewhere down the line. Each time the subject of Keigetsu came up, she would shut down the entire conversation with a smile on her face.

Leelee couldn’t help but moan. “What the heck?”

How could someone who would forgive an attempted murder get so mad over a petty argument?

Whatever the case, nodding along the moment she was asked not to mention Keigetsu’s name would make her whole trip a fool’s errand. Pressing a hand to the breast of her garment, Leelee knelt before Reirin. Bearing in mind that she was there as a Maiden’s envoy, she adopted the appropriate tone for a court lady.

“Your anger is justified, Lady Reirin. As a denizen of the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion, I sincerely apologize for the shameful abuse my mistress uttered the other day. She has reflected on her mistakes and written you a

letter of apology. There are some other matters she would like to discuss with you as well, so please start by reading this—”

Unfortunately, her masterful preface was interrupted with a soft “oh my” from Reirin.

“An apology? Whatever for?” She gently dropped to her knees before Leelee. “I have no idea what you could be referring to.”

Her gaze soft as she stroked Leelee’s disheveled hair, she ought to have been the picture of a benevolent butterfly, but she emanated an air of intensity that sent a shiver down the spine.

“If she believes she can resolve the matter by entrusting a single letter to someone else, why, that’s a thought as warm as a springtime garden.”

Holy crap! She totally just said, “Is her damn head as empty as a spring garden?!”

Upon reading the insult buried in those serene tones, Leelee began to tremble.

She was angry, all right.

She was *furious*.

“Uh, well, you see… Lady Keigetsu’s intention wasn’t to take the easy way out, of course. It’s simply that this is going to be a rather involved discussion, so she hoped to seek your opinion in advance. That is, she wanted to tread with caution.”

She couldn’t back down now. That bumbling, cowardly Keigetsu had mustered all her courage to write that letter. Plus, this was a matter of Reirin’s personal safety.

Scolding her body for quivering before Reirin’s might, Leelee forced herself to pitch forward. “Lady Keigetsu is worried for you. The reason being that Ran Houshun—”

“You mean to tell me that Ran Houshun is out to kill me?”

The moment she saw Reirin’s unamused, disbelieving smile, Leelee realized she had made a mistake.

Shoot!

Keigetsu's greatest fear had been Reirin writing off that warning as part of her grudge. Furthermore, it wasn't a court lady's place to relay the contents of a letter without permission.

"Erm, I know it might be difficult to believe after the exchange you witnessed yesterday…but that was all an act staged by Ran Houshun, and Lady Keigetsu was merely tricked into being part of it."

"Oh, is that the excuse that's written here? Goodness, Leelee, you mustn't go around sharing the contents of your mistress's letters."

"No, uh, I didn't mean to share it… And it's not an excuse! Er, it rather sounds like one, yes, but I swear it isn't."

What was she supposed to do? She was so surprised to discover Kou Reirin's anger had compounded that she wasn't sure how to react.

Leelee, too, was an emotional woman of the Shu. Once she'd started to panic, her distress only grew and grew until all her rehearsed remarks had flown from her head. "A-at any rate, please just read the—"

"I must ask that you take your leave." Reirin dismissed the flustered court lady with a tone of finality. "She is the one who said she doesn't wish to see my face. As she has requested, I will neither go see her nor read her letter. Please relay as much to your mistress."

"Lady Reirin!" Leelee raised a voice of despair at Reirin's uncooperative attitude.

Before her outstretched hand could graze Reirin's ruqun, the girl swiftly retreated back into her pavilion. At a loss for what else to do, Leelee nearly dove through the fur wall after it fell closed with a small rustle, only for someone to grab her by the arm and say, "Please wait."

It was Tousetsu, her face set into a stiff expression.

"You mustn't push her too hard. Do you have any idea what will happen if we provoke Lady Reirin further?"

"No, what?!"

“I don’t know either!” At her wits’ end, Tousetsu ran a hand through her hair, abandoning her best attempts at decorum with a fellow high-ranking court lady. “I’ve never seen Lady Reirin this upset. The one thing I know is that she’s in a foul mood, and the edges of her smile are tinged with murder. To be frank, it scares me. I beg you not to push her further over the edge.”

“Must be pretty bad if *you’re* scared,” Leelee muttered despite herself, then hugged herself on instinct as she thought back to her encounter with Reirin moments ago. If she were a man, that assault almost certainly would have left her doubled over. “But what are we supposed to do? You might not believe me, but I really do have something urgent to tell Lady Reirin. It looks like Ran Houshun is up to no good again.”

“Indeed. I had a feeling something was off about that glimpse we caught of Lady Keigetsu and Lady Houshun yesterday. I’m sure Lady Reirin will realize as much herself as soon as she calms down… So perhaps *that* should be our first order of business.”

Tousetsu tended to let her loyalty toward her mistress blind her, but just this once, it seemed she’d taken a surprisingly objective view of the situation. Maybe it was because her mistress was the one running berserk.

Leelee grasped Tousetsu’s hands in desperation. “I knew she could be merciless sometimes, but I never thought I’d see the day when she was so angry with Lady Keigetsu! What do we do? At this rate, my mistress is going to end up squashed like an aphid!”

“She seems to have found reaching out via letter to be an insincere gesture, so for a start, let’s ask Lady Keigetsu to come explain in person. I will accompany you.” With a thoughtful nod, Tousetsu added, “Lady Reirin is too furious to get anything done at the moment. We have yet to begin any preparations for the final trial. If something doesn’t change soon, my lady is going to have a difficult time with the Rite of Reverence.”

“Same here,” said Leelee, her face falling. “Despite being the first to start hurling insults, Lady Keigetsu has been throwing tantrums because Lady Reirin refuses to meet her halfway. Of course, she’s been in no state of mind to prepare a gift. It’s giving me an ulcer.”

“I never imagined Lady Reirin would be so shaken by a mere argument… We must help them reconcile as soon as possible.”

“You said it.”

And thus did court ladies of two rather incompatible clans steel their faces in unison and forge an unprecedented alliance.

“Kou Reirin ignored my letter?!”

Alas, Leelee and Tousetsu’s plan to persuade Keigetsu met a setback right out of the gate.

In the far reaches of the Maiden Court, under a pavilion a good distance from the Kou clan’s, Keigetsu had been fidgeting restlessly as she waited for her court lady to come back. The instant she saw the two women return with discomfited looks on their faces, she flew into a rage.

“What’s the meaning of this?! Did you mention that I had an important message for her?! And that I was planning to apologize?!”

“Yes! Of course I did!”

“Then how did this happen?!”

It was in Keigetsu’s nature to channel all her sadness and humiliation into angry screeching. She couldn’t accept the fact that a letter she’d spent a whole day and night writing in her first-ever effort to compromise had gone unread.

Keigetsu cut Leelee off halfway through her report, and in an effort to drown out the tears welling in her eyes with her howling, she screamed until she went red in the face. “How dare she! I was going out of my way to warn her! How stupid can she be to fall hook, line, and sinker for Ran Houshun’s act?! Does she seriously think I’m that sleazy a person?!”

“Th-there’s obviously been a miscommunication somewhere. It’d be better to clear it up in person than to send a letter—”

“I’m not going! Not a chance!” Keigetsu shrieked, spurning Leelee’s advice.

And she wasn’t content to stop there—in her first full-blown fit of rage in a

long time, Keigetsu started picking up and throwing everything lying around in the pavilion.

"What's her problem?! It wasn't anything worth getting *that* mad about! I can't believe how petty she is!"

The teacup in her hand was the first thing to break, shattering with a loud *crash*.

"So much for 'Have a little more faith in yourself'! So much for 'Let's do this with a bang!' Who does she think she is, building someone up only to cast them aside when they need her most?!"

Next went the incense burner she'd recently started using in an imitation of Kou Reirin.

"Yeah, true, I *did* say I didn't want to see her face. I'd changed my mind, but that was stupid of me. I had it right the first time. I never want to speak to Kou Reirin again!"

Once she'd run out of brushes, ink, and other objects to throw, she landed a kick on the stone table.

While Tousetsu's eyes widened at the intensity of her emotional outburst, Keigetsu fixed her with a glare. "Just so we're clear, Tousetsu, there's no way I'm going to talk to Kou Reirin. Not in a hundred years!"

"I see…"

"I have information that could save Kou Reirin's life, and I would've even been willing to testify on her behalf. But not anymore. If she wants my help, *she'd* better get down on her knees and apologize to *me*!"

Why on earth should Reirin have to apologize to Keigetsu in this scenario? Tousetsu was taken aback, but apparently the logic checked out in Keigetsu's head. Kou Reirin had hurt her, so she was owed an apology.

"Er, that's a bit much…"

"Shut up! Just shut up! Don't you value your mistress's life?! Now get out of here and bring me Kou Reirin!"

Keigetsu mussed up her hair and kicked away the debris that littered the

floor.

Tousetsu was about to argue about how unreasonable a request that was, but this time, Leelee was the one to stop her. “Hold on. I get what you’re thinking, but wait. This is one of Lady Keigetsu’s cries for help.”

“Her what?”

“She did her best to apologize, only to be met with a flat-out rejection. Her heart’s been shattered to pieces. If she goes to see Lady Reirin in person and gets rebuffed again, it’ll kill her. That’s why she wants her to come here.”

Over the course of their relationship since the first swap, Leelee had become quite the skilled translator of Keigetsu-ese.

“That’s…quite an aggressive way to ask to be coddled.”

“I don’t disagree. But that’s exactly what Lady Reirin used to like about her.” Leelee heaved a deep sigh. “Either way, we won’t have much luck dragging Lady Keigetsu out in this state.”

“I’m fully prepared to take her away by force. What should I try first: a gag, drugs, or threats?”

“All of those options sound like they’d end terribly!” Leelee scolded Tousetsu, who seemed poised to make the situation worse, before raking a hand through her hair. “It’d be much easier to bring Lady Reirin here instead. She’s a forgiving person when it comes down to it. Don’t you think *she’d* be a better target for a kidnapping, Miss Head Court Lady?”

“You want me to kidnap Lady Reirin?! Preposterous. Turning a blade against my mistress is the one thing I refuse to do.”

“Well, I can’t exactly turn against Lady Keigetsu either, you know?”

“That’s hardly my problem. Lady Reirin is my top priority. If you’re so concerned about betraying your mistress, you could easily solve the issue by transferring to the Palace of the Golden Qilin.”

“Would you listen to me?!”

Leelee felt a stomachache coming on. This was the worst. She was surrounded by people with no common sense.

“Anyway, it’s clear that Lady Keigetsu is hurt. Hmm, maybe we should start by telling Lady Reirin that. If we play our cards right, we might be able to win some sympathy points…”

She would have loved to throw in the towel if she could, but that wasn’t an option. She had to do whatever she could and hope that it would be enough.

“Let’s do this with a bang…”

“Yes…”

Painfully aware of how leaden their footsteps were getting, Leelee and Tousetsu turned back to the pavilion where Reirin awaited them.

Alas.

“Please, we’re begging you here,” Leelee said to Reirin, her forehead pressed to the ground. “Could you come pay her the briefest of visits? I won’t budge from this spot until you say yes!”

“Oh dear.” Reirin offered one of her mild stock responses while her face remained fixed in a smile, showing not so much as a twitch in expression. “That would be simply awful. In that case, I’d better go make myself presentable. Would you mind waiting here?” she asked, serene as ever, before parting the wall of fur and diving back into the pavilion.

“Erm…” Leelee’s face had frozen at the ineffable sense of foreboding, but she breathed a sigh of relief when it seemed her request had been accepted. “Well, that was easier than I expected,” she remarked, turning to look back at Tousetsu.

“No,” the latter replied, her face pale as she rubbed her arms like she was freezing. “Lady Reirin never takes long to get ready. That was code for ‘Spend the rest of your life waiting, then.’”

“So she won’t show up until the next life?!”

Leelee and Tousetsu cast a helpless glance heavenward. At length, they erased all traces of expression from their faces and stared straight ahead.

“It’s useless trying to reason with Lady Reirin. I see that now. Let’s focus on

persuading Lady Keigetsu.”

“Yes…”

“I’m sure she’s returned to the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion by now, so I’ll make the trip alone as a fellow Shu. I can’t imagine you’d be allowed to set foot in another clan’s guesthouse.”

“No, security around the Shu Palace is all but nonexistent. I’ll go with you. In exchange, I’d like you to come with me when it’s time to convince Lady Reirin.”

“That’s fair.”

Reirin could be as intimidating as a conqueror. Tousetsu may have been known as the glacial court lady, but even she didn’t want to confront the enraged Kou Maiden all alone.

Leelee and Tousetsu heaved a sigh in unison before dragging themselves back to Keigetsu’s chambers.

“Who said you could come back, you good-for-nothings?! And I’ll have you know this is *trespassing*, Tousetsu!”

A stream of flying furniture greeted them the moment they returned, dashing their hopes.

Her thread of rationality beginning to snap, Tousetsu came close to landing a reflexive chop to Keigetsu’s neck, but Leelee scrambled to hold her back.

This had every chance of turning into a bloodbath. Arriving at that conclusion, Leelee did her best to placate Tousetsu, and they headed back to Reirin once more.

“Hello, Tousetsu, Leelee. You’ve been making so many trips back and forth. Are you quite all right?”

When the pair came crawling back to the pavilion, Reirin met them with a benevolent smile. Upon asking about their well-being, however, she slowly tapped her temple with a slender finger.

Holy crap! She totally just asked us, "Are you all right in the head?"

The court ladies broke out into a cold sweat and opted for an immediate retreat.

"I'm done with Kou Reirin! A couple of mere court ladies have no right to be bossing me around!"

Shu Keigetsu lashed out at them without holding anything back.

"What's this? I keep hearing voices, but there's no one around. How mysterious."

Kou Reirin refused to leave her pavilion, at last resorting to giving the messengers the silent treatment.

Shu Keigetsu continued to rant and rave.

Kou Reirin insisted on maintaining her silence.

As the sun began to set, Leelee and Tousetsu, who had quite literally been given the runaround, came to a simultaneous halt near a small pond halfway between their two destinations—the courtyard in the middle of the court and Keigetsu's guesthouse located on the far fringes of the Shu Palace. They'd spent the last several hours making trips back, forth, north, and south across the vast grounds. Add to that the fact that they'd been careful not to get caught on the go and their nerves had been running high the entire time. The pair was exhausted.

The smell of boiled rice and steamed greens wafted over from the kitchen a short distance away. Both women had reached the limit of how much hunger and cold they could endure. Their eyes had the glazed look of a dead fish.

Whichever direction they headed next, they were doomed to be caught between two very stubborn Maidens.

Keigetsu had doubled down. The court ladies had considered dragging her to Reirin by force, but bringing her along when she had no intention of apologizing was bound to make things worse. The ideal solution would have been to talk her into going herself, but as she'd hissed at them earlier, she wasn't the sort of person to listen to "mere court ladies."

Reirin, meanwhile, had barricaded herself inside her pavilion. It seemed she'd ordered her attending court ladies to leave her. There was the option of forcing their way into her abode and scolding her for being so obstinate, but Tousetsu respected her mistress far too much to do that, and as another clan's court lady, Leelee would have been sent straight to the dungeons had she tried.

If only there was someone of a higher rank who could make Keigetsu see reason. Or, if nothing else, if only Leelee were a court lady of the Kou clan…

Tousetsu looked to the east side of the pond in a daze, while Leelee stared vacantly toward the west.

Eventually, Tousetsu broke the silence. "Allow me to think out loud for a moment, if you would." Her gaze was fixed on the lake, as if to emphasize that the comment wasn't directed at anyone in particular. "Back when I still served Her Majesty, I learned that the well a little ways ahead is an emergency escape route. If one takes a wrong turn down there, one might just so happen to wander into the main palace, where one might just so happen to come across an exalted figure."

In short, it was a shortcut to facilitate trysts between the emperor and his concubines.

This was a shocking fact for any lady of the inner court to learn. Leelee's head swiveled automatically, but when Tousetsu stubbornly refused to make eye contact, she soon turned her gaze back to the pond.

"Huh. I couldn't hear you just now."

"I believe it our duty as court ladies to familiarize ourselves with those escape routes from time to time."

"I can't hear a word you're saying, but I'm sure it's a good idea. I'd love to give my Lady Keigetsu an in-person demonstration. It would be terrible if she *just so*

happened to come across an exalted figure, though."

"It certainly would be a shame if she *just so happened* to receive a scolding from that exalted figure, but we are all powerless to the whims of fate."

"Uh-huh. Nothing we can do."

Even with their backs turned to one another, Leelee could sense Tousetsu smiling in desperation. She then took a step in the direction of the well.

When Leelee started to follow, Tousetsu abruptly cast a glance over her shoulder. "Leelee."

It was the first time she had ever referred to another clan's court lady by name.

"The Eagle Eyes are more likely to detain me for questioning if I'm around a redhead like you. Furthermore, seeing as you have a criminal record, your punishment will be more severe if you're caught. I'll take care of the rest, so you stay back and rest." She paused. "As a gamboge gold, I'm ashamed that I've failed to talk sense into my own mistress. I apologize for allowing my own incompetence to drag you into this."

At first it seemed like she was criticizing the girl's foreign background, but it turned out she was actually concerned about Leelee getting caught by the Eagle Eyes. If Tousetsu were to come under fire for using the secret shortcut, she would rather face the punishment alone. Evidently, she felt guilty that she'd failed to admonish Reirin as her head court lady.

Leelee's eyes went round at Tousetsu's unexpected show of heroism. In retrospect, though her excessive loyalty could occasionally be a problem, she would have to be a woman of high character to serve as a first-in-command at such a young age.

"I have a few preparations to make before I use the well. Goodbye," Tousetsu said for the record before briskly taking off.

In the heat of the moment, Leelee called out to her from behind. "Lady Tousetsu!"

For a moment she had considered calling her by her title, but she instead

made a point of using her name. It was proof that the two of them were peers.

As Tousetsu turned around, Leelee gave a shrug of her shoulders. “I just remembered something myself. To the west of this pond, there’s a storehouse where the personal belongings of the court ladies who have ended their term are kept. I believe there are some kitchen maids’ robes and dyes there.” When her companion met this with a dubious look, she added, “The Eagle Eyes would be on their guard if a red-haired court lady with a criminal record approached the Kou pavilion, but no one would raise an eyebrow if a black-haired kitchen maid came by to serve a meal.”

In other words, Leelee would don a disguise and sneak into the pavilion.

Tousetsu’s eyes widened, and then the faintest of smiles rose to her face. “If you wore the gamboge gold robe Lady Reirin gave you, I’m sure even fewer would question it.”

“C’mon. A gamboge gold robe isn’t to be worn for such a frivolous reason,” said Leelee, almost scoffing at the suggestion. Little did she realize that it was Tousetsu herself who had inspired her to say the words.

The gamboge gold robe was reserved for the most senior court ladies of the Palace of the Golden Qilin, the most influential palace in the court. Only the most resourceful, loyal, and resolute women were permitted to wear it.

Tousetsu stared back long and hard. Ever the contrarian, Leelee added, “Just so we’re clear, I’m not putting myself down or anything. I’m equally attached to the blazing scarlet robe Lady Reirin hand-stitched for me, that’s all.”

“Hmph. What a childish hill to die on.”

“Say what you will. Besides, I’m no match for our Maidens when it comes to being stubborn.”

“True.”

Leelee was getting the hang of reading emotion from the expressionless court lady’s face. Her lifting the corner of her mouth ever so slightly was the equivalent of a normal person clutching her stomach and exclaiming, “Hilarious!”

“Best of luck.”

Leelee held out a hand, and Tousetsu offered her own with a solemn nod.

“To you as well.”

With a resounding high five, the two women sprang into action for the sake of their difficult mistresses.

***

I took out my anger on Leelee and Tousetsu again…

In the shadow of dusk, Reirin watched from a gap in the fur pelt as the court ladies trudged away from the pavilion. It broke her heart to see an earnest hard worker like Leelee with her shoulders slumped in misery. Even Tousetsu, who always stood so straight and tall, seemed a tad unsteady on her feet.

Still, even seeing them like that wasn’t enough to make Reirin give in, read the letter, and offer Keigetsu a compromise.

Not yet, anyway.

Right? I mean…

She started to make an excuse to herself, but she wasn’t sure how to finish her own sentence. The other party was clearly at fault? She hadn’t done anything wrong? Or the way Keigetsu stubbornly insisted on settling the matter with a letter felt insincere? All of those reasons were valid, yet none of them quite hit the nail on the head.

What she knew was that she felt a pall over her heart, her thoughts were a jumble, and she was having trouble making up her mind.

What’s wrong with me as of late?

Reirin reflected on recent times as she sat on her makeshift bed of a chaise lounge in the pavilion, her knees drawn together. She had a feeling she’d grown weaker since her swap with Keigetsu. In the past, illness hadn’t fazed her, she’d never been swayed by anger, and she’d always had peace of mind. Now the smallest of things looked dazzling to her, which was a cause for celebration—but as a trade-off, the most trivial of things could weigh heavily on her mind.

How could I get so upset over something that isn't even a matter of life or death?

Reirin had indeed found herself trapped in the throes of despair back when she'd nearly lost Unran in Unso. But that had been an extreme situation with lives at stake. Now, just hearing Keigetsu say she hated her had reduced her to such a mess that she refused to make the concession of reading a single letter.

I ran away back there.

Her chin resting on her knees, Reirin thought back to the previous day—back to when she'd seen Keigetsu and Houshun talking.

Her ears had picked up on the high, sweet register of Houshun's voice even from a distance: "A nuisance… Vile… Your least favorite honor student."

All of those sounded like things Houshun might make up to make Keigetsu look bad. At the same time, they also sounded like things Keigetsu might actually say. Insults came to her as naturally as breathing. She was the sort of person who could yell that she "hated" someone without the slightest hesitation.

"I hate you. I don't even want to see your face!"

Why couldn't she stop dwelling on Keigetsu's vitriolic words at the Violet Dragon's Spring? Why couldn't she get past them? Once upon a time, she'd even found the idea of people not liking her to be exciting. No matter what form they took, she had adored the wild and beautiful nature of emotions that hit her head-on.

So why hadn't the haze over her heart lifted in the last few days?

It feels, how to put it…like I want to swing a hatchet around. No, perhaps it's like I want to squash a bunch of aphids one by one? I don't know… I don't really understand it myself.

Unaccustomed to negative emotions, Reirin didn't know what name to put to the feeling that held her prisoner. It made her want to go on a wild rampage, but on the other hand, she couldn't find the energy to do anything. She became tense enough to snap whenever Leelee and Tousetsu came to reason with her, then did nothing but hug her knees inside the pavilion as soon as they left. Her

attendants had seemed so afraid and worried for her that she'd ordered them to leave hours ago.

I wonder if I've contracted some mysterious illness that hampers my ability to think and concentrate.

It abruptly occurred to her to pull out her medicinal tools—the thoughtful gamboge golds had naturally brought those along to the pavilion as well—and that was when she heard a voice.

"Lady Reirin!"

Reirin froze upon hearing a booming voice from outside the pavilion.

"It's useless to resist! Come out with your hands up!"

It was Leelee. Reirin's face couldn't help but fall at how the court lady kept coming back again and again, no matter how politely she asked her to leave.

Oh, honestly!

She wasn't confident she could keep her cool at the moment. She wanted to be left alone a little longer and thus had been keeping her distance from anything that had the potential to set her off. If the other party came rushing in willy-nilly, she was afraid she might inflict a fatal wound on them out of sheer reflex.

And so Reirin drew up her knees once more, tuning out Leelee's shouts from inside the pavilion.

"I have you surrounded! You hear me?! If I decided to do something a little improper, the Eagle Eyes wouldn't make it in time!"

It was always endearing when Leelee did her best to threaten her. Reirin couldn't help a tiny smile rising to her lips.

"Sure, Lady Keigetsu may have started the whole thing with her insults, but I'm not impressed with the way you're sulking right now either! I don't care who caves first, but you two need to make up already!"

At that, Reirin's face twisted back into a frown.

No thank you.

She wasn't sure *why* she was so opposed, but no meant no. Her demure demeanor tended to make people forget, but Reirin happened to be the spoiled baby of her family. Once she'd decided she didn't want to do something, she wouldn't budge even if the skies came crashing down around her.

"Oh, c'mon! I'm getting mad over here! I'm about to break this stupidly expensive-looking jar!"

While the Maiden quietly buried her chin in her knees, Leelee threw a fit outside the pavilion. Perhaps she'd made good on her word, because a moment later, there came a resounding *crash*. Even then, Reirin's eyes remained downcast in melancholy.

It may have been a gift from Her Majesty, but a jar is just a jar. I'm sure it will be delighted to return to the earth.

Those of the Kou clan never had been the sort to care about material possessions.

"Uh-oh! There's shards everywhere! It's in pieces! What will you do, Lady Reirin?! Is it time to come out? Or not?"

It's not.

She pressed her mouth to her knees in a huff.

"If you don't come out on the count of five, I'm going to slit my own throat with one of these shards!"

"What do you think you're doing?!"

As soon as Reirin heard Leelee's alarming threat, she instinctively flew from the pavilion before the girl could even begin the count.

"Got you!"

The moment she showed up, Leelee—black-haired and clad in a kitchen maid's uniform, for some reason—caught her by the arm. Her free hand was still clutching a pottery shard, however, so Reirin stared back without attempting to break free of her grip.

"Why are you dressed like a kitchen maid, Leelee? And why did you dye your hair? Let go of that shard at once."

“Black hair is a good look on me, isn’t it? I promise I’ll drop the shard as soon as *you* promise to talk things out with Lady Keigetsu,” came Leelee’s shameless reply.

“How did my sweet court lady turn into such a wicked villainess?”

“Must be the influence of my two mistresses.”

“It’s not right to treat your own life so lightly, Leelee. I’m serious. Don’t do this again. And just seeing you with that shard in your hand scares me. Put it down,” Reirin chided her in all seriousness, completely ignoring the fact that she had once shoved a shard into another man’s mouth as a threat.

With an expression equal parts embarrassed and pleased, Leelee tossed the shard aside. Once she’d heard it land with a small *clack*, Reirin relaxed and invited her into the pavilion.

“Let’s talk inside for now. Night is soon to fall.”

“Thank you… Hold on.” Freezing cold, Leelee was more than happy to follow her inside, only for her eyes to widen at the sight she saw past Reirin’s back. “How did it get this filthy in here?”

“Hm?”

The inside of the fur-covered pavilion was in shambles. Charcoal had spilled from the braziers, staining the surroundings with soot. The pillows, once arranged in neat rows, were strewn across the floor, and even the bedsheets were a disheveled mess. Her crystal earrings lay shattered on the floor, perhaps having been crushed underneath something. The candle, dripping with wax, had been pushed into a position where it was poised to fall at any moment, and its faint light cast feeble flickers over the herb-littered pavilion.

“I can’t believe this! You kept that shoddy hovel of ours clean and organized!”

“Oh… Now that you mention it, I suppose I *have* made a bit of a mess.” Reirin put a hand to her cheek in dismay, apparently noticing the havoc she’d wreaked on her room for the first time. “However could this have happened? I can’t quite recall. Well, let me start us off with a cup of tea.”

She plucked the iron kettle from the brazier for Leelee, only to abruptly freeze

in that pose.

“I have a large stash of tea leaves I thought Lady Keigetsu might like. They won’t last long, so we’d best drink them soon. I doubt the girl in question will ever have a chance to try them, after all.”

In her daze, the lid of the tea canister clattered to the ground, and a stream of hot water began to leak from the kettle’s spout onto the floor.

“Hey! Watch out! You’re spilling everywhere!” Leelee yelled, snatching the kettle from Reirin the second she heard the sound and returning it to the brazier. “Okay, I see how it is now. I get why this pavilion is in such disarray. Go have a seat, Lady Reirin.”

“Goodness.” Forced to sit down, Reirin blinked, then steeled her expression and straightened her posture atop the bed. “The truth is, I’ve had a similar epiphany, Leelee. It would seem I’ve come down with a critical illness that’s been eating away at my spirit. It would be terrible if it were contagious. I must ask that you leave at once.”

“Trust me, that’s not it,” Leelee said, burying her face in her hands. With a sigh, she knelt before Reirin and gently placed her hands over those the Maiden had folded atop her knees. “I’m sorry for not noticing sooner, Lady Reirin. I didn’t realize this fight had pushed you to your breaking point.”

“My what?” Reirin was taken aback. Tilting her head to one side and furrowing her brow, she averted her gaze. “I am not anywhere close to breaking.”

“C’mon, just take a look around this pavilion. It’s like a portrait of despair.”

“I wouldn’t call it *despair*… I’m merely angry. First Lady Keigetsu unfairly berates me, and then she demands that *I* be the one to compromise.” Reirin drew her lips into a thin line as if to emphasize her outrage, but this only earned a dry laugh from Leelee.

“My original plan was to get straight down to business…but I think I’d better walk you through your feelings first.” The working-class court lady took Reirin’s hands in hers and rocked them back and forth, much like she would when comforting a child in the neighborhood. “Lady Reirin. You were hurt, weren’t

you? And you're hiding from Lady Keigetsu to avoid getting hurt even worse, right?"

"No." In a rare display, Reirin forcefully withdrew her hands from Leelee's. "I am angry, and nothing more. It's all Lady Keigetsu's fault for insulting me at the Violet Dragon's Spring for no good reason. I find her irrational behavior deeply offensive."

She didn't miss a beat—almost like she was trying to convince herself of it.

"Hmm. So you don't think any of Lady Keigetsu's yelling was justified?"

"I do not. I didn't do anything reckless. There's no reason to lambaste me over a quick dip in the waters."

"Oh yeah? Funny, I seem to remember you passing out right afterward."

When Leelee shot her a dubious look, Reirin changed her argument, sensing she was on the defensive. "Well, perhaps it might have seemed reckless by this body's standards. Still, it doesn't feel nice to be disparaged for trying to help. We Kous love hard work. There's nothing more frustrating than seeing our efforts come to naught."

"Frustrating? You sure?"

Reirin looked down at the floor, grasping at the bedding. "Yes. I was outraged and ashamed. Lady Keigetsu said I made her miserable, but the fact of the matter is that she's the one who humiliated—"

She didn't get to finish that sentence. "Gimme a break."

Leelee reached out to give each of her cheeks a pinch.

"You big sourpuss."

"A *whah*, Hweehwee?"

"It's a word we use downtown that means 'a person who loves to complain.' You're going to incur the wrath of the Heavens if you keep saying stuff you don't mean. Averting your eyes is proof that you're lying." After stretching the girl's gorgeous features as far as they could go, Leelee next cupped Reirin's face in her hands. "Chin up. Chest out, gaze forward. Isn't that what you told me?"

As Reirin's eyes went wide, Leelee gave another dry chuckle. "You can do just about anything, but I guess you've never gotten into a fight before."

Her amber eyes were almost saying, *What am I going to do with you?*

"Listen here, Lady Reirin. You were sad."

The emotional inhabitants of the southern territory—not to mention the particularly bellicose city dwellers—were quick to pick fights, but once they reconciled, they would rub shoulders without hesitation. Whenever they comforted a friend, they would pull them into a warm hug. Thus did Leelee rise to her feet and cradle the exalted Maiden's head in a soft embrace, just as Reirin had once done for her.

"You weren't offended because her anger was unjustified. You were sad because a friend yelled at you. You weren't frustrated that your efforts came to naught. You were sad because your feelings didn't come across." Bumping their foreheads together, Leelee mischievously said, "Now, repeat after me. You were sad."

"…"

"Come on. On the count of three."

"I…" Leelee released her head. Pressing her fingers to her forehead as if to trace the lingering warmth, Reirin mumbled, "I was sad."

"Exactly."

"I was sad." Reirin slowly lowered her hands, brought them to her mouth, and gave a slow nod. "You're right. I mean…"

Tears welled in the eyes set like two gems in her face.

"Lady Keigetsu said she hates me."

Leelee jolted upon hearing the wobble in Reirin's voice. "H-hold on! Don't cry! Seeing that face break down in tears packs a real punch!"

"I'm not crying. Nothing has spilled from my eyes, and these 'tears' are merely sweat produced in the wrong place."

"What a lousy excuse!"

As she sat down next to Reirin in a fluster and patted her on the back, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place for Leelee. In hindsight, during their fight at the Violet Dragon's Spring, Reirin had managed to keep her composure no matter how much Keigetsu yelled at her. It was only after she'd heard *those* words that she'd gone pale and fainted.

"I hate you."

It was a childish, run-of-the-mill, and yet uncompromising rejection.

Precisely because it was such a simple, straightforward parting shot, it had cut Reirin deep.

"Lady Keigetsu has called me 'accursed' and made attempts on my life, yes, but that never once bothered me. Her words and deeds always struck me as a charming way of complaining, 'I wish I were you' or 'I'm so jealous.'"

For a moment, Leelee almost quipped, "Uh, that seems worth a little more concern!" But it was so hard to watch Reirin tearing up that she instead just nodded along and said, "Mm-hmm."

Seeing such heavenly beauty in a state of disrepair was a downright crime. It made Leelee want to withdraw all objections and affirm anything and everything she had to say.

"But this time, Lady Keigetsu said she…h-hates me. I said the same thing to Lady Houshun not long ago, so I understand the weight of those words. They are words that cannot be uttered without the unyielding determination to eradicate the recipient, even if it means taking on the entire world. They are words of farewell."

"You needed *that* much resolve just to tell that blackhearted squirrel that you hated her?!"

Indeed, she wanted to affirm anything and everything—but Leelee's face involuntarily twitched at that comment.

That was a Kou for you. Their emotions rarely wavered, so when they *did* set their heart on something, their "love" and "hate" held a hefty weight.

"So…that means it's all over now." Reirin gently buried her face in the hands

she'd brought to her mouth. "Lady Keigetsu hates me."

"Oh, please! You know that's not true!" Leelee raised a helpless look toward the Heavens, then shook the Maiden sitting next to her by the shoulders. "She just said it in the heat of the moment! She threw open the closest drawer! That's how people from the Shu clan are! That's why she regretted it so much after the fact!"

"She regretted it?"

"That's right. She's a mess. She's spent all her time since then thinking about you, biting her nails, screaming her head off!"

"Truly?" Reirin raised her head with a pleading look, only to cast her long lashes downward. "But Lady Houshun said that she'd been cozying up to Lady Seika, since she found me a nuisance…"

"Don't fall for the evil squirrel's tricks. I came here to clear up that very misunderstanding."

"Plus, Pure Consort Kin and Lady Seika both told me…she's been going to them for advice because she's sick of me. Lady Seika confirmed it, and she hates lying."

"Are you serious?!" Leelee's amber eyes went wide upon hearing Reirin's confession. "That's demonstrably false. Lady Keigetsu has been holed up in her Shu Palace guesthouse ever since your fight!"

"Really?"

"Really. Besides, she's not adaptable enough to switch patrons that fast," Leelee declared with confidence.

Reirin's watery eyes trembled. "Perhaps…you're right."

"I know I am. The Kins were probably bluffing to exploit your weakness. The Pure Consort seems like the type to resort to such dirty tricks."

As a longtime victim of bullying as a low-ranking court lady, Leelee was good at sniffing out the cruelty and underhandedness peculiar to women. She saw through to the truth of the matter with ease, gave a snort, fixed her catlike eyes into a glare, and gave Reirin one last push.

“Who do you believe? Me or that Kin vixen?”

“You.”

“Good.”

The negotiation was a success.

Heh heh! I didn’t meddle in all those fights in the city for nothing. Mediating an argument like this is a piece of cake.

From the start, the two Maidens had made way too big a deal out of a mere yelling match.

Nodding with a sense of accomplishment, Leelee swiftly produced the letter she’d been keeping in her breast. “Now that we’ve got that settled, it’s time to make up. Go on, read this and write a reply.”

“Make up…”

Leelee was so used to getting into fights and making up that she didn’t even realize how difficult that seemed to someone who had never been in a fight before—and who was abnormally worked up because someone “hated” her.

Though Reirin reached out for the letter, she couldn’t help but ask questions. “I-It’d be best to do it sooner rather than later…right?”

After all, making up meant confronting the issue and exchanging apologies. It meant having a conversation.

If she were to come face-to-face with Keigetsu now, and the girl once again said she hated her in the heat of the moment…

Would I be able to recover?

Being rejected by a friend felt sad. Now that she understood that, Reirin wasn’t confident she could take a stand. Anger could give her the strength she needed to resolve a problem, but sadness did nothing but make her wither in body and soul.

“Of course it’s better to resolve it now. The biggest issue here is the Ran clan’s plot. They’re planning to bring you down in the final trial.” Oblivious to Reirin’s concerns, Leelee jabbed a finger at her in annoyance. “From what you’ve said,

the Kin clan is trying to shake you up too. If you don't mend this stupid rift soon, your life will be in danger. Do you hear me?"

Her perfectly reasonable point drew a stiff nod from Reirin. "Yes… You're right."

No matter how much Reirin had been hurt over the past few days, she got the feeling she had neglected a number of things for far too long. Her life was always at risk, and she'd figured she could fend off an assassination attempt with enough fighting spirit, but thinking about it rationally, she wouldn't be able to muster much fighting spirit in the throes of depression.

In that case, it really was for the best that she cleared the air with Keigetsu.

Reirin took a deep breath, hardened her expression, and turned to face Leelee. "You have a point. I'll read the letter. But first, may I take some time to prepare my medicine?"

"Say what? *Now's* the time you want to do that?"

"I've been so out of it that I completely forgot to prepare the medicine I usually take. Based on past experience, there's a good chance I'll break out in a fever if I don't take it soon."

As Reirin hefted her mortar with a grunt, Leelee yelled, "That's the absolute last thing you should neglect! Mix and take your concoctions this instant!"

"Well, if the symptoms get truly unbearable, I can always take medicine to dull the pain. I can take a large dose of miracle hemp to dissociate, or I can chew on some aconite to numb my mind and body. I have no shortage of last resorts."

"I'm not familiar with the names of most herbs, but I can tell those are ones you shouldn't rely on so lightly!" Leelee gave a shudder, then cast a glance at the various herbs strewn about the pavilion. "Besides, how did you get your hands on all these poisonous and shady herbs, anyway?"

"There is a fine line between poison and medicine. Seeing as I was born with a frail constitution, my father likes to collect and experiment with medicinal formulas and ingredients from all times and places. In the past, he was obsessed with buying up herbs and ores from all over the world." The fragile

Maiden began to reveal something outrageous in the most placid of tones. “But he soon deemed that it would be faster to grow them himself, so he bought an entire mountain about ten years ago. We named it ‘Mt. Kou,’ and it’s where we secretly grow poisonous and medicinal herbs on a massive scale. My brothers often bring me souvenirs from there. They’ve grown very well.”

“Don’t just come out and tell me that! That’s illegal drug cultivation!”

There was no doubt that those of the Kou clan were fundamentally good people, but it was nerve-racking to watch how readily and selflessly they’d indulge in evil deeds for the sake of others.

Leelee screwed her face into a frown, then hurried Reirin along as she bent down to sort her herbs. “Anyway, get your usual medicine ready before things get worse. I’ll wait here.”

“Oh, but I’d feel terrible to keep you and Lady Keigetsu waiting for too long. Perhaps I should read the letter first.”

Reirin tried to put her medicine-making efforts on hold out of consideration, which only served to make Leelee more impatient.

“No, as I said, please take care of your treatment first. If we can just make an appointment for the flame call, I’ll relay the message.”

“No, I shouldn’t give my answer without reading—”

“Jeez!” Frustrated with Reirin for neglecting her health in her despair and *still* putting herself off once she was thinking positively again, Leelee yelled despite herself, “Get a damn move on! Do you want to die?!”

And that was a mistake.

“Pardon me, Lady Reirin!” a dignified voice resounded from outside the pavilion, and in the same moment, a certain figure dove into view with a rustle of the fur wall.

“Huh… Whoa!”

The person who had flown in on a gust of wind went stern-faced as soon as she saw Leelee looking down at Reirin, and next thing anyone knew, she was restraining the redhead from behind.

“Don’t move. If you so much as budge, I’ll slit your throat.”

She had one arm around Leelee’s neck, and in her free hand, she held a pottery shard to her exposed skin.

“Are you all right, Lady Reirin?”

“L-Lady Kasui?!”

The one to come rushing into the pavilion was the Maiden of the Gen clan, Gen Kasui.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was walking through the courtyard looking for you when I spotted the shattered remnants of a jar outside your pavilion. I heard threats like ‘Get a move on’ and ‘Do you want to die?’ coming from inside, so I decided to act at once rather than call for an Eagle Eye,” Kasui matter-of-factly explained to the wide-eyed Reirin. All the while, the hand of hers holding the shard didn’t so much as flinch.

She’s quite skilled. Come to think of it, Tousetsu, who taught me self-defense, and the captain of the Eagle Eyes are both of Gen lineage.

Food resources were scarce in the northern territory, providing an opportunity for dangerous industries such as mercenaries, steel, and weapons to thrive. In addition, its rulers of the Gen clan were associated with water and warfare, so those of Gen bloodline were by and large masters of the martial arts.

“This room is a mess. Damned intruder. What are you after?”

Her eyes narrowed, Kasui’s aura was so intense that one would never have imagined it from her usual reserved demeanor. Was it because she was driven by righteous fury? Or because she was a Gen skilled in the martial arts? There was a tense sort of wariness about her that seemed removed from either of those reasons.

Reirin cautiously addressed Kasui, who was acting more aggressive than ever. “Please don’t be rash, Lady Kasui. This is a misunderstanding. I did all this myself.”

She had stated the facts without embellishment, but Kasui only furrowed her brow, incredulous. In fairness, under the circumstances—furnishings knocked down all across the pavilion, accessories crushed, and the Maiden crouching as a court lady screamed at her—her story was indeed a bit hard to swallow.

Thinking to give a proper explanation, Reirin sprang to her feet, only to feel a wave of dizziness. As a familiar chill began to creep down her back, she realized that the symptoms of a fever were coming on.

Oh no. It's all because I didn't take my medicine…

She felt faintly annoyed with her body for showing its frailty at such a critical moment. It was so unfair that she wasn't even allowed to wallow in heartbreak for a time.

"Um, can I… *May* I explain what happened here myself?"

Though it was unlikely that Leelee had noticed the Maiden's condition, she spoke up in a trembling voice, determined to make her case. Kasui's expression remained as stormy as ever, but she loosened her grip a fraction upon noticing that her captive was unarmed.

"I am Leelee, one of Lady Shu Keigetsu's personal court ladies. In light of their recent quarrel, I came bearing a letter of apology from my mistress. I broke the jar by accident, and I yelled at Lady Reirin to 'hurry up' earlier because I was concerned for her health and wanted her to take her medicine as soon as possible."

"I see… The color of your hair is different, but I do believe I've seen your face around. You were the daughter of a foreigner, if I recall."

"Yes. As a city-bred ruffian, I'm afraid I let a few inappropriate words slip. It was unbecoming of a court lady, and I am deeply ashamed of my behavior," Leelee responded in a humble manner. She'd grown a lot of courage since hanging around Reirin. Finally, Kasui lowered the shard at her neck.

Still, her dark eyes, marked by a striking mole underneath, were narrowed in suspicion. "Why did you go to the trouble of disguising yourself as a kitchen maid?"

"I'm afraid the Eagle Eyes have me pinned for a potential threat. I determined

that the only way to negotiate with Lady Reirin without the guards stopping me was to change my appearance."

"How did you get your hands on a kitchen maid's robe? You better not have assaulted someone."

"There's a storehouse at the end of the road leading west from the pond, in which the personal effects of court ladies who have completed their term are stored. I got it from—"

"A what?" Leelee had prostrated herself and attempted to clarify, but for some reason, Kasui started asking questions in the middle of her explanation. "There's a storehouse where the court ladies' belongings are kept?"

"Hm? Yes… That said, it's not an officially designated space. It's more of a run-down storage room where court ladies shove the things they aren't permitted to bring outside. It spares us the trouble of having to burn them."

"Items they aren't permitted to bring outside? Such as?"

"Well, for example, if you want to bring a diary or letters outside, it will take several days to have those inspected, and court lady uniforms are both bulky and too conspicuous to wear outside the inner court. It's a place for court ladies who don't want to waste a minute getting home to stash things like that."

Back when she was a pale pink, Leelee had frequently been bullied by her colleagues, and she'd often found her robes hidden or sometimes torn. It was then that she'd learned about the storehouse. It wasn't a very good memory, but it was true that the existence of the storehouse had saved her time and time again. She'd been able to borrow replacement robes, and she'd found a bit of solace in reading the diaries of court ladies who had suffered similar harassment.

Her face clouded over as she revealed this bittersweet tidbit of knowledge, while Kasui went unnaturally stiff.

"…"

No, upon closer inspection, her eyes had gone wide, and there was a hint of a flush on her cheeks.

“Lady Kasui?”

“Ah… It’s nothing.” Kasui snapped back to reality, but a moment later, she brought a hand to her mouth, looking somewhat distracted. “A storehouse. I see.”

Although puzzled as to why the other Maiden suddenly seemed so restless, Reirin attempted to free Leelee, seeing this as a good opportunity to escape her interrogation. “As you can see, Leelee meant me no harm whatsoever. I’m very sorry to have given you cause for concern. Come, Leelee. I must ask that you take your leave. Tell Lady Keigetsu…that I’ll speak with her at the hour of the dog.”

Going with the flow, she ended up making plans to have a flame call with Keigetsu.

With a relieved bow, Leelee exited the pavilion.

Once the two Maidens were alone, Reirin began asking Kasui questions to give herself the lead in the conversation. “My apologies again for all the fuss. You said you were looking for me, yes? How may I help you?” She wasn’t in the best of health, so she wanted to wrap up this conversation as soon as possible.

Kasui, who had been lost in thought, seemed to debate whether to continue the conversation, but she soon made up her mind and cut to the chase. “I heard that you fell ill after the altercation at the Violet Dragon’s Spring, so I was worried. I didn’t have the courage to set foot in another clan’s palace, but I heard you moved to the courtyard the day before yesterday… I apologize for taking so long to check in.”

“My, how thoughtful.” Reirin couldn’t help but smile at the expression of sincerity. Gen Kasui wasn’t the loquacious sort, no, but she was one of the most compassionate and honest Maidens around. “I’m sorry to have worried you. It didn’t take me long to recover. I simply…didn’t have the energy for extended interactions.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I don’t mean to force you to socialize.” There, Kasui inserted an extra note of caution into her voice. “I simply wanted to know if you had any contact with Anni—the shaman—either before or after your fainting spell.”

“With the shaman?”

“Yes. Er… You challenged the shaman’s opinion in the second trial, remember? I wanted to know if she had glared at you or threatened you as a result. The truth is, I stepped in earlier because I suspected the court lady might be one of her underlings.”

Reirin blinked at the surprising inquiry. “Did she glare at me or…threaten me?”

That was a good question. The shaman *might* have glared a little, now that she thought about it. To be honest, all Reirin could recall from the encounter was Keigetsu snarling “I hate you” right afterward.

She gave a noncommittal nod. “I don’t believe so, no.”

“Are you certain? When you were sick in bed, did anything seem off? Was the onset of your symptoms more sudden or otherwise different from usual?”

“No.”

“Oh, right, you also touched the paper that burst into flames. Did you notice anything odd about it?”

“Not in particular.”

Reirin was a little taken aback by the rapid-fire interrogation.

Sensing as much, Kasui backed off. “I apologize for all the strange questions. I’ve simply grown concerned after you’ve been exposed to danger so many times in a row.”

“No, you needn’t apologize,” Reirin insisted, pitching forward in a fluster. “I’m touched that you’re so worried for me, even though we’re from different clans.”

Due to her physical limitations, Reirin had never been proactive in starting conversations with those around her, but she wasn’t averse to chatting. On the contrary, her desire to socialize had grown ever since she’d deepened her relationship with Keigetsu.

She’d never imagined that Kasui—whom she had taken for a levelheaded, overserious Maiden—would have such a strong sense of justice and a hidden

aggressive streak. Much like with Keigetsu, the more they got to know each other, the more hidden sides of Kasui would inevitably come to light. Reirin honestly wanted to see that.

With the utmost sincerity, Reirin took Kasui's hands in hers. "Lady Kasui, you are a gallant person who jumped to my aid the moment you thought I was in danger. During the first trial, you rushed to my side out of concern for my burns too. I am grateful for your kindness. I'm truly glad to have the chance to talk with you."

Faced with her smile head-on, Kasui awkwardly averted her gaze. "Hardly… You flatter me."

The reaction was reminiscent of both Tousetsu and Shin-u. Perhaps it was in the Gen blood to be easily flustered by compliments.

"I require no thanks," she continued. "It's only right that one with a background in martial arts use their skills for good. And as for your injuries, well…I simply can't help but react to seeing someone get burned."

Reirin blinked. "Oh, really?"

"Yes," Kasui mumbled, almost chewing the words over, her gaze downcast. "A dear relative of mine once suffered from terrible burns."

"That's terrible. Are they doing better now?" The question spilled from Reirin's lips automatically.

"No." Kasui quietly clenched her fists. "Her burns are never going to heal."

Then, as if to relieve the tension hanging in the air, she lifted the corners of her mouth as she looked at Reirin. "I hadn't noticed until now, but you resemble her a little. She was quiet and kind…but likewise strong-willed and prone to astounding acts of recklessness. Perhaps that's why I worry so much about you."

"Come now. Even *you're* calling me reckless?"

For a moment, Reirin was conflicted, but she soon pulled herself together and began to tidy up the room. Nothing helped in times of sickness quite like moving the body. Sitting still only made her all the more aware of her

symptoms. Besides, she couldn't ignore the story Kasui had just told her about a relative suffering from burns.

"Erm, Lady Kasui. I believe I've mentioned it to you before, but have you ever heard of the medicinal herb called miracle hemp? Although it's not well known, it's extremely effective at fighting infection. Would you care to share some with your loved one?"

Kasui, meanwhile, showed restraint toward the Maiden who was mumbling to herself as she groped around for a certain herb. "No, that's quite all right. In truth, as a descendant of the bloodline of warfare, I am likewise well versed in herbs that fight infection. I couldn't ask you to share such a precious resource with me. What's more…"

She debated whether she should share the real reason for her refusal. The sister of hers in need of miracle hemp had died three years ago. The time when she'd been desperate for the herb had long since passed. Was it all right to say as much?

"She is—"

"Oh, don't be shy. As you can see, I have plenty to go around."

Kasui was cut off mid-sentence—because Kou Reirin had oh-so-casually handed her a bundle of medicinal herbs.

The leaves looked like those of a fern, dried and brownish in color. The way the pointed tips of the leaves curled slightly inward identified it as the medicinal herb known as miracle hemp.

"What?"

"This is all I have on hand, but if I ask my brothers, they can bring us however much we need. Granted, it's better to use miracle hemp in small doses. It has a hallucinogenic effect when taken in large quantities."

The girl wore the gorgeous smile of a celestial maiden as she handed over the miracle hemp without hesitation, and Kasui's heart thumped in her chest at the sight.

Not only were there few regions where it could be grown, but it was also

difficult to cultivate, so there was an extremely limited amount of miracle hemp in circulation. How could one person come into possession of such a large quantity?

Her pulse quickening, Kasui's voice hitched. "I *did* wonder when you brought it up during the first trial. Do you really own that much miracle hemp?"

"Yes. About enough to fill three warehouses, I'd say. You really needn't hold back."

Three warehouses' worth would constitute almost the entire amount on the continent combined.

"How did you come upon such a large amount?"

"Hm? Oh. Because my whole family—"

Reirin was about to reply with the truth, but when she saw Kasui's face stiffen, she swallowed the words.

"That's illegal drug cultivation!"

Leelee's earlier observation sprang to mind.

She'd never given it much thought before, but her father's actions could get him accused of treason. For instance, although miracle hemp had special antibacterial properties, it was a narcotic-like herb that could induce hallucinations and addiction when taken in large doses. Confessing that her whole family had been cultivating it on a large scale could see them *all* come under suspicion, not just her.

"Your whole family what?"

"We…purchased a large amount."

In the end, Reirin replied with what she considered to be an innocuous answer, putting a hand to her cheek. Her eyes darted back and forth so fast that she didn't even notice the color drain from Kasui's face.

"You would have to corner the market to come upon such a quantity."

"Is that so? Well, perhaps my brothers bought up all the stock out of concern for their ailing sister. Goodness knows those men know no moderation."

“When was this? Three years ago, perhaps?”

“Huh? Um, yes. Maybe so.”

Reirin gave a noncommittal nod, surprised that Kasui was going in on her this hard. She was struggling to lie to such an honest girl.

“Were you suffering from a serious burn at the time?”

For some reason, all traces of expression had vanished from Kasui’s face as she stared at the other Maiden. Concerned about her threatening aura, Reirin struggled to think of a way to cover her tracks. It would be immediately obvious she was lying if she claimed to have suffered a burn. If the daughter of a nobleman—and one destined to one day become a Maiden—had ever been scarred, it would have caused quite the stir.

“Umm… I’ve never been burned. I was simply interested in it as, um, a precautionary measure. I think I may have asked for it on a whim. I don’t remember much about it.”

Was that a convincing enough answer? It was hard to think straight when she was feeling so light-headed.

“In any case, I have plenty of miracle hemp, so I’ll prepare some right now.”

Reirin figured she’d mix her own medicine and gulp it down while she was at it. She had no time to worry about what sort of face Kasui was making behind her.

“Does this person live nearby? If so, I’ll go all the way to the boiling stage. If they live further away, I’ll settle for chopping it up to make it easier to brew.”

She gathered up the hem of her garment and took only the miracle hemp from her box of herbs. By this point, she had begun to hear a ringing in her ears.

“Or perhaps I should make them into pills and send them along later? Erm, where’s my pestle?”

She wanted to get straight to mixing, but she couldn’t find her tools amid the clutter of the pavilion. In a corner of her dizzy mind, she reflected upon the importance of manners even when one was in a slump.

Anyway, the important thing was that she couldn’t keep Kasui waiting.

“My apologies, Lady Kasui. Is there a pestle lying near your—”

“Lady Reirin.”

Reirin never got to finish asking her question.

Thud!

The moment she turned around, Kasui struck her hard around the temple. Sparks exploded behind her eyelids, and a beat later, a burning pain shot through her head.

Kasui must have dropped her weapon. The sound of a dull *clang* told Reirin that she had been hit with the pestle, but by then, her knees had buckled under her and she had crumpled to the ground.

“I can’t believe it.”

The very brief glimpse she managed to catch of Kasui’s face was contorted like never before.

What?

Reirin felt a slow trickle of blood run down her cheek. Oil that had spilled from a jar she’d knocked over seeped into her sleeves. Even those trivial details felt so terribly vivid in that moment.

“I can’t believe *you* were the one who bought up all the miracle hemp back then.”

A measured voice echoed through the flickering world around her. No—it was a *strangled* voice.

“And on a *whim*?”

She felt someone grab her by the hair. “Feeling” was truly all she could do. She couldn’t see, and she couldn’t hear. Her body was so accustomed to hurting that when her pain passed a certain threshold, it blocked out all sensation.

Reirin struggled to hold on to her consciousness, which was rapidly slipping away from her.

“When you didn’t even need it? Meanwhile, there was someone who… Do you have any idea how much…went through…when she could have…”

There had been a serious misunderstanding somewhere. She had to get up and explain herself.

The moment Reirin was roughly tossed aside by the hair, she managed to plant her elbows on the floor. Unfortunately, she slipped on the oil and went hurtling back onto her face.

“I’ll make…pay.”

She had to get up. She couldn’t pass out.

There had been no hesitation in Kasui’s blow. Her malice was the real deal. At this rate, Reirin knew she was going to be killed.

She’d known she was fated to die soon one way or the other. She’d been braced for it.

But if she died *now*…

We still haven’t…made up.

Her fingers crawled sluggishly over the floor until she hit upon some sort of shard. Though unsure what it was, Reirin tightened her hand around it without hesitation.

If she could just pierce her skin, perhaps the pain could keep her awake.

Ah…

Alas, her fragile body had passed the point of being held together by sheer willpower. She couldn’t even put enough force in her grip to slit her palm on a shard.

Her whole body sank into the floor, limp and powerless.

The flame call…

It was then that Reirin belatedly realized she could have shouted in the direction of the candle’s flame—in Keigetsu’s direction. If she were lucky, the other girl might have noticed.

How like her not to think of calling for help until the last moment.

I must…apologize…

She’d always done her best to live her life with no regrets. How had it come to this?

Lady Kei…

Just as she was about to call her friend’s name one last time, Reirin blacked out.

Chapter 6:
Keigetsu Flips Out

CLICK-CLACK, click-clack…

Two sets of muffled footsteps echoed down the stone-walled tunnel. Despite the high ceiling of said passage, it was too narrow for an adult to stretch both arms in either direction. No light shone inside, and water occasionally dripped down from above. Keigetsu had been forced to walk this path for some time now, with Tousetsu pulling her along by the arm.

“Hey… Answer me. How far are we going to go?”

The only source of light was the torch Tousetsu held as she led the way. The moment Keigetsu stepped out of the circle of the flame’s glow, she’d be assailed by a boundless darkness. That was such a frightening prospect that, even though Tousetsu’s grip wasn’t all that strong, she still made sure to tag close behind.

“S-say something already! If you go silent in a creepy place like this, it makes me feel like I’m looking at a ghost!”

Though she hated the emotionless, strict gamboge gold court lady, she felt like she was going to go crazy if she didn’t talk to *someone*.

“I-I’ve had enough. I’m going back! Turn us around this instant!”

As her shouts fell on deaf ears, Keigetsu berated herself for listening to Tousetsu half an hour ago. If she’d known this was going to happen, she would have stood strong no matter *what* she was threatened with.

“Lady Shu Keigetsu.”

It was just after Keigetsu had returned to the guesthouse and slammed her chopsticks on the floor without so much as touching her dinner. All of a sudden, the door swung open and an unannounced visitor breezed right into the room.

And who should it be but Tousetsu, the head court lady of the Kou clan.

“I am about to take you to reconcile with Lady Reirin.”

True to her name as the glacial court lady, Tousetsu looked at the Maiden with ice in her gaze.

Keigetsu was taken aback by her assertive tone, and it took a few moments before she finally spoke up. “Wh-what are you going on about? And what is the court lady of another clan doing in the Shu Palace, anyway? What are the guards doing? Where is Leelee?”

As the words left her mouth, her mind caught up to what was happening. In Keigetsu’s case, that meant adapting enough to berate those around her, so she grabbed the nearest teacup from the table and hurled it at Tousetsu with all her might.

“I don’t care what you have to say! I’m never going to apologize to Kou Reirin!”

Crash!

The flimsy teacup burst into fragments of various sizes with a fleeting sound. Tousetsu’s gaze followed it as if she were watching an insect fly by. Then she slowly turned back to the table and trailed her hand along the porcelain sitting there.

“Is that right?”

She brushed her fingers against a delicate teacup.

“I’ve done my best to settle this with words and goodwill, as that is what Lady Reirin often commands of me.”

She ran her fingers back and forth across the stout teapot several times, then pulled her hand back as if she’d grown bored.

“But if my words are not sufficient, I will have to resort to other means.”

Eventually, she traced the rim of a thick serving bowl full of broth, then transferred its contents to a smaller saucer with an approving nod.

“I’d say a skull is about this thick.”

“Wha…?”

Crack!

Before Keigetsu even had time to look dubious, Tousetsu abruptly slammed the bowl against the floor.

“Eep!”

Keigetsu jolted despite herself, swallowing hard as she looked down at the wreckage strewn across the floor. The ceramic bowl had been of a considerable thickness, yet it had been smashed into dust, not a single shard left behind. A tense whine escaped her lips.

Just how strong *was* she?

Turning pale, Keigetsu took a step back, but Tousetsu bridged the distance between them with a blank expression. As the Maiden stared at that face as tranquil as a doll’s—as pitiless as if it had been stripped of all humanity—she came to a realization at last.

She had pushed this court lady too far.

“T-Tousetsu…ma’am…”

Her eyes darting around in search of a fire, Keigetsu failed to suppress her fear.

That reminded her: This woman wouldn’t hesitate to resort to torture if it was for her mistress. In recent days, the pair of them had bickered back and forth, teamed up, and exchanged compliments, so she’d gotten too complacent.

I see a flame. If I can just find an opening and use my magic to burn her…

Moving only her gaze, Keigetsu captured the flame of a candle in her sights. Unfortunately for her, Tousetsu noticed this and reached out as fast as lightning, catching her head in a vise.

“Eek!”

“If you wish to strike me with your flames, be my guest. I’ll take you down with me. My whole body could be engulfed in fire, and it still wouldn’t stop me from smashing your head in.”

It wasn't a bluff. The ominous creaking noise her skull was making proved it.

"L-Let me go!"

"Come, Lady Keigetsu. It's time to make up with Lady Reirin." Tousetsu slowly brought her impassive face right up to Keigetsu's. "I shall show you the way, so come with me and don't make a scene."

As for Keigetsu, there was little she could do but bob her head in a series of tiny nods.

Still, I have no idea what's going to happen from here. I should have tried harder to fight her off when I had the chance.

Keigetsu followed along behind Tousetsu, chewing on her lip in regret for the umpteenth time.

After the aforementioned scene, Tousetsu had blindfolded Keigetsu and forced her to walk in the direction of the Maiden Court. Then, upon reaching a certain spot—Keigetsu wasn't sure *where*, but she figured it was somewhere in the courtyard—she had suddenly lifted the lid of a well and ordered her captive to head down.

Was the woman planning to bury her alive? Or was this old well where she was going to torture her with insects, as she had alluded to once upon a time? The thought sent a shiver down Keigetsu's spine—but upon closer inspection, there were neither water nor insects inside the well, and there was even a set of iron bars arranged like a ladder for people to climb down. Tousetsu had ordered her to use that.

"If we include dry wells, there are more than two hundred wells around the inner court, some of which are designed as entrances to an underground passage. Now, tell me, which would you prefer: to descend on your own or to have me drag you down?"

Tousetsu, who had started to climb down first, was already reaching out to pull Keigetsu along by force. The Maiden had obediently plunged herself into the well, afraid she might fall otherwise. In light of later developments, however, she really should have refused to accompany the court lady no matter

the cost. She wasn't a fan of being subjected to physical pain, but being trapped in a darkness that never seemed to end was even more terrifying. She didn't know where they were headed, nor what Tousetsu was planning.

Due to childhood experiences, Keigetsu hated being confined to dark, cramped spaces. She felt as if insects or ghosts might come crawling from the void at any given moment, and the creeping fear had her on the verge of screaming.

"Come on. I said I want to go back! Turn us around! You'll pay if you don't heed my words, you lowly court lady!" she yelled, but it was more an effort to break the silence than to threaten Tousetsu.

Though she believed she could do just about anything as long as there was a flame around, even if she did manage to fell Tousetsu, she'd go insane if she were stranded all alone in a place like this.

"You really are noisy. Lady Reirin would be delighted to go exploring in your shoes."

"Yes, because she's nuts! Listen to me. No matter *how* you threaten me, I'm never going to apologize! An apology made under duress would only make her angrier. Can't you see that?!"

When Keigetsu bluffed as best she could, much to her surprise, Tousetsu stopped in her tracks and huffed a small sigh. "You can make a good point sometimes."

"Sorry?"

"It's true that I'm not adept at dealing with matters of the heart. To be frank, I don't have the faintest idea how to comfort Lady Reirin or change your mind on my own. I'm nothing more than a mere court lady. You are correct. Therefore…"

Tousetsu covered her torch with her sleeve to extinguish its flame, then hurled the plain wooden stick that had become of it directly overhead.

"I enlisted a certain someone's help."

Thud!

Without Keigetsu realizing it, the two of them seemed to have reached the

end of the well, and the wooden lid blocking the opening above them went flying into the air as it was upended by the stick. There came an immediate rush of fresh air, and moonlight streamed down from the circle clipped out of the navy-blue sky.

Night had long since fallen.

“Ha ha ha, that’s Tousetsu for you! Who else would be dashing enough to shift a well cover from the inside?”

“Right on time too. Hear that? The first bell of the hour of the dog just began to ring. Can you climb out, Lady Keigetsu? I have my doubts, since you seem like the clumsy type.”

The voices of two men descended along with the night air.

Watching from the bottom of the well as Tousetsu climbed up the ladder, Keigetsu’s face froze. That overzealous laugh and mocking manner of speech rang a bell.

“Thank you for responding to my request in such a timely manner.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was glad to finally have a use for Dove No. 8. If our sister is having a problem her court lady can’t solve, it’s on us as her brothers to handle it.”

“I only asked for you to summon His Highness. I wouldn’t mind in the least if you hotheads stayed out of it.”

“Ha ha ha! Sorry, couldn’t hear you there. We’ll be sticking around for the whole thing, of course.”

Tousetsu dropped to her knees as soon as she had hoisted herself out of the well, where she seemed to be engaged in a rather vitriolic conversation.

“Hmm. Can you reach for me, Lady Keigetsu? Up you go.”

When she was pulled up in a daze and properly identified the men in the light of the moon, Keigetsu almost moaned despite herself.

“Hi there, Shu Keigetsu. I hear you’ve been picking on our darling Reirin.”

Standing near the rim of the well where she sat was the eldest son of the Kou

clan, Kou Keikou, whose lips were curled into a grin.

“You said it. I’ve refrained from intervening for the past few days, since a certain someone said it would be uncouth to meddle in someone else’s fight… but preserving Reirin’s smile is a matter of worldwide concern.”

Next to him was the second son, Kou Keishou, who was flaunting his usual shameless favoritism toward his family with a straight face.

“Right, Your Highness?”

Lastly, there was the recipient of his sardonic glance.

“If Reirin were her usual self, she’d prefer to sort the problem out on her own.”

It was the crown prince of the Kingdom of Ei, Gyoumei, who looked as gorgeous as ever despite the scowl on his face.

That underground passage connected the inner court to the main palace?!

Keigetsu finally understood where she’d been. That tunnel with two wells for an entrance and exit was either an evacuation route or a secret passage the emperor used to pay clandestine visits to his consorts.

While she froze at this unexpected development, Gyoumei extended a hand to her, exasperated. “The Rite of Reverence is a ritual for the Maidens, so we outsiders have refrained from interfering. That includes your little quarrel. It would be uncouth for a man to meddle in a fight among women, after all.”

The prince’s mouth twisted in discomfiture, but perhaps aided by the Kou blood that ran through half his veins, he quickly moved past whatever the issue was.

“At this point, it’s dragged on too long. I hear that Reirin has forgotten to eat the past few days. I can’t stand to watch this any longer. No matter—a crime isn’t a crime so long as you don’t get caught.”

“Wha…”

“Tousetsu told me everything. Ever since your falling out with Reirin, rumors have spread that you’ve been going around bad-mouthing her to the other Maidens. How could you allow such childish, base gossip to go unchallenged?”



Judging by his phrasing, Gyoumei didn't believe the rumors. It was a small relief to know that he hadn't jumped to the conclusion that Keigetsu was the sole party at fault.

His next words, however, caused her face to twist into a frown.

"According to Shin-u's report, Reirin was heartbroken enough to lament, 'I'm done with Lady Keigetsu.' I can't take this any longer. Won't you both hurry and make up already?"

There it was.

Kou Reirin this, Kou Reirin that.

The prince truly only had eyes for Kou Reirin. He seemed to have learned a bit more restraint, but as far as Keigetsu was concerned, the fact that he prioritized another girl over her meant that he would never "get it."

"You gotta! Fights get uglier the longer they drag on. In times like this, you've got to give in to the heat of the moment, dive right into the other guy's bosom, and bury the hatchet without room for dissent."

"If you're willing to meet Reirin in the middle, I think the problem will resolve itself."

No, it wasn't just Gyoumei. Keikou, Keishou, and even Tousetsu—who was hanging back and holding her tongue—were all deeply biased in Reirin's favor. As a matter of fact, Keigetsu appeared to be surrounded on all sides by four very overzealous people, all of whom were fanatically devoted to Reirin.

"How's that, Lady Keigetsu?" Tousetsu spoke softly after a long silence. "Since you weren't interested in listening to what a court lady like myself had to say, I asked two military officers and His Imperial Highness to come meet you."

Was it Keigetsu's imagination, or was there a hint of smugness to her deadpan expression?

"Now then. Shall we be off to reconcile with Lady Reirin?"

The quartet was intent on ganging up on Keigetsu and forcing her to do what they wanted. All for their precious Kou Reirin. All to ensure that she wasn't hurt any worse.

Keigetsu clenched her fists.

“Give…”

Anger had always been Shu Keigetsu’s driving force. Even when she felt the fear of standing before an authority figure, even when she felt the misery of having no one on her side, she could keep on fighting so long as she channeled it all into rage. She didn’t know any other way to survive.

And the more fear and despair there was to feed on, the bigger and faster that rage ballooned.

“Give me a break…” Keigetsu muttered in a trembling voice, her pitch almost low enough to brush the ground. Then, she snapped her head back up, just barely managing to keep her tone respectful as she tore into everyone present —the crown prince included. “I’ve heard quite enough, thank you! This whole conversation, it’s been Kou Reirin this, Kou Reirin that… If she’s so precious to you, aren’t there more important things to be doing than putting me on trial?!”

Everyone’s eyes widened when Keigetsu suddenly began to scream. Yet her emotions were raging so hard that even the reactions of those around her didn’t seem to matter. If she could, she would have gone around and shaken each and every one of them by the shoulders.

“Hear this! I will never apologize. It’s her own fault for getting mad when *she* was the one in the wrong. She’s to blame for being so reckless and impulsive! For putting other people at her mercy! For being so oblivious to danger and the feelings of those around her!”

Keigetsu heard her own voice crack, and she wondered if she was headed for an execution in some calmer part of her mind. But even if it meant getting arrested for shouting at the prince or killed for the crime of insulting a future consort, she couldn’t help but raise her voice. So be it. If they decided to torture her, she’d simply bite off her tongue rather than give them the pleasure.

“How can she be so foolhardy?! Surely it’s because you all make big claims about protecting her or respecting her will while you spoil her and let her run wild! You ought to discipline *her* before you start blaming me! Otherwise, she —”

The words she was about to say next were too sinister for her to utter. Keigetsu abruptly stopped shouting and glared at the ground. If she didn't glare at *something*, she was going to break down in a pathetic sobbing fit.

"She… Kou Reirin fell into a spring in the middle of winter…"

Keigetsu was so worked up that her lips were trembling and her voice was hoarse. She didn't even notice how the men stirred at the sight of her like that.

"She's a noblewoman, not a military officer, and one clad in heavy robes. And she fell into ice-cold water. Her whole body got soaking wet, and her face…her face was so pale…"

Memories of that day flashed through Keigetsu's mind before she could even close her eyes. The girl's hands had been as white as paper. Her fists had been trembling, and even clenching them hadn't been enough to hide the cold and pain she felt.

Her slender body had been sucked into the spring below. To Keigetsu, the freezing water had looked far more frightening than the flames.

Splash.

"She almost died. Because of me."

The moment that choked voice escaped her lips, the tears brimming in her eyes leaked out and dripped onto the ground. Keigetsu scrubbed at her eyes, cursing them for crying of their own accord, but the tears came spilling out one after another, as if a dam had burst. She couldn't hold it in any longer.

"That's not all. She got burned trying to protect me. She's made all sorts of sacrifices for me…without thinking twice. And then she *smiles*. She says, 'I'm so glad you're all right.' I—" Keigetsu's face crumpled, and she covered her eyes with her fists. "What would you have me do?! Let her keep on protecting me like a failure, continue to burden her, and eventually cost her her life? And you want me to be okay with that? You want me to say, 'Oh, you'll die for me? Thanks!' Well, it's not happening!"

Keigetsu at last abandoned all attempts at decorum and let out a gut-wrenching scream. "Hello? *Someone* has to stop her! Someone has to scold her! How can you tell me to forgive and forget?! There's no way I'm going to do

that! Because if I do, she—”

“Good heavens.” The squeak of Keigetsu’s voice was interrupted by an airy laugh. “You’re such a compassionate girl.”

The one looking at her with a rueful smile was Keishou.

“Excuse me?!”

“Do you seriously believe you’re mad at Reirin?”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been saying!”

“To me, it sounds more like you’re so worried about her you can hardly stand it.”

Keigetsu was struck speechless by his casual observation. “I’m…what?”

“Why, it’s hard to believe this is coming from the girl who once pushed our sister out of a pagoda. How times can change. Thank you for caring so much about Reirin. As her brother, I appreciate it.”

Even Keikou was nodding along, overcome with emotion. “That’s our virtuous sister for you. She’s been blessed with a great friend. I’m touched!”

“Wh-what?!” Keigetsu’s cheeks flushed with bewilderment and an inexplicable embarrassment. “What are you talking about?! Don’t dictate what I’m feeling! I’m mad. Every time she does something reckless, *I’m* left feeling miserable—”

“That’s called guilt, I believe.” This time, Gyoumei was the one to gently cut in. “It was your own impotence that put her in danger. The reason you feel so miserable is because *you* want to be the one to help *her*. And you feel guilty when you can’t accomplish that.” When Keigetsu’s jaw dropped at his logical assessment, he broke into a faint smile. “You don’t know how to express the concern and guilt you’re feeling as anything but anger. You are indeed a woman of the Shu, the sovereigns of flame.”

“Wha…”

“Ever since I witnessed your fight at the Violet Dragon’s Spring, I’ve had a feeling you two were talking past each other because you both care too much. A third party can provide a much more objective perspective on these things.”

Keigetsu looked stunned, while Gyoumei teasingly cocked an eyebrow. “Of course, my heart almost stopped when Reirin fell into the water—but to be frank, your argument afterward was almost heartwarming. It’s clear that you have a much bigger place in Reirin’s heart than I do.”

“There’s no point getting jealous of one of your own Maidens, Your Highness,” Keishou quipped.

“Fair point.” Gyoumei nodded, a glazed look in his eyes. Then he cleared his throat and turned back to Keigetsu. “It was a fight between two girls who care deeply for one another. I was certain it would resolve itself in no time. Unfortunately, both you and Reirin came to the conclusion that the other party was angry with you, which seems to have complicated matters quite a bit. Hence, you’ve left us no choice but to intervene. Someone has to teach you girls how fighting works,” he said, soft but reproachful.

Keigetsu lapsed into a flustered silence.

“When it comes to not knowing how to fight, Reirin is far worse off than you are. She’s never had a friend until now,” Keishou said. “We were too protective of her for her own good, I think. Everyone she knew either looked down on her and coddled her, or gazed up at her in adoration… She didn’t have anyone who would express their emotions to her head-on. At first, Reirin seemed to enjoy the novel experience, but it looks like it hit her where it hurts this time around.”

He chuckled, looking every bit the big brother he was. “It’s probably because emotional clashes stopped being a fantasy and became a ‘reality’ for her. You seem to think Reirin is angry, but I don’t think that’s true. I’m pretty sure she just doesn’t know what to do. Since you have a slight edge on her in emotional intelligence, won’t you please meet her in the middle? That’s all we’re asking. I’m sorry we didn’t phrase it better the first time.”

His gentle assertion finally encouraged Keigetsu to stop and reflect on their words. In hindsight, they hadn’t made a point of chastising her for yelling at Reirin. They weren’t demanding Keigetsu apologize because she was the one in the wrong—they were asking her to take the first step toward reconciliation because she was in a better position to do so.

Once she realized as much, she was able to swallow their advice without

issue. So too did it occur to her that her defensiveness and distrust of those around her had been at an all-time high.

I mean, I thought they were going to blame me *for everything.*

Kou Reirin was the beloved butterfly of the Maiden Court, and she was the sewer rat. If the two of them fought, she had taken for granted that everyone would rush to the other girl's defense. But she had been wrong. The people around Keigetsu were far more rational and impartial than she'd given them credit for.

Kou Reirin and Shu Keigetsu were on a much more equal footing than she'd thought.

That's right.

At last, Keigetsu admitted something to herself—the true form of the desire that had smoldered in her chest ever since the Harvest Festival.

I want…to be her equal.

The reason she'd scrambled so hard in the lead-up to the Rite of Reverence wasn't because she was burning with a competitive desire to beat the other girls. It was because she wanted to be Kou Reirin's equal. She wanted to get closer to her. She wanted to become a friend whom Reirin wouldn't be ashamed to have by her side.

The reason it made her feel pathetic to ask so much of Kou Reirin was that she wanted to be someone the girl could befriend on equal terms.

Tousetsu, who had watched the exchange in silence, took a step forward. "You seem to believe that Lady Reirin is the one putting you at her mercy and making you miserable." She looked at Keigetsu, her face as impassive as ever. "But from my perspective as her attendant, she is a victim to *your* whims. Ever since you said you hated her, the poor thing has lost her composure, spilled her ink, dropped mooncakes, left her room a mess, and been misled by entirely unfounded gossip."

"She what?"

"As I said, she has lost her composure, spilled her ink, dropped mooncakes,

left her room a mess, and been misled by entirely unfounded gossip."

"You never told me any of that!" Keigetsu yelled.

Tousetsu scowled in annoyance. "Each time I attempted to explain, you threw a teacup at me."

Keigetsu awkwardly bit down an angry retort. That was a fair point. After how sure she'd been that Kou Reirin would forgive her, seeing her greetings and letters go ignored had upset her to the point of covering her ears and screaming ever since.

"Moreover, I assumed you wouldn't believe me until you came and saw it for yourself."

"Well… That's fair."

Frankly, it was hard to picture the flawless Kou Reirin distraught enough to make such a blunder. No matter how much she screamed and yelled, Keigetsu had figured the Kou Maiden would either put a hand to her cheek and go, "Oh dear," or ignore her with a smile like she always did to Houshun. She'd assumed that Reirin was refusing her flame calls and letters because she was angry enough to give her the silent treatment.

"Kou Reirin refuses to speak with me not out of anger…but because she doesn't know what to do? Do I have that right?"

"I also assumed that anger must have been the cause, but it seems I may have been mistaken. In hindsight, it's more her style to promptly neutralize those who incur her wrath."

"You make a sound argument," Keigetsu muttered under her breath, then nodded her head in agreement. "In that case, I have to be the one to step up."

Reirin didn't hate her, nor had she tossed her aside. In that case, Keigetsu didn't mind reaching out to her one more time. After all, *she* was used to dealing with more emotions that she could handle.

It was time to tell that reckless, impulsive, oblivious Kou Reirin just how worried she'd been and how guilty she'd felt. She was going to give her friend a good scolding.

“Consider this a request from me as well,” Gyoumei chimed in with a solemn expression. “Reirin uttering the words ‘I’m done’ brings back unpleasant memories… If you don’t set things right with her, I’ll be left with the sinking feeling that my past self will never be forgiven. I can’t bear to watch this any longer.”

Who would have guessed that the part he “couldn’t bear to watch” wasn’t Reirin’s heartbreak but the fact that Keigetsu had fallen out of her favor?

When Keigetsu stared long and hard at the gorgeous crown prince, he furrowed his brow, incredulous. “What is it?”

“Erm… I just never expected you to relate to me, Your Hi—!” Keigetsu clamped a hand over her mouth, realizing how rude she had been. “Um, never mind! Please forgive my impertinence!”

“For the record,” Gyoumei replied with a self-derisive smile, “you’re in a much better position than I was in the past. The ‘I’m done’ she directed at you likely wasn’t meant as a genuine rejection. Since I *have* experienced that, I can tell the difference.”

“Is that so?”

“So, well, have a little confidence in yourself.”

“R-right.”

As she gave a noncommittal nod, it occurred to Keigetsu that he probably meant to encourage her. She opened her mouth to thank him, but by that point, his gaze had already wandered elsewhere. Most days, she would have found that brusqueness infuriating. Yet in that moment, she thought, *His Highness isn’t my enemy. Nor is anyone else standing here.*

It was a simple discovery, but one with a profound impact.

They weren’t her enemies. Not everyone was out to criticize her.

She was a sewer rat, and Kou Reirin was a butterfly. There was still a gap between them, but it didn’t run as deep as she had assumed. On the contrary, Shu Keigetsu was one of the few people in existence who could subject Kou Reirin to her whims and leave her shaken.

“I’ll do my best.”

She had to be the one to reach out. The thought came naturally to Keigetsu as she gazed up at the white full moon hanging in the sky.

“That’s all well and good…but when are you going to cast your flame spell, Lady Keigetsu?”

Upon heading back through the underground passage—much less frightening on the way out—and returning to her guesthouse in the Shu Palace, Keigetsu had found Leelee waiting for her. It was forbidden for attending court ladies to approach the guesthouses for the duration of the Rite of Reverence, but the blazing scarlet was currently disguised as a kitchen maid. She’d figured she might as well make the most of it, so she’d snuck into the guesthouse and spent half an hour waiting for Keigetsu to show up.

The moment Keigetsu had stepped into the guesthouse after parting ways with Tousetsu—who had gone back to her own mistress—Leelee had said proudly, “I got through to Lady Reirin! We almost got into a bit of a fight, but thanks to me, she’s willing to face the problem head-on. I wasn’t able to bring back a reply letter due to various circumstances, but she sent me off with the message that she’d talk to you by flame call around the hour of the dog.” Then she’d pouted in accusation at Keigetsu. “But it took you forever to get back! You have no idea how worried I was.”

“Get off my case, court lady. I had a lot of my own problems to deal with.”

After the pep talk, Keigetsu had taken advantage of her meeting with the crown prince to inform him of the Rans’ shady conversation. The men’s expressions had turned serious in an instant, and they’d taken her statement under consideration. Based on the investigation thus far, it seemed like one of the Kin clan’s apprentices might have been responsible for bringing down the tent, but the prince had agreed to add the Rans to the list of suspects in the ongoing probe. He’d also promised to tighten security around Reirin moving forward.

Feeling as if a weight had been lifted from her chest, Keigetsu had breathed a sigh of relief.

“Actually, you and Tousetsu were in on this together, weren’t you? What kind of court lady grants permission for her mistress to be abducted? If you ever do something like this again, you’re dead, Leelee.”

“Whoa, I’m shaking in my boots. But look, you’ve finally stopped biting your nails in frustration. Your face is brighter too. Seems like you’re ready to talk things out with Lady Reirin now, huh? I feel like I deserve a little thanks here.”

“Dream on!”

“Whatever you say. But forget that—hurry up and make your flame call. The bell for the hour of the dog rang a long time ago.”

Leelee, who kept stealing glances in the direction of the bell, pushed a candlestick toward the center of the table.

Keigetsu scowled from her seat. “Don’t rush me. I’ve already told His Highness about the Rans, so there’s no more need to hurry. Besides, are you planning to stick around for this? Get out. You’ll just make things awkward.”

“I’m worried you’ll get so nervous you throw open the closest drawer again…”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Keigetsu snorted, but Leelee didn’t seem interested in entertaining her protests.

Honestly. Be it Tousetsu or Leelee, court ladies these days were getting a bit too big for their britches.

Despite her internal grumbling, Keigetsu eventually gave up on chasing Leelee out and turned back to the flame.

Kou Reirin.

She focused her qi and vividly pictured the form of the person she wanted to talk to.

No matter how hard she had stared into the flames over the past few days, she had never managed to detect Kou Reirin’s presence beyond the flicker of red. It was hard to describe, but it was almost as if there had been a thick curtain hanging between them, and she couldn’t find a way to make the connection.

There were two conditions under which a flame call wouldn’t connect. One

was if the other party wasn't near a fire—and the second was if they were intensely rejecting the caster.

If I can't get through again… Keigetsu started to think in spite of herself, then hastily shook her head. Of course it was going to connect. Reirin was the one who had specified a time to talk. *What should I say first?*

If Leelee's explanation was to be believed, Reirin wasn't actually mad at her. Her brother Keishou had also claimed she just didn't know what to do, so that had to be right.

In that case, Kou Reirin would also be struggling with how to open the conversation.

Perhaps I should be the one to break the ice.

Should she come right out with an apology for her insults? No, it was true that the boar in celestial maiden's clothing had been too reckless. Apologizing would be like acknowledging that what she'd said was wrong, so that plan was out.

Would she do better to matter-of-factly explain exactly what Kou Reirin had done to make her so displeased—correction, *worried*—and why she felt so guilty? But if she went that route, one wrong step could lead to a second coming of the catastrophe.

Actually, you know what, I won't be satisfied until I get in a shot or two at her for spending all this time ignoring me—no, no, no! Why do I always get so mean when I'm nervous?!

It was time to admit the truth to herself, Keigetsu realized. She was *incredibly* nervous.

Who could blame her? This might have been Kou Reirin's first experience with a "fight," but she had never seen Kou Reirin act so curt before either. Even after switching their bodies and attempting to snare her in a trap, the girl had still offered her a smile. She'd always lavished Keigetsu in forgiveness, compliments, and encouragement without reserve.

To think there would come a day when she was ignored.

Oh, enough already!

Keigetsu clenched her fists and exhaled a short breath. She'd been ignored and neglected countless times since coming to the Maiden Court. Why was she so distraught over one person doing it without any malicious intent?

Let's get on with it!

She stared down the candle with a determination clearly inspired by Reirin herself.

"Heed my voice, Kou Reirin!"

In an instant, the flame that had been no bigger than the tip of her finger swelled to the point of scorching the ceiling. Just as the fire had grown massive enough to illuminate the whole room, the flame began to shrink back to its original size, its hue darkening as if it had all been concentrated in one place.

I feel her there.

Keigetsu swallowed. It was a unique sensation, one that was impossible to describe any other way. She sensed the other girl's presence.

On the other side of the flame, Reirin was hoping to speak with her. Keigetsu felt her heart skip a beat at the realization.

"K-Kou Reirin."

Would she be wearing her usual serene smile? Or would she be serious and silent? Would there be a tinge of repugnance to her beautiful, jewel-like eyes?

Keigetsu's breath came faster. Her voice hitched.

"Say—"

"Incredible!"

But then, her insecurities were shattered in one fell swoop by a voice so cheerful as to sound out of place.

"I can't believe it! I actually got through! This is amazing!"

As her image took shape in the fire, Reirin's face—which took up most of the oddly shaky visual—wore a smile like a flower bursting into bloom. Keigetsu was almost taken aback at how much she looked like her usual bubbly self. Why was she acting so friendly all of a sudden?

“Don’t give me that…”

“I can’t help it. I’m just so happy. Say, Lady Keigetsu… I’m truly glad to have the chance to talk with you.”

“You’re one to talk! You were the one ignoring me!”

Her startling behavior had Keigetsu pressing a finger to her temple. Just what kind of magic had Leelee used? It was almost as if there had never been a fight in the first place.

“Give me a break. What is your problem? Do you realize how distressing this has been for me? Listen here! I had something important to warn you about. Yet you—”

“I’m truly sorry, Lady Keigetsu.” Just as Keigetsu had fallen back on her usual disparaging comments out of sheer relief, Reirin cut her off. ***“For swallowing Lady Houshun and Lady Seika’s lies, for avoiding you, and for sending back your letter—everything. Furthermore, I started the entire mess by giving you cause for concern at the Violet Dragon’s Spring. I feel simply terrible.”***

She apologized for every last thing Keigetsu was planning to bring up before she could get around to it, effectively taking the wind out of the other girl’s sails.

“I…”

I’m sorry too. Keigetsu knew that was all she had to say, but after opening and closing her mouth a few times, she looked off to the side.

“I-I’m glad you’re seeing things my way.”

As she averted her gaze, she saw Leelee was gazing at the sky in dramatic desperation. Still, it was too late for Keigetsu to come clean about her feelings now; she was too pleased that Reirin was still willing to accept her at her most cantankerous. It felt like a cold hand had released its vice grip on her heart. Her relief was so overwhelming that it even took *her* by surprise.

Next time, I’ll be the one to make the first move, she told herself, scrambling to make excuses.

She really had intended to be the first to apologize. That had been the whole

point of making the flame call. It was just that the other party had bridged the gap with all the force of a wild boar, so she'd been beaten to the punch.

Keigetsu cleared her throat.

"So that means," the girl on the other side of the flame went on solemnly, ***"you'll forgive me, correct?"***

"M-more or less."

"So our friendship is restored? We're back to being friends?"

"Well… I-I suppose that's what it means, yes."

"Thank goodness," Reirin murmured back, her lips forming a soft smile. ***"That's such a relief to hear."***

"Kou Reirin?"

The reason Keigetsu suddenly looked so incredulous was that Reirin's response had been oddly subdued and muffled. It wasn't like she was *hoping* for a better reaction or anything, but the usual Kou Reirin would have beamed brightly. It seemed more her style to get ahead of herself and exclaim something like, "I'm so happy!" or "Hee hee, we're the very best of friends!"

"It's a good thing we could clear the air. I'm so glad I made it in time."

What was it? Why did this feel so wrong? Keigetsu felt a chill down her spine, as if a cold gust had suddenly blown past.

"Kou Reirin…?"

"That reminds me, Lady Keigetsu. Please relay a message to His Highness and Her Majesty for me. I don't want her punished too severely for letting her emotions get the better of her. There must be a good reason why she would resort to such violence. I'd like them to look into what that might be."

"What are you talking about?"

When Reirin abruptly entrusted her with a message, Keigetsu grew more and more bewildered. No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she started to get a bad feeling.

Now that the apology had put her mind at ease, she finally realized that

something was off about Kou Reirin. On the surface, the Maiden sounded as calm and composed as ever—but if she listened more closely, she could hear ragged gasps punctuating her words.

“Hey, hold on a second…” Leelee, who had been peering into the flame from the side, leaned over with a face frozen in horror. “Lady Reirin… Is that a trail of *blood* I see peeking out from your hair?”

Fear flashed in her amber eyes as she stared at Reirin’s temple reflected in the flame.

“What did you say?” Keigetsu asked, startled.

A beat later, something occurred to her. The flame spell usually reflected the background behind the recipient, but all she could see around Reirin, her face magnified in the reflection, was pure darkness without so much as a furnishing in sight.

“Where are you right now?”

Her pulse grew erratic. Sweat crawled down her back.

Keigetsu had to wonder: Where was the head court lady who always clung to Kou Reirin like a shadow?

“Where are you, what are you doing…and how are you connected to my spell?”

“Oh, you see—”

Just as Reirin parted her shapely lips, there came a storm of thumps as someone banged on the door to the guesthouse and burst in without so much as waiting for a reply.

“Is this where you are, Lady Reirin?!”

It was Tousetsu, the gamboge gold court lady, her face white as a sheet.

“Lady Reirin is nowhere to be found in either the pavilion or the Kou Palace! The Eagle Eyes didn’t know where she was either!”

The moment she spotted her mistress in the flame around which the two Shu girls had gathered, Tousetsu clung to the table with enough force to tip it over,

her hair a disheveled mess.

"Lady Reirin! Where in the world are you?!"

"A well, I believe."

Her mistress's answer had her reeling. "What?"

"Lady Kasui struck me over the head and tossed me into an old well—somewhere on the grounds of the inner court, I would assume. I'm not sure of the exact location."

Kou Reirin spoke as unhurriedly as if it were someone else's predicament. Or, no—she *sounded* calm enough, but her voice had begun to shake. Come to think of it, she wasn't even making her trademark gesture of putting a hand to her cheek.

"It's a very old well, so I was fortunate enough not to drown. Still, I've been up to my knees in muddy water for quite a while now, so I've grown awfully cold. I'm afraid my consciousness is beginning to fade. This body of mine… truly is a fragile thing…" She must have relaxed at the sight of so many familiar faces. Her words were slowly but surely coming in fragments. ***"I spilled oil on my sleeve…so I used that as fuel… Hee hee, is this what they call…a lucky mistake? I'm truly glad I could connect to your flame spell…one last time."***

"Wait… Don't say that."

"I meant to live with no regrets…but so much for that. Before I knew it, I'd become far too spoiled. I found myself wishing that these days would last forever. That I would have ample time to wallow…"

"Hold it right there, Kou Reirin!" Keigetsu screamed, going red in the face as she made a grab for the candlestick. "Don't go! You can't! I'll come find you. Where are you?! A well in the courtyard?!"

"I appreciate the sentiment…but I'm afraid…it may be a little too late."

"You listen here! I'll *never* forgive you if you douse this flame call. I don't care what you say, so just keep talking! You better not faint or die on me, or I'll end our friendship once and for all. I'll take back everything I said about us making up!"

Her knees bumping into the furniture scattered around the room, Keigetsu flew out of the guesthouse clutching the candle. The court ladies were soon to follow, grabbing spare candles and live coals, medical supplies, and blankets on their way out.

"That's…so cruel, Lady Keigetsu. Don't speak of such terrible things…as ending our friendship…"

"I don't want to hear *you* saying terrible things either!"

Where was she? Where might there be an old well where someone could dump a Maiden without anyone noticing? If Keigetsu could just get close enough, she could use the flame spell as a clue to track her down.

When her voice almost locked up in fear, Keigetsu twisted her anguish into a screech and screamed at the other girl from across the flame. "Say something, Kou Reirin! Or else I'll hate you forever! Actually, I *already* hate you!"



“Why must you always…say such mean things? Please stop.”

“Never! If you try to cut contact right now, I’ll call you things a hundred times worse! You blockhead! You boar! You idiot, moron, imbecile! I hate you so much I could puke!”

Keigetsu couldn’t let her cut the call. It was her only lead. She had to keep Kou Reirin conscious and talking for as long as she possibly could.

For that, she’d call her as many names as it took.

On the verge of tears, Keigetsu stared into the flame she was shielding with one hand and shouted, “Just you try dying on me. I’ll kill you dead!”

Chapter 7:
Reirin Braces for Death

REIRIN AWOKE TO THE DULL *THUD* of her head hitting a stone wall.

Ouch…

She had lost count of how many times she'd been roused so far.

The well was too narrow for her to either crouch down or lie flat, so she had little choice but to stand in place. While she was conscious, she could lean her back against the wall to keep herself upright, but whenever she passed out from the cold, her body would wobble from losing its center of gravity and send her slamming against the rock surface.

She'd already lost all feeling below her knees—the part of her body submerged in the water. Ever since Kasui had carried her off and tossed her into the well, Reirin had been trapped in a cycle of fainting and waking back up again. At first, she'd tried to claw her way out of the well, but her legs were practically useless. In the end, she'd failed to keep her footing and had accomplished nothing but wasting her strength.

Just once, a eunuch dragging a cask of wine and a handful of court ladies presumably carrying silverware had passed near the well, perhaps in preparation for a banquet. Unfortunately, Reirin's feeble voice hadn't managed to reach any of them through the lid.

Evidently, this wasn't an area that saw much traffic, as she had yet to hear any footsteps since.

"You ought to get a taste of what it's like to wait for help that will never come," Kasui had declared right before throwing Reirin into the well. "Wait with bated breath for your miracle hemp to arrive, tormented by your body's slow decay…only to have your hopes dashed every single time. See how much despair that brings to both you and your loved ones."

She crossed Reirin's limp arms in front of her chest, gathering up her long sleeves and stuffing them into the gap. Then, after arranging her robe so it wouldn't get caught on the surrounding walls, Kasui picked her up in what could almost be described as a courteous manner and dropped her feet first into the well.

"I didn't deal you a fatal wound. You shouldn't die immediately. I pray that you will have at least one moment of consciousness before the end."

The well wasn't that deep. Thanks to the large accumulation of mud, Reirin managed to land at the bottom without breaking any bones. Her sleeves didn't even get wet. Still, the rim was too far for her to reach even if she stretched her arms.

The cropped circle of the night sky above was soon obscured by a heavy lid.

"Repent for the sin of buying up medicine on a whim and robbing someone else of their dearest loved one," Kasui spat before leaving the scene. Reirin made out the words from within the complete and utter darkness, then fainted for the first time shortly afterward.

"Have mercy on me, Lady Kasui," she muttered when she regained consciousness sometime later.

Kasui appeared to be under a grave misconception. Reirin's white lie about buying up the miracle hemp had clearly hit upon some inviolable trigger of hers.

But why?

It must have something to do with her relative who got burned.

It seemed said relative had already passed away. Going by Kasui's remarks, this had happened about three years prior, and this mystery person hadn't survived because someone bought up all the miracle hemp at the time.

But did Kasui even *have* a relative that close? How many people did she have in her family?

And then there's the shaman…

Kasui had also seemed very interested in what the shaman was up to. She'd asked questions about the sheet of paper that suddenly caught fire, if Reirin

recalled.

Combustion. Burns. A relative. The shaman. Miracle hemp. A buyout. Reirin had a feeling it would all converge into a single line, but she was too nauseated to think straight.

I have to return the favor to Lady Kasui, or I simply won't be able to rest in peace.

She idly wondered how long a normal person would survive if they were hit over the head with a blunt object and thrown into a well full of cold, muddy water. Her robust brothers, for example, surely would have climbed out in a heartbeat. If she were in Keigetsu's body, she'd probably catch a cold, but she'd be in a good position to save herself. This sickly body of hers was the root of the problem. Just as a cloth can unravel the moment one stitch comes undone, symptoms that would be harmless for most people could quickly throw Reirin's body into critical condition.

It didn't feel too stifling inside the well because the old wooden lid had thin boards that allowed air to travel through the gaps, and even the sensation of insects crawling up her limbs in the dark didn't bother her too much. She hadn't sustained much damage to her psyche, but it was still uncomfortable not being able to move, and worst of all, she was cold. She could feel how excessively feverish she was.

Before long, her strength would run out, and eventually she would die of hypothermia.

Freezing to death… I suppose that is *high up on my Top Ten Preferred Ways to Die.*

Compared to the nightmares she had every time she ran a high fever, it was a fairly peaceful way to go. One might even call it ideal.

Even so, Reirin absolutely couldn't allow herself to die right then.

I must apologize to Lady Keigetsu first…

She gave a faint chuckle, finding it ironic that now was the time she'd finally found her resolve.

This falling-out had certainly caused her to lose her cool. There was the fact that she had carelessly allowed herself to be attacked from behind, of course, but she couldn't believe that she'd been led astray by Seika and Houshun's slander either. She had been vaguely cognizant of Kasui's questionable behavior, the evidence that Houshun and Seika were struggling, and the imminent threat on her life, but she'd let it all slide out of an excess of lethargy.

And to top it all off, she hadn't even managed a word of apology to her precious friend.

It's shameful. I should have known I didn't have the time to care about Lady Keigetsu rejecting me.

Reirin scolded herself for becoming so laid-back somewhere down the line. Matters like who ought to apologize first or not wanting to hear "I hate you" again were truly trivial in the grand scheme of things.

Well, at least as far as someone like her—who quite literally wasn't guaranteed a tomorrow—was concerned.

"I've gotten quite spoiled…"

After Leelee had talked some sense into her, part of the reason she had started mixing her medicine without reading the letter was, of course, due to her deteriorating physical condition, but she belatedly realized that it was just as much because some part of her had wanted to put off the reconciliation.

The truth was, she'd wanted Keigetsu to reach out to *her*.

Just once, she'd wanted the other girl to be the one to bridge the gap and show her acceptance. She'd wanted her to take back that "I hate you." She'd wanted her to acknowledge that the two of them were still friends.

How could she have forgotten? She had neither the time nor the right to hope for something like that.

"I'm such a big idiot…"

Outside the well, she could hear the bells beginning to announce the hour of the dog. If Leelee had passed along her message, and if Keigetsu had been willing to accept it, she was bound to be facing a fire right around now.

Chest out… Chin up.

Pushing her stiff, frozen body into action, she opened the arms folded across her chest a fraction. Inside her tightly clenched fist was the piece of crystal she had grabbed earlier in a desperate bid to retain her consciousness. She forced her fingers open, slowly counting the seconds in her head, and managed to shift the shard so she was holding it between her thumb and index finger.

That act alone caused her body to shake to a ridiculous extent.

Reirin exhaled a deep breath, then moved on to feeling around inside her sash with her left hand. The breast of her garment, the inside of her sash, her sleeves, her hem—women's robes had no shortage of places to store things.

After a considerable amount of time, she fished a dagger from inside her sash and a bundle of aconite tied with a hemp cord from her breast. Both were items she used to prepare medicine on the go, and both were items she carried to give herself a painless death should worse come to worst. If her brothers or Gyoumei ever found out, they'd be sure to blanch and snatch them from her hands, but Reirin saw them as a talisman of sorts.

I always assumed I would use them to take my own life one day… I never dreamed I'd be using them like this.

The unanticipated development was so fascinating that she couldn't help but give a dry laugh. She was fine surrendering her shot at a peaceful death. Never had she dreamed she would wish so desperately to survive for just one more hour, for just this one moment.

Reirin bit the dried aconite between her teeth to pull it free of the cord, then let the herb itself drop to the bottom of the well. A faint sweetness and numbing sensation lingered on her tongue. But she had no more need of the sweet poison that once might have lured her into a restful sleep.

She then did her best to untie the leftover cord with her rigid fingers, hooking it around the little finger of her right hand. The end of the limp piece of string brushed against her oil-drenched sleeve. It had seeped into her clothes when she knocked over a pot earlier.

Reirin gave the dagger in her hand a light shake and let the sheath fall to the

ground. She gently ran a finger across the blade to make sure its exposed edge was in the correct position.

Please let me summon a flame.

Exhaling one last long breath, Reirin steeled her resolve. This might not work. Still, even if it meant giving up her means of an easy death, she had to take the gamble.

She was going to make a fire. It didn't matter how small a spark it was.

All that mattered was that she could connect to Keigetsu's flame for but one fleeting moment—that she could say at least one word of apology.

So long as she could do that, she was sure she could leave this world without regrets.

"Ggh…"

The simple *clonk* of striking the crystal shard against the blade sapped her of a great deal of her strength. Nevertheless, Reirin pursed her lips and hit the shard against the steel again and again. Crystal was used in jewelry, but her experiment-loving brothers had taught her that it also made a good quality flint.

Clonk.

The crystal only produced a muffled sound; it didn't generate so much as a spark. All she got for her efforts was ragged gasps of breath. Her whole body shook.

That was fine by Reirin. Her breath came faster, her pulse quickened, and her body trembled. That was all proof that she was still alive.

The higher her temperature rose, the looser her fingers would become.

Clonk!

For a brief moment, a spark smaller than a particle of dust whizzed by. Alas, it vanished into thin air, unable to reach the fuse of the hemp cord.

Yet Reirin was not deterred.

Lady Keigetsu.

She had to tell her.

Please let me connect to her flame.

She wanted to at least apologize. She wanted to clear the air.

Keigetsu was the first friend who had ever directed such fiery emotion her way. Reirin wanted to make her mark on that friend of hers—that glittering treasure—within the short life she had been given.

Please…let me reach her!

As she brought all her strength to bear on the blow, the biggest spark yet danced through the air.

Fwoosh!

The tiny grain of flame spread to the hemp cord, lapping up the oil on her sleeve. Within moments, it glowed as blindingly bright as the comet on the night of the Double Sevens Festival.

A murmur escaped her lips. “Oh…”

As she saw the flames shooting from her sleeve and the figure reflected in them, Reirin’s whole being was consumed with joy. She’d gotten through.

“K-Kou Reirin. Say—”

“Incredible!”

Energy surged through her along with the wave of excitement. Capitalizing on that momentum, Reirin cut off a section of her robe with the dagger and held the blazing sleeve between her fingertips. This way, she could keep the conversation going until the fabric burned out.

“Don’t give me that…”

Squinting into the dazzling light, Reirin gazed upon Keigetsu’s face, which was contorted with resentment on the other side of the flame.

Yes, this was indeed Shu Keigetsu. This was her emotional, short-tempered, charming friend who flitted through expressions like the seasons.

“Do you realize how distressing this has been for me?”

The girl seemed as grumpy as ever, but contrary to Reirin’s imagination, the sight wasn’t scary in the least. Only now that she was looking her friend in the

eye could she realize one simple fact: Keigetsu didn't hate her. She was just sulking. It was just as Leelee had said—she'd merely thrown open the closest drawer.

Oh… So that's all it was?

She was helpless to stop a grin from spreading across her face. Perhaps it was because she'd lost control from the big adrenaline rush, or perhaps it was because of the tiny amount of aconite she had chewed; she felt the giddiness that came with a light intoxication.

Whatever the case, she was running out of time.

Stopping Keigetsu in the middle of a scathing tirade she clearly didn't mean, Reirin got on with her apology. Frankly, about half of the insults she'd heard at the Violet Dragon's Spring still didn't sit right with her, but that didn't matter anymore.

"I-I'm glad you're seeing things my way."

That put an end to their dispute.

"Well… I-I suppose that's what it means, yes."

She'd even gotten it on the record that Shu Keigetsu and Kou Reirin were friends again.

"Thank goodness."

Reirin felt a deep sense of relief; she was truly glad. Now she could die with no regrets.

By the time Keigetsu and Leelee had caught on to her situation and Tousetsu had leapt in front of the flame, Reirin's consciousness was fading as a result of all the excitement. The hands she'd raised to hold out the cloth were growing numb. She'd managed to cut off her other sleeve and transfer the flame before it could die, but how much longer was she going to have the strength to hold it in front of her?

Her head in a fog, she managed to pass along her dying wish regarding Kasui. But then, Keigetsu shouted hard enough to make the flame quiver, ***"I don't care what you say, so just keep talking! You better not faint or die on me, or I'll end***

our friendship once and for all. I'll take back everything I said about us making up!"

Reirin's drooping eyelids shot up at the declaration. What a horrible thing to say. Here she'd been so distressed by the words "I hate you" that she'd risked her life to see them retracted, yet Keigetsu had come along and brandished the even more powerful threat of "ending their friendship."

"That's…so cruel, Lady Keigetsu."

This was going to be their last chance to fight. Reirin mustered all her courage to argue back, but Keigetsu went on to add, ***"I hate you so much I could puke!"*** and called her all manner of nasty names. Was she truly a red-blooded human?

"Please stop insulting me. You're so mean. And to think…I bottled up all my objections to apologize."

"Huh?! So you never saw my perspective at all, then! What, that apology was totally insincere?!"

"I mean…the points you made…are absurd."

Was this what was called tit for tat? She'd already ceded the argument once, but hearing Keigetsu come on so strong in her criticisms made her want to fight back all of a sudden.

"You got mad at me…because you believed I was being too reckless. But I didn't…do anything rash. I thought my actions through. You made a mountain out of a molehill."

"Like you're in any position to say that! Just who is off dying as we speak, huh?!"

"I'm referring to the second trial. This and that are two different things."

Keigetsu must have been running with all her might; she kept gasping for air, and there came the sound of her stumbling over something from time to time. Yet there was something almost comforting in the fact that she still had the drive to fire back insults without missing a beat.

Oh, Reirin thought in a haze. *This is what we should have done all along.*

She shouldn't have been so afraid to be hated. She shouldn't have avoided

hearing her friend's counterarguments or getting hurt by them. Instead of hiding, the two of them should have faced one another and traded barbs from the very start.

Though Keigetsu would inevitably jump on any comment she made, the back-and-forth of their conflicting opinions was fun. The two of them were polar opposites, and it was unlikely that they would ever share the same position on anything—but that was exactly what allowed them to face each other head-on.

"Besides, I was trying to make you happy. My intentions were nothing but good. Yet to nonetheless take me to task over it… I'd appreciate it if you gave *my* feelings some consideration."

"The problem is that you express your good intentions in a twisted way! Who would cherish the rotting corpse their cat brings them just because its heart was in the right place? No one! You'd dispose of it immediately and scold the cat!"

"That's a terrible thing to say. If it were me, I'd accept the gift with gratitude. And cats don't bring people rotting corpses, anyway."

"Who cares?! You're impossible!" Keigetsu's voice hitched in frustration.

In the background, Reirin could hear Tousetsu shouting, ***"I'm sure it's this way, Lady Keigetsu! The only well shallow enough for someone to fall in and survive is the old well to the north!"***

"There! Did you catch a glimpse of light from inside that wooden lid?!"

The one to cry out in that shrill voice must have been Leelee.

"Hey, Kou Reirin! Is that where you are?! Answer me! Make the flame bigger!"

"That's easy for you to say…but I don't have a means to do so…"

"Pour some fighting spirit into it and it'll blow right up! Come on, it's simple!"

Fighting spirit. Somehow, *Keigetsu* was the one who sounded more like her usual self. Reirin chuckled, only to frown at the next words she heard.

"Excuse me, did you just giggle?! How could you laugh at a time like this?!

That's exactly the kind of thing that gets on my nerves! I can't stand it! I hate you!"

"Pardon…but could you please stop throwing around the words 'I hate you' so flippantly?"

She didn't mind being called incompetent or mistaken for a weirdo, but there was something about the simplicity of the word "hate" that absolutely gutted her. Especially as of late.

"Back then…it was those words that hurt me most. I really…hated it. I never…ever…want to hear that again."

That was what she'd learned from Leelee: She had been hurt. She was rather appalled at how deeply she'd been shaken by such a trivial remark, but she cast aside all shame in the face of death. Reirin chose to lay bare the most pathetic sides of herself and the fragile truth of her feelings.

"Say, Lady Keigetsu. I used to…think nothing of being hated. But I was wrong. It's a sad thing. All the more when it comes from villagers you've come to trust. And especially when it comes from a beloved friend."

Oh. She was running out of breath. Even if there were gaps in the lid, it was only natural that she'd suffocate if she kept a fire going inside a closed well.

She had lost feeling in her limbs, and the sleeve she'd used in lieu of firewood was moments from burning out.

Now was the time to tell her, Reirin realized.

"I love you, after all. You are my comet. I've been truly blessed to have such a dazzling friend. So, Lady Keigetsu…"

She had to tell her. Her feelings. Her true wish. She had to be honest.

"Just once is enough. Won't you tell me you love me too?"

On the other side of the flame, Reirin heard Keigetsu gasp. She was a kind girl deep down, so perhaps she would indulge this final wish. Perhaps she'd avert her gaze and squeak out the words—*I love you.*

"I…hate you!"

Instead, Reirin was treated to the loudest screech thus far. “What?” she murmured with a blink.

How cruel.

Yet Keigetsu would brook no argument. Before Reirin had a chance to interject, tears began to spill from the other girl’s eyes. ***“Wh-what kind of selfish request is that?! I’ll never say that! I refuse! I-I’m going to hate you for the rest of eternity—for trying to tie things up on your own, for refusing to ask for help, and for making me miserable!”***

“Lady Keigetsu… Um, please don’t cry…”

“Put that brilliant mind of yours to use and think for a second! If I literally hated you, I-I wouldn’t be running around like this! How many times do you think I’ve tripped?! And all because of you! C’mon, can you really not figure it out?!”

As if running nonstop wasn’t hard enough, the tears made Keigetsu’s voice shake further. And that voice soon rained down on Reirin from above, overlapping with the version coming from the flames.

“Listen up, Kou Reirin! I’ll only ever say that I hate you! If you’re looking for a sugar-sweet friendship, you’ve come to the wrong person!”

“Allow me to take care of the lid, Lady Keigetsu.”

“So, Kou Reirin…”

The sound of Keigetsu’s voice coincided with the crash of Tousetsu kicking the wooden cover off the well.

“It’s up to you to read between the lines!”

Her almost valiantly self-centered words flooded the well with the crisp night air. Just as her sleeve had burned its course, Reirin stared up in a daze at her friend, who had appeared like a comet in the round patch of sky overhead.

“Lady Keigetsu…”

Shu Keigetsu was a mess. Her hair was disheveled, and her freckled cheeks were wet with tears. She must have tripped and fallen somewhere too, given the twigs and leaves caught in her sleeves.

Even then, the candle in her hand glowed a brilliant scarlet.

She was the one who always cast a powerful light upon Reirin—her comet.

“We made it…” Keigetsu heaved a huge sigh of relief. Her face crumpled, and not a second later, she was berating Reirin in a voice choked with tears. “Now, look what the cat dragged in! I never imagined I’d see the *prince’s butterfly* looking so ragged! Oh, I see how it is now. The truth is, you can’t do anything unless you switch places with me!”

“Lady Keigetsu…”

“That’s a good look on you. Now, go on and grovel. I *might* feel sorry enough to lend you a hand.” She attempted to punctuate that with a shrill laugh, but tears soon streamed from her eyes. “So, get on with it—ask me for help!”

Her free hand shot straight out, without the slightest hesitation, to where Reirin stood at the bottom of the well.

“…”

Several moments passed as Reirin stared long and hard at Keigetsu.

How refreshing the night breeze felt as it carried her friend’s voice. How radiant were the flame she held aloft and the words she uttered.

“Oh, Lady Keigetsu…”

To tell the truth, Reirin had no intention of bothering Keigetsu with the task of hoisting her up. Nor did she have the will to live on. After all, she didn’t have the strength to hold on to someone else’s hand long enough to be rescued.

My…comet.

The reason Reirin raised an unsteady hand overhead wasn’t to reach for the other girl’s outstretched palm. It was simply because Keigetsu was too dazzling to behold.

Just like that beautiful star she had gazed up at on the night of the Double Sevens Festival.

Just like a wish-granting comet that had sailed across the sky far more leisurely than a shooting star.

If she were to put the act of reaching for that phenomenon into words, it would surely sound something like this:

“Please help me.”

In reality, Reirin refrained from saying as much, a soft smile rising to her lips.

“Thank you,” she whispered instead.

They were words of farewell. Reirin intended to part ways with Keigetsu with a gentle wave of her hand.

In that same moment, however, the other girl seized her hand in a mighty grip. No sooner had she felt the warmth of her friend’s skin than her eyes burned from a light so intense that its flash was audible.

“I’ve got you now, Kou Reirin!”

“Huh?”

A familiar heat coursed through her entire body. She felt her vision spinning around her, and the next time she opened her eyes…

“Huh?!”

Reirin was standing outside the well, looking down at her own body.

“Wha…”

Right as the other girl’s hand nearly slipped from her grasp, she scrambled to adjust her grip. The arm she clasped was all too familiar. Slender, pale, and so very brittle-looking—it was her *own* arm.

The moment she processed as much, Reirin’s mind caught up to what had happened. “Lady Keigetsu! What have you done?!”

The moment their hands touched, Keigetsu had switched their bodies.

“What were you thinking?! H-how reckless! Lady Keigetsu! Are you still with me?! Lady Keigetsu!”

“Hee…hee hee…” Having claimed possession of Reirin’s vessel, Keigetsu went limp for several moments. But after her name had been called one too many times, she finally raised her pale face. “Serves you right… You ought to savor what it’s like to be a victim to someone else’s recklessness.”

“This is no time to be saying that, Lady Keigetsu! Why would you do something so rash?!”

“Because *you* kept dragging your feet! Oh, this is the worst! It’s so cold. My head hurts, and I’m nauseous! I feel like I’m going to die!”

Despite Keigetsu’s ominous mutterings, Reirin was surprised to see that she had the strength to shout and lament the pain she was in. Why, just moments earlier, *she* hadn’t even been capable of raising her voice. Was the secret that Keigetsu’s soul was indeed the more resilient of the two? No, never mind that—she didn’t have time to be leisurely pondering such matters.

Reirin leaned over the well. “Hang tight, Lady Keigetsu! I promise I’ll get you out of there!”

“Yes, get on with it, please! Why do you think I switched us in the first place?!” Keigetsu, who had taken Reirin’s place at the bottom of the well, shot back arrogantly. “I’m much better at being the damsel in distress. And you’re best at being the hero, right? So hurry up and save me!”

“What kind of logic is that?!” Reirin was no longer sure whether she ought to get angry or burst out laughing. With a face that would look halfway between tears and a smile to an outside observer, she shouted back, “Understood. I’ll figure something out!”

Next, she fired off commands for the court ladies, who had leaned over the well alongside her. “Tousetsu. You can rope together objects that are a good distance apart, can’t you? I’d like you to use the cord of my sash to bind my wrist to Lady Keigetsu’s. Leelee, stand behind me and hold me tightly around the waist!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“On it!”

The faithful court ladies sprang into action at the order. Once Tousetsu had used her lassoing skills to tie the Maidens’ hands together, Reirin gave a firm nod, climbed up onto the rim of the well, and bent over with her feet planted wide.

“We’ll pull you up on the count of three,” Reirin shouted as she made eye

contact with Keigetsu.

I can do this, said a voice inside of her.

Of course she could. She was bursting with power. Heat surged from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, and she felt not a shred of either pain or nausea. There was nothing she couldn't do.

"One, two…"

Digging her heels into the ground, Reirin straightened up and bent backward as far as she could.

"Three!"

"Eeeek!"

"Whoa!"

It seemed Keigetsu couldn't keep her balance as she was pulled up, and she lurched forward, knocking Reirin over in the process. Behind her, Leelee failed to support the weight of two people, resulting in all three girls collapsing in a heap on the ground.

"Ow! Wasn't there a gentler way to do it?!"

"Ouch…"

Under the full moon, the two Shu women were tearing up from their aching hips and legs. As Reirin cast them a sideways glance, she felt her own eyes begin to water.

Thank goodness. I'm truly glad…

This wasn't unlike the relief she'd felt at knowing she could die with no regrets. But this was even more exhilarating, even more intense. It was a hopeful rush of emotion that made the whole world seem to glow around her.

Reirin pressed her face to her wrists, still bound to Keigetsu's, as if to trap that vibrant sensation inside her.

"Goodness gracious. Have you finally learned your lesson, at least?" Keigetsu said with a glare, lying close enough that Reirin could almost feel her white puffs of breath. Indignant, she pushed the other Maiden off of her with her still-

cuffed hands.

“Erm… What lesson?”

“That you’re a weakling who can’t do anything unless you switch places with me. If nothing else, that’s the lesson *I* took from this.” Despite shivering from the cold, the girl in Reirin’s body curled her lips into a smirk. If Reirin wasn’t seeing things, she looked proud and gleeful. “I won’t let you say you’re not rash ever again. You’re the epitome of reckless abandon! Quit overestimating your abilities when you’re just a sick girl who can’t do a thing by herself.”

“I have nothing I can say to that…”

“Hah! So you finally admit it! I’ll say it as many times as it takes. You’re a weakling who would die in a second if I weren’t here to take your place,” Keigetsu declared with bravado.

Reirin gave a solemn nod where she lay. “That’s true… You’re absolutely right…”

She’d known as much from the very start.

“And now you’ve gotten a taste of how awful it feels to watch someone else push themselves past their limits. If you’ve learned your lesson, keep your head down and—”

“Hm?” She tilted her head at Keigetsu’s “curious” remark. “Why should I?”

Keigetsu’s face twitched. “Excuse me?”

Beside her, even Leelee went wide-eyed. “Huh?”

“I mean, uh… Your very life would be in jeopardy if it weren’t for me!”

“Yes. Correct.”

“And I taught you how much it hurts to watch someone else do something stupid.”

“Indeed. It gave me quite the fright. Please don’t ever do that again.”

“So from now on, you’ve got to remember your limits and behave yourself.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

When Keigetsu repeated herself in an attempt to persuade her friend, Reirin cocked her head to the other side with the same blank look. Then, unwinding the cord, she sat upright and cracked her knuckles in an all-too-natural motion.

“Right now, there’s nothing I *can’t* do.”

Reirin stared entranced at the hands that produced such a vigorous sound. Ah, yes—these bones were thicker indeed. What satisfying music they made.

She had no fever and no nausea. How comfortable it was to move around in a body that regulated its temperature and was always bursting with energy.

“You’re right that I am ordinarily a weak, sickly, helpless girl.”

Brushing the dirt off herself and rising to her feet, Reirin smiled down at Keigetsu where she lay flabbergasted.

“On the other hand, now that I’ve switched places with you, I’m invincible.”

“How did you come to the opposite conclusion?!”



When the Maiden raised a loosely clenched fist toward the sky, Leelee blanched so hard that it was visible even in the dark of night. Assuming she was cold, and taking pity on her, Reirin removed the thick outer garment "Shu Keigetsu" had been wearing and draped it over the two girls who were still sprawled over the ground.

After all, she had no more need for such bulky, cumbersome clothes.

"K-Kou Reirin…!"

Keigetsu's lips were still trembling, so Reirin crouched down beside her and pulled the robe tighter around her shoulders. While she was at it, she used the supplies the court ladies had brought and wiped down Keigetsu's—or rather, her *own*—legs with a towel, washed the wound on her head with alcohol, and wrapped her up in a blanket. She grabbed a torch lying nearby and pushed it into Leelee's hand. In ideal circumstances, she would have given Keigetsu some medicine right away, but since the girl still seemed to be lucid, this would have to do for now.

"Once we've made it back to the pavilion, I'll administer proper treatment. Don't worry. From here on out, I will ensure that you get proper rest and don't have to move so much as a finger."

"Th-that's not the issue…"

Heedless of Keigetsu, who was tongue-tied and feeling like a carp on the chopping block, Reirin nodded sagely. "I've caused everyone a good deal of trouble these past few days. I allowed Lady Kasui to take me out from behind, let myself be taken in by the Rans and Kins, and left various issues on the backburner… I've been a disgrace. I'm so ashamed of myself. Why, I wish there was a hole I could crawl into."

"No, uh…"

"However."

As she got to her feet once more, Reirin took a deep breath. She felt crisp, clear air fill her healthy lungs. So too did she feel something shine even more brightly than the radiant light of the moon—the fighting spirit within her.

“It is the height of folly to dwell on past mistakes. We young ones must always look to the future.”

The corners of her lips lifted into a loose smile. In a complete turnaround from the past few days, when she hadn’t felt like doing much of anything, excitement coursed through her as she was flooded with things she wanted to do one after another.

First, she had to get back at Kasui. While she was at it, she’d “lend an ear” to the story of what had led Kasui to such heinous acts. She needed to have a good “talk” with Seika, who had danced to her consort’s tune, and Houshun, who had resorted to such petty deception. Of course, she had every intention of pulling off the final trial of the Rite of Reverence without a hitch too.

Unconsciously, Reirin narrowed her gaze in the direction of the moon. “I’m going to recover the lost ground in one fell swoop.”

“Eep!”

Keigetsu and Leelee huddled together. Behind her, Tousetsu gave a small, approving nod.

It was a winter night studded with stars sparkling in the skies.

Reirin slowly put a hand to her cheek, as if to savor the energy welling up within her and the smile on her face through the touch.

Afterword

HELLO! Satsuki Nakamura here. Thanks to your support, the series has reached its fifth volume.

Say, friends, do you enjoy dramatic, emotional fights in fiction? I happen to love them. Ever since Reirin and Keigetsu deepened their friendship in the previous arc, I've been dying to get the girls into a super impassioned spat.

It takes two parties on equal footing to get into a fight. After all the growing up Keigetsu did in the last arc, she's at last become someone who can have a proper argument with Reirin, which I had a ton of fun writing. Indeed I did, but as you probably guessed from the moment you read the synopsis…erm…that is to say…(whispers) I couldn't wrap up the story in a single volume.

As a result, we're stuck with the usual one-page afterword for Volume 5. What can I say? I had too much fun. I'm afraid this was inevitable. The story will continue in Volume 6.

The key item of the Rite of Reverence arc is "mirrors." Light will begin to shine upon those who sank into the pits of despair in this volume. Look forward to the turnabout in the next volume, where the rescued will become the rescuers and the bullies will turn into the bullied.

Once again, I want to thank you all for allowing me to continue this story for so long.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my kind editor, who always analyzes the work even more deeply than the author herself; to Kana Yuki-sensei, who adds a splendid visual component to the novels; to my designer; to Ei Ohitsuji-sensei, who started an *Inept Villainess* sensation with her god-tier manga adaptation; and to you, my dear readers.

Let's meet again in Volume 6.

—Satsuki Nakamura, October 2022



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