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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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THOSE WERE THE WORDS SHE HAD ALWAYS LONGED TO HEAR...
Gen Kasui
Feeling that rush of heat in the ice-cold storehouse stirred the Gen Maiden to the depths of her soul.
"That reminds me. There's a certain line I've been dying to say."
Then, for whatever reason, the girl curled her mouth into the taunting sort of smirk that screamed "Shu Keigetsu."
Shu Keigetsu
CONTAINS KOU REIRIN
"Go on and grovel. I might feel sorry enough to lend you a hand. So get on with it— ask me for help!"
Gen Bushou
"It's okay to cry for help when times are hard. I'll always come to your rescue."
Gen Kasui
If Kasui had but one memory of warmth in the snowbound Gen estate, it was her sister's hand.
Two years apart in age, the young siblings would always huddle together to keep warm.
KASUI'S KIND, WISE ELDER SISTER WAS HER WHOLE WORLD.

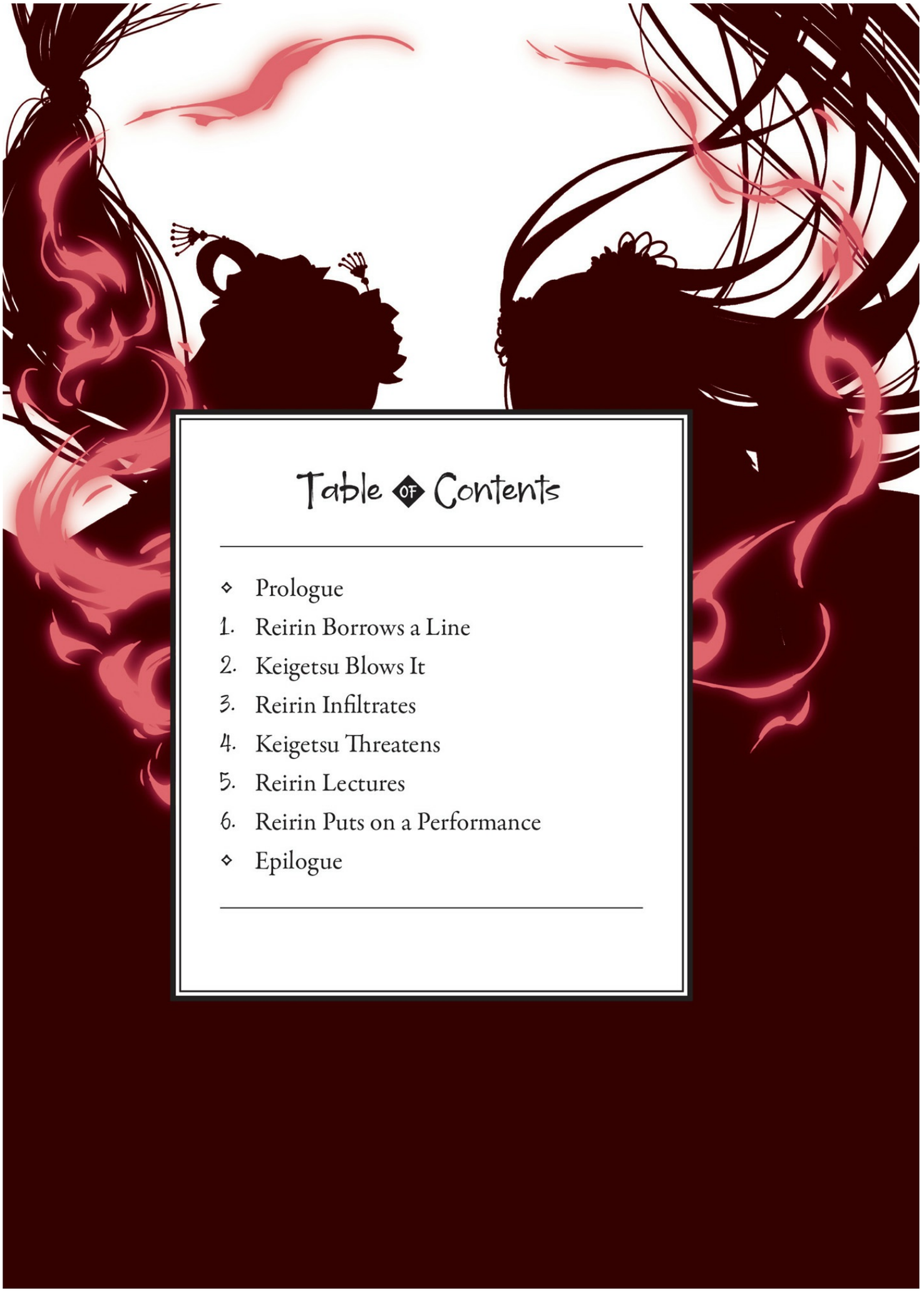


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Though I Am an Inept Villainess

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NOVEL

WRITTEN BY

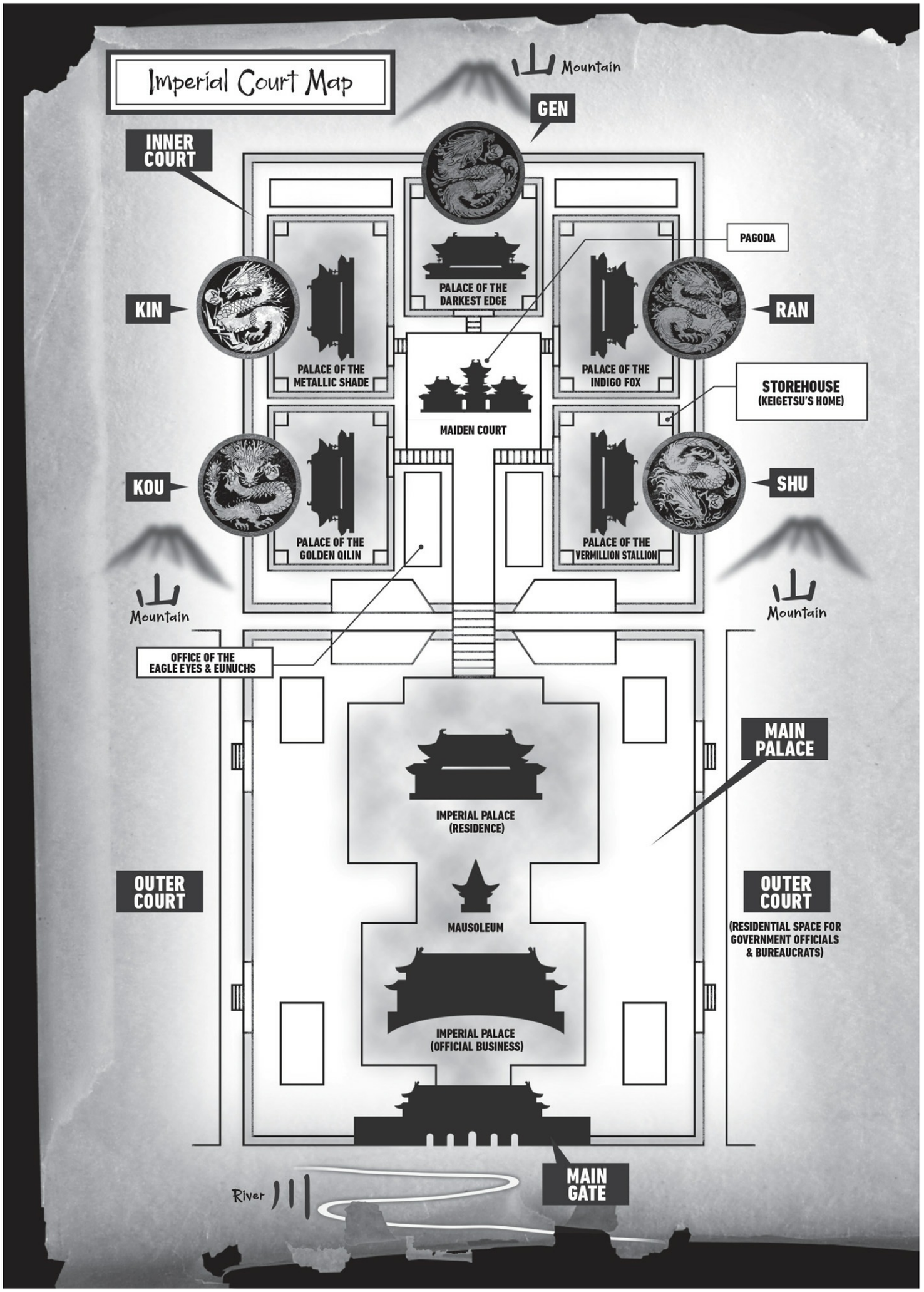
Satsuki Nakamura

ILLUSTRATED BY

Kana Yuki

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment


Imperial Court Map
Mountain
GEN
INNER COURT
PAGODA
KIN
RAN
PALACE OF THE DARKEST EDGE
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)
River
MAIN GATE

Relationship Chart

GEN CLAN

(WATER / NORTH / WINTER)

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.

KIN CLAN

(METAL / WEST / AUTUMN)

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.

RAN CLAN

(WOOD / EAST / SPRING)

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.



KOU CLAN

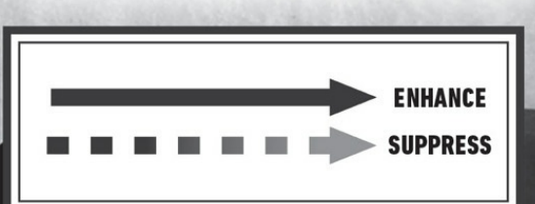
(EARTH / CENTER / CUSPS)

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."

SHU CLAN

(FIRE / SOUTH / SUMMER)

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.

Anni



A shaman who performs ritual prayers and prophesies misfortune.

Kin Reiga



The Pure Consort.

Gen Gousetsu



The Worthy Consort.

Ran Hourin



The Virtuous Consort.

Futsutsukana Akujodewa Gozaimasuga Vol. 6
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Prologue

"THE WARBLERS SING and the swallows dance" was a traditional idiom that evoked images of a gorgeous spring landscape.

Despite being born into the bitter cold of the Gen's northern territory, the two sisters were given names that reflected a yearning for the warmer months. The older sister was named Bushou, containing the character for "dance," while the younger was named Kasui, which bore the character for "song." Everyone they met complimented them on the beauty of their names.

In reality, their mother may have given them those names out of spite. She was the daughter of a low-ranking nobleman from the eastern fringes of the northern territory. The Gen patriarch had fallen for her at first sight and, in a fit of the strong obsession for which the Gens were known, snatched her away from her childhood sweetheart to be his wife.

Though the area their mother grew up in was still considered part of the northern territory, it was close to the border with the Rans, and thus she found it difficult to adapt to the austere and

stifling environment that defined the Gen clan. The patriarch had lavished his wife with every treasure imaginable, but like a flower wilting in the cold, she had languished and spent her days gazing eastward toward her old home, pining for its signature season.

She never had much love for her two daughters. Their father never took much interest in them either—though there was at least a certain impartiality to his indifference, as he was equally apathetic toward the sons he had sired by his other concubines. All the man cared about was his wife. Had she loved her own children, no doubt he also would have showered them with boundless affection. Alas, he had no use for little girls who had brought her nothing but the pain of childbirth and failed to capture her heart.

Those through whom the Gen blood runs thickest cannot divide their affections equally. A fire scraped together in the icy cold can only hope to keep one person warm.

Desperate for a ray of warmth in her stone-cold home, it was only natural that the young Kasui would come to idolize her older sister. Bushou, in turn, had a soft spot for the little sister who so adored her.

“There you are, Kasui. It must be cold in the dark. Come, I’ll take you back to your room.”

“But, E-Elder Sister…look what a mess I’ve made of my robes. I couldn’t possibly go back looking like—”

“There’s no reason to fret.”

Whenever Kasui made a minor mistake, she was quick to get discouraged and hide. It was always Bushou’s job to track her down with a rueful smile. Whether she took shelter in the storeroom or crouched under the veranda, her older sister would be sure to find her.

“My apologies, Elder Sister,” Kasui said stiffly, shrinking in on herself.

Bushou reached out to caress her little sister’s cheek. “‘Elder Sister’ is a bit of a mouthful, isn’t it? Call me ‘Big Sis,’ like you always have. Don’t force yourself to grow up too fast. You’re allowed to take things at your own pace.”

At the time, Kasui was withdrawn and inarticulate. Earlier that day, her mother had chastised her for calling Bushou “Big Sis” with the same infantile pronunciation as when she first learned to speak, and she had withered under the criticism.

“I love hearing your name for me, Kasui. It warms my heart.”

“Really, Big Sis?”

Young Kasui’s face crumpled with relief.

“You’re the younger of us, yet you can be so uncomfortable with emotions. It’s okay to cry for help when times are hard. I’ll always come to your rescue.”

“But then *you’ll* get in trouble.”

“I’ll be fine. We have nothing to fear if we stick together. Now give me your hand so I can warm you up. As soon as you’ve thawed a bit, we’ll head back.”

Each time Kasui wilted, Bushou would take her hand and put her worries to

rest. If Kasui had but one memory of warmth in the snowbound Gen estate, it was her sister's hand.

Two years apart in age, the young siblings would always huddle together to keep warm.

***

"Look, Kasui. What do you think? I settled on a snowflake motif."

"Wow, Big Sis! It's beautiful."

Bushou was skilled with her hands and had a knack for painting. Neglected by their parents, the two girls were eager to find activities in which they could immerse themselves: They painted, they made cut-paper art, and Bushou in particular dabbled in metalwork from an early age. She enjoyed carving designs into iron plates and decorating the grooves with gold thread. It didn't take long for her pastime to develop into full-fledged goldsmithing, incorporating techniques on the level of inlaying and engraving. After all, there was no shortage of iron, gold, and furnaces to be found.

Due to its harsh winters, the northern territory didn't produce much in the way of food. Instead, its main industry was mining, as the region was blessed with a wide variety of high-quality ore deposits. While it was hard to compete with the self-professed artists of the western territory, a fair number of northerners were skilled at turning the iron and gold they extracted into jewelry.

Looking up to these blacksmiths and artisans as her mentors, Bushou lost track of time as she immersed herself in the world of craftsmanship. Kasui was more inclined toward physical activity, but when she saw that her big sister preferred works of art to iron swords, she followed her example.

With so many fires burning, it was always warm in the forge. Nothing looked more dazzling to Kasui than the sight of her sister's hands eagerly working to melt iron and engrave gold, flames blazing behind her.

Kasui's kind, wise elder sister was her whole world.

“If only I could become an artisan instead.”

This was three years ago. Ever since she’d been unofficially appointed the northern territory’s Maiden, Bushou would mumble something to that effect from time to time.

“As wonderful as it will be to spend my days as a Maiden surrounded by so many beautiful crafts…I’d rather make them myself, if I’m honest.”

She was eighteen years old. The emperor was still in his prime, and it was unclear when Prince Gyoumei’s Maiden Court would be opened. It was entirely possible that Bushou would be past the age of twenty by the time she joined the court. Whether she should still serve as their Maiden in spite of that was a matter of hot debate within the Gen clan.

To put forth a Maiden would be a clansman’s highest honor. The patriarch naturally wanted his own daughter to be the nominee—after all, his wife could be granted the status of the favored consort’s mother as a result—while the branch families saw their chance to get ahead. The current Worthy Consort was herself from a collateral line, and a distant one, at that. It would be fair to say that the odds were in favor of the branch families, but on the other hand, some Gens had become all the more determined to see the patriarch’s daughter prevail in the next generation.

The consensus was thus: *If all goes well, the patriarch’s eldest daughter—the beautiful, artistic Bushou—will become the Maiden. However, if she proves unfit for the role, we should send a daughter from* our *family line.*

Before political tensions within the Gen clan could escalate further, the patriarch resolved to send Bushou to the imperial capital. He arranged for her to study at the Worthy Consort’s Palace of the Darkest Edge, where she would familiarize herself with the ways of the court. The idea was to have her disguise herself as a court lady-in-training and distant relative of the Gens, with the ultimate goal of receiving an initiation prior to her term and becoming a respectable Maiden. In short, he was out to make Bushou’s unofficial appointment a done deal.

The scheduled duration was one month “to start,” but part of the plan was to lengthen her stay little by little. In all likelihood, once Bushou left for the capital,

Kasui wouldn't be able to see her again for quite some time. All too aware of their impending farewell, the sisters were inseparable during their last days together. The pair painted, forged crafts, and praised each other's handiwork.

That day, Bushou was working on a jeweled mirror with a sigh-inducingly ornate snowflake pattern, as well as an ornamental sword.

"As a matter of fact, I hope to show this to the artisans of the inner court when I have the chance. There are a number of talented craftsmen in the pottery unit. Under their tutelage, I'm confident I could improve my own craft."

When Kasui waxed lyrical about the workmanship, Bushou smiled and assured her that the jeweled mirror would one day belong to her.

"I won't know what to do with myself if the artisans are impressed. What if they ask me to make another one on the spot?"

It was unusual to hear humor from Bushou. Realizing that her sister was trying to put a positive spin on her trip to the capital, little crybaby Kasui managed a joke of her own, sniffling despite herself. "You're too much, Big Sis. If they saw a Maiden engraving and casting her own metals, it might give them a heart attack."

"Hee hee, fair point. I'm sure it would come as quite a shock." Bushou laughed for a few moments, then lowered her gaze a fraction. "Still…my dream is to create a masterpiece worthy of becoming a national treasure and present it to His Majesty and His Highness. How proud I shall be to shine the light of beauty upon the hearts of my kingdom and its people."

Her fingers gingerly traced the snowflake design. The snow was shaped like a blossom—a beautiful pattern simultaneously emblematic of winter and reminiscent of spring.

Kasui knew whose heart Bushou truly wanted to illuminate—the one she truly wanted to make proud.

"If anyone can do it, it's you," she said, gently placing her own hand over her sister's on the mirror.

Their mother, in her perpetual yearning for spring, loved flowers more than anything.

Bushou was a kind girl. Even after being neglected and cast aside, she still wished to brighten the heart of her abuser. Kasui had never known anyone so tenderhearted.

She wanted to hold on to her sister's warm hand forever.

The morning of Bushou's departure was a sunny winter's day.

"It's time for me to go."

"Oh, Big Sis…"

When Bushou attempted to board the luxurious carriage arranged for her, Kasui instinctively grabbed a handful of her robes. The northern winter promised to get frostier yet. She couldn't bear to lose the warmth her sister provided.

As Kasui fell silent, clutching her sister's sleeve tightly enough to wrinkle the fabric, her parents shot her disapproving looks. They considered her a worthless daughter, neither as prudent as her older sister nor as polished by the rigorous schooling of a Maiden-to-be.

She couldn't get in her sister's way. She had to smile and wish her the best in her new life. Kasui knew this, but still her face stiffened and tears streamed down her cheeks. "Good luck in the capital, E-Elder Sis—"

Bushou interrupted Kasui's stammering words of farewell. "You can call me Big Sis."

She hopped down from the carriage and pulled her little sister into a hug, unconcerned with the creases it made in her robes. Winding her arms tightly around the girl's slender, growing back, she nuzzled their cheeks together.

"I'll be fine, Kasui. Live a happy life."

Bushou bumped their foreheads to seal the promise, making Kasui cry even harder.

Despite the sobs racking her body, the hand against her back gave her the courage to nod her head. *Don't go. Stay by my side. Never leave.* Fighting to swallow the words threatening to escape her, she managed to say a proper

goodbye. “Yes… I will. Take care, Big Sis.”

Bushou was like a ray of sunshine. She had always protected her timid little sister and kept her warm. Now it was Kasui’s turn to wish for her sister’s happiness. Her family in the north had never cared for her, but surely she would lead a joyful life among friendlier faces in the capital. Her hands were meant to craft beautiful works of metal; she couldn’t waste them keeping her younger sibling warm forever. The time had come to entwine her fingers in bigger, snugger ones.

“Safe travels.”

With a sniff of her reddened nose, Kasui bowed her head low and watched her sister go. The light she carried in her heart shone for Bushou alone. So long as her big sister was smiling, Kasui believed that would be enough to keep her warm—even if her own surroundings remained sealed in an eternal winter.

On one occasion, Kasui was struck with the urge to imitate her sister’s casting work, but she suffered a few minor burns in the process. Her parents forbade her from ever trying again. It felt as if the whole world was confronting her with the fact that her time with Bushou, her heart’s beacon of gentle light, had come to an end.

She could no longer wish for her sister to stay by her side. Bushou would never come home again. So Kasui kept telling herself as she blew white puffs of breath onto her frozen hands.

But she was wrong.

“We have an emergency! Lady Bushou was subjected to the Trial by Fire!”

The wish Kasui had locked away in the depths of her heart came true in a way nobody wanted: Bushou came back to the northern territory after spending less than half a month in the imperial capital. Unfortunately, she’d returned with terrible burns on her arm and a reputation as a wicked traitor.

She had left in a carriage inlaid with gorgeous mother-of-pearl, only to return packed into a merchant’s ramshackle wagon like luggage. Her hair was disheveled, her robes were covered in soot, and she was too weak with fever to

speak.

Her cracked lips formed a name as feebly as a breath. “Ka…sui…”

Kasui’s mind went blank at the sight. Her sister looked so frail that the light of her life could be snuffed out at any moment.

Shortly thereafter, a letter from the Worthy Consort arrived explaining the situation. In her guardian’s absence, Bushou had brought an unauthorized blade into the inner court and been arrested as a traitor. When she stubbornly refused to admit her guilt, the shaman—who just so happened to be on-site—had conducted the Trial by Fire.

The Trial by Fire was an interrogation in which the accused sat inside a magic circle drawn by the miraculous shaman. If their soul was corrupt, said circle would burst into flame and exorcise the impurity.

Judgment had been swift. A fire had broken out the moment the shaman began her prayer, and Bushou’s right arm had been engulfed in flame. The shaman, known for her benevolence, had doused Bushou with water and extinguished the fire before her suffering could get any worse. What’s more, she’d administered basic first aid, handed the Maiden her belongings, and let her flee the inner court, claiming that justice had already been served.

This, in turn, had prevented the Worthy Consort from learning of the situation until it was too late. By the time she had carried out her duties as consort, returned to the inner court, and rushed to the Gen estate in the capital upon learning what had happened, Bushou’s condition had deteriorated to the point that she was barely holding on to consciousness.

The Worthy Consort had taken swift action. No court physician was going to conduct a clandestine examination of a girl who had undergone the Trial by Fire. The same was true of the entire imperial capital. Her only hope for survival was her own family. Hence, the consort had slipped some money and medicinal herbs into a merchant’s hand and sent Bushou back to her parents’ home before she exhausted all her strength.

The consort’s letter contained an expression of regret, all the information she had managed to gather, and well-wishes. The frantic jumble of brushstrokes ended with one last apology for good measure.

After snatching the letter from a retainer and reading it over, Kasui shouted, “What is the meaning of this?!”

It didn’t make any sense to her. None of it added up.

Bushou would never conspire to treason. Who was this shaman? Why had she passed judgment? What was this so-called Trial by Fire? Was it the same as burning someone alive? Had her virtuous sister been tried as a *criminal*? Kasui didn’t understand any of it.

Rage surged within her like a tsunami. Her fists trembled with a determination to rally the Gens’ forces and launch an all-out effort to uncover the truth.

Yet her father’s next actions left her speechless. “Leave her in the guest house for now.”

His proposal was to throw her into an annex without even giving her proper treatment.

“Father? What are you…?”

“If what the letter says is true, the girl has become a blight upon our clan. We must keep her out of sight. I’m going to ask His Majesty and the Worthy Consort for an explanation in person.”

No sooner had her father announced his intentions than he mounted a horse and left for the imperial capital. As Kasui found out a few days later, he hadn’t gone there to get to the bottom of the matter but rather to cover up the scandal. He didn’t want anyone knowing that his clan had produced a villainess who caught flame during the Trial by Fire. One Gen to another, he’d asked the emperor to keep the “vile, shameful” truth to himself.

Emperor Genyou was the son of the empress dowager, who originally hailed from the Gen clan. She, the Gen-born emperor, and the Gen patriarch had what appeared to be an involved discussion, whereupon the empress dowager went over the head of the collateral Worthy Consort and imposed a gag order on the incident.

All the court ladies who had been present for the Trial by Fire resigned en masse, and the records of the event were expunged. In the northern territory,

news of Bushou's return was kept quiet, and her disappearance was attributed to a fatal bandit attack on her way to the capital. Ever since, it had been taboo to speak Bushou's name.

Kasui was dismayed to see how quickly everything was moving forward, leaving both Bushou and herself behind. She couldn't believe that the servants had done as they were told and tossed Bushou into the guest house without even treating her burns.

Perhaps the greatest shock of all came when her father ordered *her* to become the Maiden as soon as he returned from the capital. Bushou had already been reduced to a nonentity within the Gen clan. Kasui was gripped by a blinding rage, then despair.

Since Bushou's return, Kasui had been sneaking trips to the guest house to nurse her back to health, but her burns showed no signs of healing. No matter how much medicine she took, the pus only spread. By this point, there were swollen patches not only along her burned arm but all over her body. Her fever continued to rage, and she could barely form words.

Each time the delirious Bushou weakly called her sister's name and tried to tell her something in her fleeting moments of consciousness, Kasui clutched her hand and cried, begging her not to force herself to speak. She didn't want her sister to waste even an ounce of her strength. More than anything, she feared that whatever Bushou said would become her last words.

Her wounds were festering, and her fever was high. Cassia wouldn't work on such an abnormal burn. This called for a much more potent herb.

Snow pelted against the guest house. The sound of the roof creaking under its weight was like the squeak of wheels rolling toward the land of the dead.

One night, Kasui finally broke down screaming and ran to the forge, not even stopping to put on her shoes. It was the only place she knew full of warmth and smiling adults.

"Help! Please, you have to help me! B-Big Sis is in trouble!"

The blacksmiths were often burned while operating the furnaces and hammering iron. Her one hope was that they could supply her with some of

their go-to secret medicine: miracle hemp.

“About that, Lady Kasui…”

Alas, the chief smith to whom she’d grown so close was evasive. He said they’d been struggling to get their hands on miracle hemp all year. According to the peddlers, someone in the capital had bought up all their stock before they could reach the northern territory.

Despite Kasui’s desperate pleas, none of her retainers were willing to procure more miracle hemp. Frustrated, she had jumped on a horse and raced through the snow to the imperial capital. Only sixteen at the time, she galloped on and on without stopping to eat, drink, or even sleep.

It took her a mere two days to make the trip, but when she arrived, she was faced with the reality that even the capital had run out of miracle hemp. According to Bushou’s letter, citizens of the capital had little regard for the herb—and yet, in the past few days, someone had bought up the entire supply. Descriptions of the buyer’s appearance varied from shop to shop, making it impossible to pinpoint their identity.

Perhaps sympathetic to Kasui’s plight, the apothecaries of the imperial capital gave her the leftover dregs of miracle hemp stuck to the crevices of their draining baskets. Kasui scrounged it all together, bought additional herbs to fight fever and drain pus, and hurried back to the northern territory.

But by the time she burst into the guest house, the herbs were no longer needed. Bushou’s body, once racked with such high fever, had gone ice-cold.

“Big Sis?”

Kasui couldn’t believe what she was seeing. She staggered over and sat down beside the mat, reaching for her sister’s hand that lay strewn over the floor. The icy chill she felt brought words welling up in her throat, but they vanished before they could take form.

“Big Sis… Big Sis!”

She hastily rubbed Bushou’s hands between her own, but the warmth didn’t stick.

“You’re so cold…”

She kept thinking that it didn’t make sense. It was all wrong. How could her sister’s hands, her sole source of warmth, be so cold? It wasn’t supposed to be like this. *She* was supposed to be the one who kept Kasui warm.

“This is all wrong… You shouldn’t be this cold, Big Sis…”

It was then that Kasui’s eyes, wide with shock, caught a glimpse of something white in Bushou’s other hand. Her sister was clutching a piece of paper where she lay slumped over the floor. It was the same paper she’d used to squeeze out the pus.

Kasui gingerly extracted it, only to find a short message written in the kind of chicken scratch she would never have expected from Bushou.

Kasui,

Forget about the miracle hemp.

No brushes at hand, she’d written it with her own finger. Her pus-soaked blood had served as the ink.

Don’t cry.

Live a happy life.

I love you.

Even on the brink of death, her sister had written out of consideration for someone else.

“Ah…”

The hand in which Kasui held the letter trembled.

At the end of the message, in handwriting so illegible that the characters were barely recognizable, was the name “Bushou.” She usually signed her letters

“Your Big Sister.” The fact that she’d gone to the trouble of writing out her name showed how important this message was.

These were her last words.

As soon as it dawned on her what she was reading, Kasui let out a tearful howl. “Ahhhhhh!”

She was outraged. She resented everything and everyone, herself included.

Why hadn’t she stayed by her sister’s side? Why hadn’t she listened to her? Why had none of the servants taken care of her? Why had their parents forsaken her? Why had this happened to Bushou? Why? *Why?*

“Someone will answer for this…”

Tears trickled down her lowered face and dripped onto the page. Bushou’s dried, blackened blood smudged and blurred, and those dark, swirling hues nestled deep in Kasui’s chest.

Perhaps the tragedy had begun as an innocent misunderstanding. Even so, Kasui would never forgive those who had escalated the situation to the point of taking her sister’s life. That included the person who had bought all the miracle hemp; her parents, for abandoning Bushou; and herself, for failing to come through for her sister.

“They’ll pay…”

As she slowly lifted her face from the page, Kasui’s black eyes glinted in the light.

“Who was it?”

She had to find out who was behind it all. With a gag order in place, all the records had been incinerated, and anyone who tried to investigate the incident would be punished, be they a Gen or an inhabitant of the inner court. But Kasui didn’t care. No matter how long she had to bide her time, she vowed to uncover the truth.

To that end, she’d become a Maiden. If the Worthy Consort’s absence had left her in the dark, Kasui had no choice but to make her own move.

She rose unsteadily to her feet and silently wiped the tears from her eyes. Her

sister’s dying wish was that she wouldn’t cry. In that case, she would never shed tears again.

Besides, she had no right to be sad after she had left Bushou to die alone.

As she suppressed the emotions roiling within her, she was struck by the strange sensation that the world around her had grown more distant, as if a thin layer of gauze had been cast across her five senses. A mysterious calm had settled over her mind. She felt neither cold nor sadness.

It was as if she were trapped in a still, black mist. In the hazy blur the world had become, her thirst for vengeance was the only thing that stood out in sharp relief.

Kasui took a step forward. She had to inform her parents of Bushou’s death. Her first order of business was to play the obedient daughter and secure the position of Maiden for herself.

She would conceal her malice and catch the raccoon dog hiding in the inner court by the tail. And once she’d grasped the full picture…

“I’ll kill them,” Kasui muttered tersely, then drew her lips into a firm line.

With all traces of youth stripped from her voice, it bore an uncanny resemblance to Bushou’s.

Chapter 1:
Reirin Borrows a Line

IT WAS A QUIET NIGHT in the inner court. A thin layer of ice covered the small pond at the edge of the courtyard, and a chilly night breeze swept across the grounds. A gaggle of women could be seen marching along the frozen water's edge.

"Oh, for shame! Even in this vessel, it seems I'm not quite strong enough to carry Lady Keigetsu. Say, Lady Keigetsu, would you permit me to spend the next three days or so training your biceps and back muscles?"

The girl lamenting her failure, a hand pressed to her cheek and her sigh manifesting as a white cloud, was the Shu Maiden named Keigetsu—or rather, Kou Reirin in her form.

"Uh, Lady Reirin? *Most* women can't lift girls their own age. It's nothing to get upset about."

Behind her was Leelee, disguised as a dark-haired kitchen maid, poking holes in her mistress's statement with a wry smile.

"Carrying luggage is a court lady's job. Nevertheless, I do admire your ambition to reach ever greater heights."

"Excuse me, Tousetsu, did you just call me luggage?! And don't even think about it, Kou Reirin! If you turn me into some kind of beefcake, I'll kill you!"

Bringing up the rear were Tousetsu, who was carefully cradling the body of "Kou Reirin," and Shu Keigetsu, who currently inhabited it.

The four women were migrating from the northern end of the courtyard, where the well was located, to the southern end, which led to the Shu and Kou Palaces. Upon rescuing "Kou Reirin"—or Keigetsu, as it were—the real Reirin had rolled up her sleeves and offered to carry her friend, only for Tousetsu to snatch the opportunity from her. Though she'd managed to heave Keigetsu out of the well in a rush of adrenaline, the Maiden was no match for Tousetsu and

her outlandish Gen strength when it came to carrying her for a prolonged period.

"I still hate to think there are things I can't do in this form… No, that's a defeatist attitude. Give me three days. I believe in our combined potential, Lady Keigetsu. I vow to hone this body to perfection," said Reirin, throwing Keigetsu a regretful glance for the umpteenth time.

"I just asked you not to! Besides, I don't need anyone to carry me. I can walk on my own. Let me down already!"

"I don't think so, missy! That body was submerged in a well for hours. You need to rest."

"Would you listen to me?! I said that I'd go lie down as soon as *you* give up looking for Gen Kasui! Now drop it!"

"Nuh-uh."

"Ex*cuuuuse* me?!"

Ever since their first fight and subsequent make-up, the two girls—especially Reirin—had become a bit more casual in their interactions.

Did Lady Reirin just say "nuh-uh"?

Unbelievable… That's the first time I've ever heard her call anyone "missy."

Leelee and Tousetsu exchanged glances. Oblivious, the girls in question carried on with their bickering.

"I'm going to recover the lost ground in one fell swoop."

It hadn't been long since Keigetsu had switched places with Reirin in order to get her out of the well. In a healthy body, a loose clench of her fist was all it took to send heat coursing through Reirin's veins. Given that she had quite literally been at death's door only moments earlier, she found herself deeply moved by the sensation.

She wasn't nauseated. It was easy to breathe. She could move her arms and legs without psyching herself up first, and she felt no pain. It was pure bliss. For

each steady beat of her heart, Reirin felt a surge of vigor and gratitude strong enough to bring tears to her eyes.

Along with her determination to repay the favor, memories of the past few days came flooding back and spurred her to action.

I've wasted a lot of time.

That fight with Keigetsu had thrown quite a wrench in her plans. She had yet to unravel the case of the poisoned cosmetics and the collapse of the tent during the solemn Rite of Reverence. Despite her original intentions to investigate the Rans' and Kins' suspicious behavior, she had become so distraught over the falling-out that she'd even allowed Gen Kasui to sneak up on her from behind.

It was clear that Kasui had something weighing on her mind. One second she'd been talking about miracle hemp, and the next she'd bludgeoned Reirin over the head and thrown her into a well. It had been her honest intention to kill.

Reirin wouldn't rest until she had forced the other girl to confess what had driven her to such heinous acts. While she was at it, she would have a good, long "chat" with Kin Seika and Ran Houshun about why they had interfered in the Rite of Reverence and exacerbated her conflict with Keigetsu. Of course, she also planned to see the final trial through without a hitch.

Yes. She would recover *all* the lost ground.

In contrast to Reirin's fearless smile, Keigetsu, soaked from the knees down, started shaking and shivering. "Wh-what do you mean…recover the lost ground?!"

"Exactly what it sounds like. I plan to start by questioning Lady Kasui. Time is of the essence, so I'll begin my search at once. But you come first, Lady Keigetsu. Just look at the shape you're in, and all because you switched places with me… We must warm you up." Reirin glanced back at Keigetsu, her face falling in pity. The speed at which her friend's teeth were chattering concerned her. "I'll carry you back to the pavilion straight away. And while I'm there, I'll brew you the most potent of decoctions. We should also cool the wound on your head. Don't worry. I'll take care of everything, Lady Kasui included, so you

ought to focus on recovering."

"N-no, that's not why I ask—"

"Oh, you're positively soaked! There's no time to waste in conversation. You need to rest. I don't want you lifting so much as a finger."

Hearing the crack in her friend's voice filled Reirin with guilt and a determination to make her rest. Yet when she took both of the girl's hands in her own, Keigetsu jerked out of her grasp, her face twitching.

"Listen to me!"

Just as her arm sliced through the air, the flame of Leelee's torch swelled.

"Whoa!" the redhead yelped.

The burst of fire engulfed Keigetsu's lower body in a blazing whirl, only to retreat a moment later as if its work was done.

Keigetsu snorted at her companions, who were staring at her in dumb surprise. "There. I'm all dry."

"What…?"

"What does it look like? I dried myself off with magic. For the record, I almost never do that sort of thing in front of an audience. Don't even think about making me your go-to handyman." She jabbed a finger in Reirin's direction, scowling and browbeating her with all her might. "I can't believe you! You set your own problems aside until you're almost dead, yet you'll make a huge deal out of someone else's robes getting a little wet. Look, I never asked you to take care of me. All I want is for you to calm down," she all but spat.

Reirin couldn't help asking, "Huh? But don't you feel ill?"

"Sure, I feel dreadful. Winter nights are cold enough when I'm *not* wet, and the lump on the back of my head is throbbing."

"No, I'm talking about more serious symptoms. Any dizziness or nausea? What about a fever? Heart palpitations?"

Keigetsu furrowed her brow in thought, then gave a decisive shake of her head. "I thought I might die from the pain when we first switched bodies, but I

feel fine now."

"Huh?!"

"Like I said, I'm freezing cold, and my head hurts. But it's not so bad that I can't walk," she matter-of-factly replied.

Reirin studied her friend long and hard. It wasn't the first time she had wondered as much, but how could Keigetsu still have so much pep in that sickly body? Did Daoist magic have healing properties, perhaps? Or was it that she herself was too sensitive to pain, and that level of discomfort was trivial as far as anyone else was concerned?

No, that can't be it… The first time we traded places, Lady Keigetsu was indeed in a great deal of pain. Even worse than I usually am.

It didn't add up.

After some debate, Reirin concluded that it must be an issue of fighting spirit. Seeing as Keigetsu had previously suffered in the body of "Kou Reirin," it couldn't be that switching bodies eliminated the illness. In that case, either she'd simply gotten used to feeling sick, or she was suppressing the symptoms through sheer willpower.

Reirin herself had made it through most major ceremonies on the back of her mental fortitude. In a state of tension, her body would naturally block out the pain. Still, that only worked for so long, and the rebound was always terrible. She was only growing more and more concerned for Keigetsu.

"You might feel fine now, but you should still lie down. Come, let's go to the pavilion."

"And what are you planning to do while I'm resting, hm?"

"As I've said, I will begin the search for Lady Kasui at once."

"I told you to drop it!" Keigetsu snarled. "Remember, you're in *my* body now! If you do something stupid, I'll be the one to pay for it. What are you going to do if she attacks you again?!"

"Don't worry. I won't repeat the same mistake twice, and I'm confident I can defend myself in this form. Your body is the finest and strongest there is. You

ought to have a little more faith in yourself."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?! Listen. Gen Kasui is a murderer who tried to drown you in a well. And we're supposed to hand criminals over to the Eagle Eyes, not apprehend them ourselves. Either way, the Eagle Eyes are scouring the inner court for 'Kou Reirin' as we speak. They'll catch her in no time," Keigetsu emphatically declared.

Reirin considered that for a moment, then frowned. "But Lady Kasui failed to kill me. That means she's not yet guilty of murder."

"I'm sorry, what?! That was just a fluke, and it doesn't change that she *did* hit you over the head!" Keigetsu thrust herself forward, showing off the bump on her cranium.

"Yes, true. You have a point…but I want to hear her side of the story before I decide what to do."

Reirin thought back to what had happened in the pavilion.

"I can't believe you *were the one who bought up all the miracle hemp back then."*

She had caught a glimpse of Kasui's face just before she lost consciousness. The girl's contorted features had betrayed a dark hatred, along with a deep, heart-wrenching despair. The fact that she'd dumped Reirin in an old well without bothering to destroy the evidence proved that she had acted on pure impulse.

Her gait had been hurried, and there had been an air of desperation about her. Kasui was planning to do something that evening. Whatever it was, it was of great importance to her—and once the deed was done, or even if it failed, she might very well have been prepared to throw her own life away.

Not on my watch. I won't let you run away, Lady Kasui.

Reirin briefly explained that Kasui had lost a "relative" to a burn wound three years ago, that the shaman had apparently had something do with it, that the availability of miracle hemp had been a major factor in the incident, and that Kasui had resorted to violence out of the mistaken belief that the Kou clan had bought up the entire supply of the herb.

“During our confrontation, Lady Kasui behaved more like a cornered animal than a violent criminal. She assaulted me on impulse, without explaining her reasons… I have to catch her tonight, before the Eagle Eyes can. I want to hear what happened in her own words.”

“Let me guess: ‘She must have had her reasons’? You’re out of your mind.” Keigetsu didn’t even attempt to hide her disdain. With a click of her tongue, she added, “Cornered or not, the fact is that she hurt you. Why are you trying to protect your enemy? You’re too soft!”

“Wrong, Lady Keigetsu. I want to understand her motives, not so I can protect her but for the sake of my own revenge. It’s hard to determine the severity of the punishment if you don’t know the extent of the crime, no?” Reirin smiled. “Can you let them off with a slap, or should you go in for the kill? If you don’t know exactly who you’re up against, you won’t know where to begin.”

She then took advantage of Keigetsu’s stunned silence to grab her by the armpits. “As soon as I’ve escorted you back, I’ll start looking for Lady Kasui. I have a vague idea of where she might have gone. Now come, Lady Keigetsu. Hold on tight.”

“W-wait a second!” Momentarily overwhelmed, Keigetsu brought herself back to her senses with a furious shake of her head. “You can’t. What if you mess up and give the swap away? Isn’t the bet still on? If His Highness finds out, he’ll have the right to make you his wife on the spot!”

“Oh, right…” Reirin blinked, as if she’d forgotten all about that. Then she flexed a bicep, smiled, and responded with a dash of Kou-style optimism. “I’m not worried.”

“Your positivity is just plain carelessness!”

“This particular swap was a matter of life and death, so surely it doesn’t count. Besides, I’m proud to say that my impression of you has been steadily improving. Even if I were to run into His Highness or an Eagle Eye, this time I’ll pull off my ‘Shu Keigetsu’ act without a hitch. I’m sure of it.”

“How can you claim that in light of your past record?!” Keigetsu cried in despair. Then, at length, she uttered a guttural growl of warning. “I’m going with you.”

“Pardon?”

“If you insist on going after Gen Kasui, then I’m coming too. I absolutely refuse to rest. If that bothers you, you’d better give up on your search.”

Of course, she meant it as a threat.

And yet, after staring back at Keigetsu for a moment, Reirin sheepishly put a hand to her cheek. “If I may be so bold as to start ‘reading between the lines’… Does that mean, ‘Which is more important to you: Gen Kasui or my health?!’”

“Huh?! Wh…wha…?! No! Don’t be stupid!”

“Oh. Then how about, ‘I’m too worried to let you go alone. I refuse to leave your side!’”

“No!” Keigetsu denied the accusation with a piercing shriek. “When did I ever say that?!”

“I see.” Reirin gave a solemn nod of her head. “So you haven’t said anything at all, then. In that case, I’ll be on my way.”

It was a textbook example of a straw man argument.

With that, Reirin took off at a brisk pace. It was only when Keigetsu screamed her name, red in the face, that she stopped to cast a worried glance over her shoulder. “It’s not good for you to shout like that. You’re free to join me if you’re so worried, but your health should come first. The moment I determine you’re in danger, I’ll see to it that you go back to your room and rest, even if I must order Tousetsu to see it done.”

“Wha…”

The corners of Keigetsu’s mouth twitched.

Wh-who does she think she is?!

It wasn’t long ago that the girl had been a goner, sobbing as she braced herself for death. Yet as soon as she’d been rescued—or rather, as soon as she’d switched bodies—she’d suddenly become boisterous and forceful enough to mow down all obstacles in her path.

Hands shaking, Keigetsu yelled the one thing the other Maiden couldn’t stand

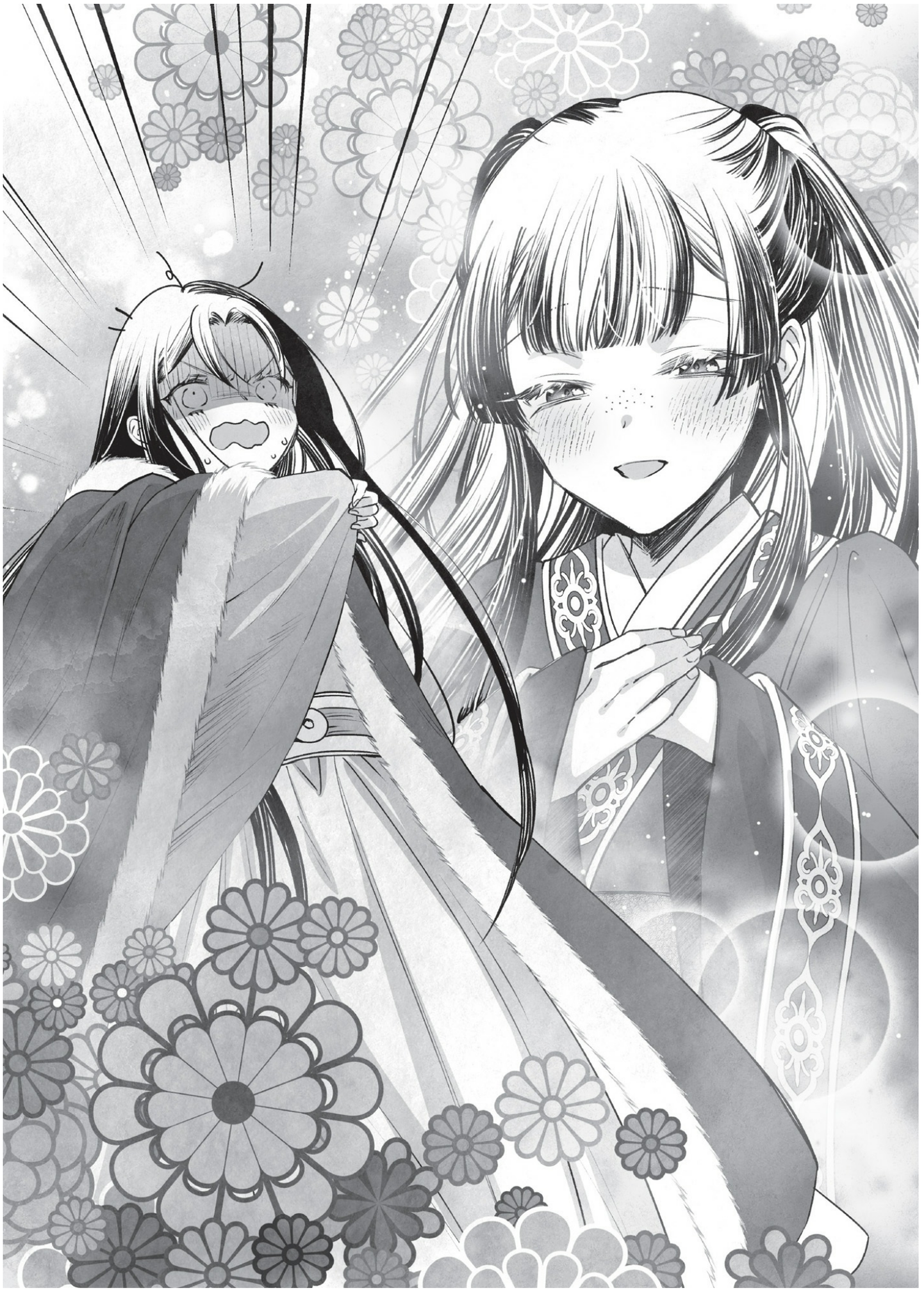
to hear: “You’re unbelievable! I hate you!”

“Dearie me.” Reirin brought her hands to her mouth, only to press them to her chest a moment later, her eyes watering. “That one meant, ‘I love you’…”

She had the look of someone basking in delight, her smile like a flower bursting into bloom. Even though it was her own face, one look at that ridiculously overjoyed expression made Keigetsu’s next words die on her tongue.

“Oh, for crying out loud…” Leelee cracked a resigned smile, a glazed look in her eyes, while Tousetsu nodded impassively.

Now that she inhabited a healthy vessel, no one could stop the woman of steel.



“So this is the storehouse where the court ladies discard their personal belongings, Leelee?”

The group had been walking westward from the pond for some time, hiding the sound of their footsteps for part of the way. Eventually, they arrived at an abandoned storehouse bathed in the pallid glow of moonlight. It was raised on stilts to keep out the damp, but those efforts had been for naught, as the plaster had peeled away to expose the rotting wood inside. The only thing that could pass for a window was the dilapidated door. The building was little more than a glorified shed, though at least the crumbling roof tiles and gaps between the thin wooden planks could serve as a light source in a pinch.

“Some storehouse this is. It looks like it’s about to come crashing down around us.”

“Pretty much… There are holes in the floor due to all the rot, and the shelves are crammed so full of junk that if you’re not careful getting things down, they’ll tip over and send everything crashing down on you. Once you’re used to all that, it’s perfectly serviceable.”

That earned a disgusted scowl from Keigetsu, so Leelee shrugged her shoulders and elaborated.

“Anyone who comes here is usually at the end of their tether, so they have no *choice* but to get used to it.”

The addendum made Keigetsu glance back at her court lady, then awkwardly avert her gaze. She knew *she* was one of the reasons that Leelee had been “at the end of her tether” in the past.

“In any event, it would be dangerous for all of us to go in at once. The rest of you should wait out here,” said Reirin, as if to break up the uncomfortable tension in the air. She narrowed her gaze in the direction of the storehouse, then gave a quiet nod. “She’s here.”

The flicker of a flame could be glimpsed between the gaps between the planks. Listening closely, one could also hear the occasional thud of something like a stack of papers hitting the floor. It seemed the person inside was holding up a torch and rummaging around for something.

“Is that…Gen Kasui?”

“I assume so. She reacted strongly to Leelee’s mention of the storehouse.”

Reirin nodded to herself as she retraced her memories.

“A storehouse. I see.”

When Kasui had come to visit Reirin in her pavilion, the look on her face had changed as she’d listened to Leelee’s explanation. She’d started to fidget, and she’d even seemed poised to cut the conversation short and walk out.

“Items they aren’t permitted to bring outside? Such as?”

It was probably the part about “diaries stashed without undergoing inspection” that had piqued her interest. If there was one place she was bound to go after throwing Reirin into a well in a fit of rage, it was that storehouse.

“Lady Kasui appeared to be searching for something. The relative she lost three years ago, burns, the shaman, a buyout of miracle hemp… I’m unclear on the details, but something tells me she’s looking for clues to the incident that killed her loved one.”

As Reirin strung together the fragments of information she had gathered, Tousetsu looked up with a start. “Three years ago… The shaman?”

“Does that ring a bell, Tousetsu?”

“Not exactly…” The stony-faced court lady faltered. When Reirin prompted her a second time, she prefaced that it was little more than hearsay before explaining, “Three years ago, Lady Anni came to the capital to recite the prayers for His Majesty’s birthday celebration. She spent a few days in the inner court, during which time she held a meeting to distribute protective talismans to the palace women…but I heard that turned into something of a debacle.”

“What kind of debacle?”

“A servant girl brandished a blade and was exiled from the court after suffering burns in a ritual fire. Unfortunately, Her Majesty was off preparing for the festivities when it happened, and I was an attendant of hers at the time, so I cannot claim to know the facts of the matter.” Tousetsu frowned apologetically, then dropped her voice even lower and added, “The public would be alarmed to

know that we had allowed an act of rebellion right before such an auspicious event. Thus, Her Majesty the Empress Dowager instructed us not to speak of the matter."

"The empress dowager herself? Truly?"

She was the former emperor's legitimate wife and the mother of the current emperor, Genyou. Having long since retired to an imperial villa, the girls seldom encountered her, but her influence was still immense.

"Is there any chance that 'servant girl' was Lady Kasui's relative?"

"I cannot say. The incident was hushed up." Even Reirin's most loyal retainer dodged the question. "When a gag order is issued, all the records of the event are destroyed, the witnesses are dismissed…and sometimes false rumors are spread to obfuscate the truth."

That roundabout answer was the best one she could give.

Reirin nodded and whispered that she understood. Something terrible must have happened in the inner court three years ago. However, the records had been incinerated and the witnesses evicted, so only fabricated rumors remained. Hence why Kasui was looking everywhere in search of the truth.

With another murmur of "I see," Reirin strode toward the storehouse, leaving her companions behind. "It's probably best that we don't address this matter as a group. Lady Keigetsu, please wait here with Tousetsu and Leelee."

"Lady Reirin!"

"Kou Reirin!"

Aghast, the trio attempted to follow, but Reirin stuck out a hand and shushed them. She knew that in times like these, it was best to act before the worrywarts around her could hold her back. Sure enough, once she'd made her move, the others ceased to fuss out of fear of the enemy noticing them, instead settling for sighing or casting helpless glances heavenward. Reirin mouthed a silent apology to the girls before erasing all traces of her presence and pressing her back to the wall.

Fortunately, there was a gap in the battered door large enough to slip her

hand through, allowing her to hold down the hinges and enter without making a sound. The slightest of night breezes drifted in after her, but the girl deep inside the storehouse didn't seem to notice.

Reirin took slow, steady steps so as not to trip over the thin, uneven floorboards. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she instinctively scanned the area for objects in danger of collapsing or falling. When she discovered that the entire building was a hazard, she let slip a dry chuckle despite herself.

It stood to reason. Shelves lined both sides of the narrow aisles. The antique-looking ledges were packed full of everything from stationery to cosmetics, from chests of clothes to books, so much so that they jutted out into the aisles, lending the space an overcrowded air. There was no telling when one of those storage units might topple over, and the whole floor was in danger of falling out from under her.

Step by step, she crept through the musty room until she was close enough to catch a glimpse of her target through the gaps in the shelves.

Lo, there was Gen Kasui. She was sitting in the middle of the storehouse, under a shelf containing a particularly large number of books, intently reading a stack of papers she had wrenched free.

"Blast it! This account doesn't go into the details. But the shaman *was* involved…"

She tossed the large pile of documents to the side, then held a book to the light of the candle. If one had to guess, those were the discarded diaries of the court ladies.

"The Kin clan and Ran clan too…"

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Reirin called out from behind, prompting Kasui to whip around with a start.

Shielding her eyes with one hand, Reirin grabbed a nearby book with the other and hurled it at the candlestick. The tome succeeded in knocking over the candle, putting out the fire with a *clang*.

"Wha…"

The well-lit room was abruptly plunged into darkness, and Reirin took advantage of Kasui's impaired vision to close the distance between them. She flung herself at the other Maiden, straddled her on the floor, and pressed one sharp elbow to her throat.

"I came here to ask you something."

"Lady Shu Keigetsu…? What are you doing here?"

Kasui attempted to wriggle free, but Reirin increased the pressure from her elbow to force her back down.

"Shall we keep this brief? I'd appreciate it if you'd answer my questions before the Eagle Eyes can arrive on the scene. Why is a Maiden rummaging through old court lady diaries in a storehouse like this? Why do you bear a grudge against the shaman, the Kins, and the Rans?"

"Wha…"

"And why did the miracle hemp buyout enrage you to the point of drowning Kou Reirin in a well?" whispered Reirin, bringing her face even closer. A lock of black hair spilled over her shoulder and fluttered into Kasui's face.

"Should I take that to mean," Kasui eventually murmured after a long silence, "that Lady Kou Reirin made it out alive?"

"Correct. Lady Kei…*I* pulled her out. She filled me in on a number of things, and that brought me here."

Gen Kasui was quick-witted indeed. Instead of making excuses for herself, she fell silent. She must have realized immediately that it was too late to sweep anything under the rug.

Why had "Shu Keigetsu" saved "Kou Reirin"? For starters, how had she known to rush to the Maiden in her time of need, and how much information did she have? No doubt Kasui's mind was swimming with questions. Rather than ask any of them, however, she insisted on keeping her silence until Reirin huffed a soft sigh. Clearly she wasn't dealing with the shallow sort of person who would gloat about her crimes.

"The silent treatment, hm? Well, this isn't ideal. If you refuse to answer me,

I'll have no choice but to turn you over to the Eagle Eyes."

Then again, Kasui was a mainline descendant of the Gen clan. She was bound to be even more impervious to torture than Reirin.

For lack of a better option, Reirin shifted her gaze to the books scattered around her. "Did these diaries belong to former court ladies? I assume they didn't contain much information of value. Still, I can deduce which palace's retainers they belonged to by the color of the bindings. It looks like most of these belonged to the Kin and Ran clans, so I suppose that means—"

Whoosh!

The moment the Kou Maiden took her eyes off her foe, she heard the sound of something slicing through the air. Kasui had grabbed an inkstone lying close at hand and swung at Reirin's head.

"Goodness gracious."

Before the blunt object could make impact, it smacked into something else with a dull thud. Reirin had picked up a nearby book and used it as a shield against the inkstone.

"I won't make the same mistake twice."

"What?!"

Kasui was stunned to see that her would-be surprise attack had been thwarted. Reirin tried to exploit the opening to knock her back to the ground, but her opponent was no pushover and twisted to avoid the impact. While Kasui was at it, she aimed a powerful kick at Reirin's jaw.

"Eep!"

Reirin hastily bent backward to dodge the relentless strike calculated to knock her out.

It had been such a sharp kick. Leave it to a Gen to employ tactics so incongruous with her noble station.

This is getting me fired up!

She neither made excuses nor asked questions. All that mattered was

eliminating her obstacles by the most direct means possible. Her methods were more those of an assassin than even a warrior, and something about that drove Reirin wild.

Most Gens were taciturn by nature. Part of her had known that she wouldn't get a straight answer to her interrogation—and that asking Kasui questions when she was so on edge would send her into a violent rage.

If she doesn't want to use her words, then I have little choice but to let my fists do the talking.

Feeling belligerent, Reirin took a great leap back and assumed a defensive stance. Kasui likewise sprang to her feet and unleashed a rain of blows from her fists, elbows, and feet. The whistle of the air splitting attested to the tremendous force behind each punch and kick. One hit would be all it took to bring even "Shu Keigetsu's" towering form to the ground in an instant.

Reirin stayed out of Kasui's reach, chucking various objects at her in between dodging her attacks. She threw books and letterboxes, plus ashes into her eyes to blind her. Rolls of fabric. Jars and even incense burners. She was quite proud of the speed of her throws, yet Kasui dodged each and every projectile with ease.

The floor of the room was streaked by beams of silvery moonlight, and the walls echoed with the clatter of objects falling to the floor, each kicking up a massive cloud of dust in its wake.

Kasui's fists and feet slashed through the air in assault. Reirin dodged the blows in a light-footed dance, taking cover in the darkness or sometimes knocking over objects to block her foe's path.

Yet despite Reirin's best efforts to defend herself, Kasui had a slight advantage. Though the distance between the two remained the same, the Kou Maiden was soon overpowered. Little by little, she was driven from the center of the storehouse until she was up against the wall.

When Reirin saw that a glancing blow from Kasui's foot had shattered a jar to smithereens, she knew it was time to speak up. "Nothing will come of fighting, Lady Kasui. Why don't we talk this out? Please?"

“Silence.”

“I have no intention of airing your private affairs, so there’s no cause to be so hostile. Won’t you please explain what’s going on? I have something to tell you as well.”

“Silence.”

“I say this for your sake as much as mine. If you fight with all your strength—”

“I said, silence!” Kasui shouted, cutting short Reirin’s plea. “I won’t let anyone stand in the way of my revenge!”

Her eyes glinted with enough intensity to be visible in the darkness of night, and she took a great step forward, preparing to unleash a full-force strike…

Snap!

And then there came a thundering crack, and Kasui’s body plummeted downward.

“Wha—?!”

The section of decaying floor Kasui had shifted her weight to had given way underneath her. With her left leg suddenly buried up to the knee, she lost her balance and pressed both hands to the ground.

“If you fight with all your strength, you’ll break the floor. I did try to warn you,” Reirin said with feeling, putting a hand to her cheek. “I see I was too late.”

“Damn you…”

“One more thing. I apologize for prattling on after you told me to be quiet.”

As Kasui struggled to free her leg, Reirin pointed above her head.

“You had better crouch down, or you might be in trouble.”

It happened in the very next moment.

Boom!

One of the shelves came crashing down with the most deafening rumble yet.

“Eek!” Keigetsu, who had been keeping an eye on the storehouse from a

short distance away, shrieked at the startling commotion. “Wh-what was that?!”

“This is bad! It sounds like one of the bigger shelves collapsed!” Leelee turned white as a sheet. “What if Lady Reirin got pinned underneath?!”

“What kind of question is that?! We came along for a reason! Go help her!”

Keigetsu shook Tousetsu, who was still cradling the Maiden in her arms. Yet even the most loyal court lady of all gave a small shake of her head, looking conflicted. “We mustn’t. In her current state, Lady Reirin isn’t one to be outdone by Gen Kasui…and she ordered me to get you both to safety.”

Loyal though she was, that loyalty manifested itself in trusting in her mistress and obeying her commands.

Keigetsu scowled. “Would you get a grip already?!”

In a blinding fit of rage, she grabbed Tousetsu by the collar from point-blank range and jerked her back and forth. The court lady glanced down at her in surprise.

“Why are you Kous all so obstinate?! Have you learned nothing from this whole mess?! Her reckless streak is never going to get better if you all just nod your heads and go along with whatever she says!”

“Oh…”

“Yes, Kou Reirin is resourceful, a paragon of virtue, and has the devil’s luck. Now that she’s in good health, she’s practically invincible. But you know what? She’s also soft! She’s naive, and she leaves herself wide open! What if she went too easy on Gen Kasui and had the tables turned on her?!”

Tousetsu’s eyes widened, then dropped to her feet. In truth, she was starting to question her own values. Until now, she’d never dreamed that her mistress could be so shaken over “a mere argument,” or so distracted that someone could sneak up on her from behind and almost kill her.

“Put me down. I can walk on my own,” said Keigetsu, still trapped in Reirin’s body. Her tone left no room for argument. “I’m going to check on what happened.”

And so, with her feet firmly planted on the ground and two court ladies in tow, she crept toward the storehouse.

Boom!

"Agh!"

The thundering crash that shook the storehouse was loud enough to drown out Kasui's scream. A shelving unit large enough to tower over a grown adult collided with the one opposite, dumping its contents in the process. Though the impact mercifully halted its descent, all the objects that had been stored on its higher shelves—chests, letterboxes, and books—rained down on Kasui's head. Most notably, she was powerless to deflect the large wardrobe that had been sitting on the very top.

"Ghk…"

"If one chunk is lost, the whole floor tilts. It didn't help that the lower shelves had been all but emptied, while so many heavy objects were left on top. It raises the center of gravity."

So said the very culprit who had taken and thrown all the items from the bottom shelves. Better yet, her "strategic retreat" to the wall had allowed her to steer clear of the collapse.

Gently, Reirin kneeled down in front of Kasui, who was buried under the shelves. The girl appeared to have been hit by a book or some other falling object, as blood flowed from her temple where she groveled.

Reirin reached out to carefully trace the wound. "Goodness. That looks painful."

"Lady…Keigetsu…" Kasui's first instinct was to slap her hand away, but with her movements restricted, she settled for shooting Reirin a glare so intense it practically came with a sound effect. "Why do you insist on standing in my way?"

"You misunderstand. I simply want to know what drove you to almost kill my *best friend*, Kou Reirin."

“And you expect me to believe that under the circumstances?”

“This was but a tragic accident.” After nodding shamelessly, Reirin replied, “If you’re asking why I wish to know, you ought to answer *my* questions first. Why are you rummaging through diaries in a storehouse? Why do you bear a grudge against the shaman, the Kins, and the Rans? And why did you attempt to murder Kou Reirin?”

“…”

“If you refuse to answer, I have little choice but to fill in the blanks myself. For instance, you mentioned ‘revenge’ earlier. Am I to understand that the shaman inflicted harm upon one of your kin?” She pressed a hand to her cheek as she sorted her thoughts. “I’ve heard that three years ago, there was a criminal loose in the inner court who rose in revolt and suffered burns as punishment. Perhaps she was your—”

“Big Sis was no criminal!” Kasui suddenly yelled. It sounded so much like a howl that “visceral” was the only word to describe it. She snapped to her senses with a gasp, then immediately hung her head. Fury and torment seeped from her clenched teeth and fists.

Reirin said quietly, “So she was your older sister, then.”

“…”

“Ignorant as I am, I hadn’t the faintest idea you even had one. I’ve never heard the Gen clan so much as allude to her existence. Why did they keep quiet when one of their own was embroiled in such a terrible incident?”

“…”

“Did your family conspire to cover it up, perchance? And you’re alone in your quest for vengeance? That would certainly explain your rash behavior.”

As Reirin pieced together the information she had, muttering her thoughts aloud, Kasui’s irises wavered.

Reirin crouched down again, peering straight into the other girl’s face. “Consider your situation, Lady Kasui. I hold your life in my hands. Don’t you want to justify your actions? If you won’t explain what you were thinking, you

leave me no choice but to turn you over to the Eagle Eyes." She lowered her voice a fraction. "Once you stand accused, the Gen name will be forever tarnished. By the same token, you will be trampling on your sister's dignity."

Moonlight shone through the cracks in the building, bathing Reirin's downturned cheeks and Kasui's balled fists in a pale glow. A long silence fell.

When the dust in the air had finally settled, Kasui spoke in the lowest of growls. "I won't allow my sister's name to be sullied any further."

"Then let's hear it," said Reirin, undaunted by the threat.

Gnashing her teeth at her inability to move, Kasui clenched her fists hard enough to draw blood, then parted her lips at last. "My sister, Bushou," she said, the gleam in her eyes sharp enough to kill, "was the original candidate for the Gen Maiden. She had the proper temperament and all the right gifts…and she was a kind soul."

Occasionally choking with emotion, she began to recount the events of three years ago.

"My sister used to send me letters each and every day. One day, she wrote that she would be attending a gathering led by the shaman while the Worthy Consort was away…and the next thing I knew, she'd been sent back to the Gen domain with horrible burns along her right arm. The only explanation given was that she brought a blade into the inner court and was subjected to the Trial by Fire on the charge of treason."

"The Trial by Fire? I'm not familiar."

"Imagine the Lion's Judgment, but replace the lion with fire. It's a trial that amounts to an execution. As the prestigious shaman was already present, the rite was carried out without delay."

In truth, Kasui confessed, she had no idea what had transpired in the inner court that day. All that remained in the aftermath were unanswered questions. Nay, the gag order had silenced even those. Only Kasui was left—plagued by doubt, despair, and resentment.

"No one… No one has ever tried to investigate. That includes the inhabitants of the inner court afraid to get involved, of course, but also my own parents.

Even the kindly Worthy Consort adamantly refuses to address the matter. That leaves me no choice but to find my own answers."

Kasui declared that her reason for becoming a Maiden. She didn't want to listen to her parents, nor did she desire the glory once meant for her sister. The very idea of her gracefully vying for favor or putting on performances was laughable, but if she could only get closer to the scene of the crime, she believed she could get her hands on the truth.

"It was my sister's dream to present the crown with a sword or mirror of her own design. If I were to venture a guess, all that talk of treason was a misunderstanding borne of the ornamental sword she brought with her to the inner court. She would never conspire to betray her kingdom."

"Yet things went straight from that innocent misunderstanding to a fiery execution."

"Yes, precisely. There was foul play afoot. Someone took that insignificant spark and fanned it into the flames of a trial for their own amusement. Or perhaps they were using the ritual as a pretext to get rid of her!" Kasui had been keeping her tone in check, but here she raised her voice. "I've learned something from my time at the inner court. The women here are a cruel bunch. They are starved for love, honor, and entertainment. For their own pleasure or self-interest, they wouldn't hesitate to sabotage and set someone ablaze!"

Her virulent loathing, if anything, convinced Reirin of her virtue.

That reminds me, when the subject of leaving "Shu Keigetsu" to burn with the village came up during the Unso tea party, Lady Kasui was the only one to object.

When they met back up at the village, Keigetsu had explained in detail how each of the Maidens had behaved during the tea party. That said, Kasui had allegedly changed her tune to "a Maiden must uphold her honor even if it means going down in flames" shortly thereafter. Keigetsu had sniffed and dismissed it as her overselling her loyalty to offset the false accusations against her clan, but perhaps the real reason Kasui and the Gens had been so eager to prove their allegiance to the imperial family lay in Bushou's "criminal record."

Or perhaps that was Lady Kasui's attempt to come to terms with her sister's

death.

"I must confess," Kasui choked out, her fists trembling, "I've often questioned whether I should give up on revenge. Perhaps it was all just a tragic misunderstanding. Perhaps my sister *was* to blame. I held myself back, clinging to whatever leads I came by in the course of my empty life…until, at long last, I met the shaman. And I witnessed something during the second trial."

Her fair cheeks glistened with pale moonlight. Imprisoned in the darkness, her eyes the only part of her that shone, she looked to be an apparition.

"Didn't you notice, Lady Keigetsu? Just before your composition burst into flames during the second trial, the shaman rubbed her robes against the paper. Around where the holy emblem was, I believe. She did something. I'm sure of it."

"Ah!"

Only Kasui, who had watched the shaman's every move, had caught on to the truth.

"That old woman who claims to be a shaman doesn't have a trace of the divine gift."

Keigetsu's bravado played back in Reirin's mind.

"I bet she's bluffed her way through her career performing plausible enough rituals, divining plausible enough fortunes, and reciting plausible enough prayers."

So that's *what happened!*

It explained the faint odor emanating from the emblems on the rice paper. Reirin's various forays into developing new medicines helped her to realize its true nature.

While Reirin's face stiffened, Kasui's tone became more pointed. "She took revenge because you belittled her. You exposed her 'divine gift' as a hoax, nothing more than a tool to take the law into her own hands. Doesn't it stand to reason that she did the same to my sister? That Big Sis insulted the shaman, and that is why she was subjected to the Trial by Fire?! I have no proof. But the

more I think about it, the more suspicious the shaman appears!”

“Still, here in the inner court, the shaman doesn’t have the authority to hold rituals at her own discretion…”

“I’m aware! Hence why I believe she had an accomplice! It would need to be an inner court official with the standing to give her permission for a rite. That day, the empress and the Worthy Consort had left to prepare for His Majesty’s birthday celebration. The former Noble Consort was often bedridden and rarely attended ceremonies exclusive to the inner court. That leaves only—”

Reirin finished the sentence for her. “Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran.”

“Precisely,” said Kasui with a nod. Her black eyes stared into the distance, no longer focused on Reirin. “In the end, I couldn’t find any mention of that day in the court ladies’ diaries. But the majority of the diaries destroyed around that time belonged to the Kin and Ran clans. Both clans had a hand in the Trial by Fire, at the very least. Those women immolated my sister.”

Still groveling on the floor, Kasui clenched her fists hard enough to press into the floor planks. Both her hands and voice were shaking with rage.

“Big Sis met a gruesome end. Although the shaman claimed to have treated her wounds, the infection spread and her whole body swelled. She once possessed miraculous hands that could etch the most beautiful of designs, yet in her last moments, it was all she could do to scrawl the words ‘Don’t cry, live a happy life’ in pus-soaked blood. She was forsaken by all, denied even basic medicine!” Kasui wailed that it was unforgivable. “I’ll make them all pay! Both those who set fire to my sister over a misunderstanding and Kou Reirin, who hoarded all the miracle hemp out of petty curiosity while she languished! Neither a lapse in judgment nor a thirst for knowledge can excuse it!”

Blood trickled from her hands as she slammed them hard against the floor. “I won’t let you stand in the way of my revenge, Lady Keigetsu. I’m certain the shaman will visit the inner court tonight. Either the Kins or Rans are planning to hold a banquet in her honor. With no clues to be found in the court ladies’ diaries, tonight’s banquet is my last chance to uncover the truth. I must find out what really happened that day!” She shot “Shu Keigetsu” another glare, then

shouted with all the force of a raging tidal wave, “Let me out of here! Move this wardrobe aside! I must find out where the banquet is being held and get there before the Eagle Eyes find me—for the sake of the sister I lost!”

“For the sake of the sister you lost, hm?” Reirin eventually murmured after listening to her tirade in silence. “Very well. If you had that compelling a reason __”

Just as she reached out to move the junk pinning Kasui to the ground, there came a sharp cry from the wall behind her. “Hold it right there!”

“What?!”

“I knew it! How could you agree to help a would-be murderer so easily, you big idiot?!”

A glance at the bare wooden wall of the storehouse revealed her own face—Keigetsu, in other words—peering back at her through one of the cracks, nose pressed up against the opening.

Reirin was genuinely dumbfounded. “What in the world are you doing here?! I told you to rest! You mustn’t touch the wall, or it will collapse! Please get out of here! It’s too dangerous!” she pleaded with her friend.

Keigetsu’s expression grew stormier. “That’s my line. What was that crash just now?! It looks like Gen Kasui was the one trapped in the rubble, at least…but why would you let the criminal you just captured run free?!” Though only a third of her face was visible, her trademark shrieking echoed through the storehouse, carrying well despite coming from Reirin’s lungs. “Look here. Gen Kasui knocked someone out with malicious intent. Then she tossed them into a well to give them a slow and painful death. Don’t let her off the hook just because she revealed her sob story of a past!”

“Kou Reirin?” Kasui couldn’t quite make out her face through the crack. Still, she recognized the voice coming from outside the wall as the Kou Maiden, and within moments, her entire body bristled with hatred. “I can’t believe you’re still alive.”

“Hah! Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Gen Kasui. The Heavens smiled upon me, not you. As they should. Why would anyone bother with a fool who

runs around enacting a senseless revenge and fancying herself a tragic heroine?”

“Excuse me?!”

That was a good time to back off, but Keigetsu was so incensed that she persisted in taunting Kasui from the other side of the wall. “Heh. You must have been so pleased with yourself for dunking your nemesis in that well, but just look at you now—*you’re* the one drowning in a pile of junk, completely helpless. Oh, the irony! You got what you deserved.”

“How vile. Was this your true nature all along, Kou Reirin?!”

Reirin attempted to rein her friend in, instinctively massaging her temple. “Um, Lady Kei—*Reirin*, you’re complicating matters, so could you please leave it at that?”

She was touched to see Keigetsu so mad on her behalf, but she preferred to handle her own problems.

Aha… It’s quite upsetting to have your affairs settled without your consent. No wonder Lady Keigetsu got so angry with me at the Violet Dragon’s Spring.

Alas, Keigetsu, who was second to none when it came to finding fault with others, was borderline gleeful as she carried on shouting. “Not a chance! Why didn’t you confront her with the facts right off the bat?! Tell her that she botched her so-called ‘vengeance’ from the very first finger she pointed!”

“Erm…”

“Tell her that Kou Reirin…that *I* wasn’t the one who hoarded all those medicinal herbs,” Keigetsu snapped with finality. “Someone offered her miracle hemp out of the kindness of their heart, and she repaid them by bludgeoning them over the head and tossing them into a well!”

Kasui’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“What, didn’t get it the first time? The Kou clan didn’t buy up the stock. You were mistaken. And that—”

“For heaven’s sake! Will you please desist?! Tousetsu, take her away!”

Tousetsu swiftly obeyed her mistress’s panicked command, slapping a hand

over Keigetsu's mouth. But there was no taking back what had already been said.

Kasui turned so pale that it was obvious even in the dark. "But…Lady Reirin told me that her clan bought the entire supply."

"She lied," said Reirin, stressing that she herself was partly to blame. "The truth is that the Kou clan bought an entire mountain for their sickly daughter, where they grew their own medicinal and poisonous herbs. They didn't hoard anything. However, the mass cultivation of poisonous plants could be considered an act of treason, so she opted to fudge the truth."

Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that the lie would be more likely to strike a nerve with Kasui.

"It was nothing but an unfortunate accident," said Reirin, her mouth twisting in discomfiture. "No one could blame you for jumping to the wrong conclusion."

Her assurances didn't seem to reach Kasui's ears. The girl's eyes lost their focus, all that righteous anger nowhere to be found. "Thus why she acted so uncomfortable…"

She might have recalled how Reirin's eyes had darted about in response to her questions. Or how the Kou Maiden had been unusually tongue-tied, communicating only in noncommittal nods.

"I was mistaken…"

"Indeed. It was all a tragic misunderstanding."

"I almost killed someone…over a misconception?"

Reirin had meant it as a consolation, but assaulting someone over a misunderstanding was Kasui's greatest taboo. It was the same excuse Bushou's killers used to hold the Trial by Fire.

"Neither a lapse in judgment nor a thirst for knowledge can excuse it!"

"I can't blame Lady Reirin for taking such a nasty tone with me," Kasui mumbled, as if her own words had come back to haunt her, then fell silent.

Just then, a stampede of footsteps and a series of shouts could be heard in the distance.

“Lady Kou Reirin!”

“Where are you, Lady Reirin?!”

“Turn the place upside down!”

It was the Eagle Eyes, who had come looking for Kou Reirin.

The color drained from Reirin’s face, but on the other side of the wall, Keigetsu seemed quite pleased with this turn of events. While Tousetsu was distracted by the officers’ arrival, she brushed her hand aside and cackled. “Ha ha ha! It’s time to pay the piper, Gen Kasui! You had this coming. I’m glad I was here to see it.”

Kasui, meanwhile, was still on her hands and knees, her head hanging. She had lost all will to fight.

“Please pull yourself together, Lady Kasui.”

“…”

The light faded from her unblinking eyes, leaving them hollow and haunted. That was probably the moment she gave up on everything—on her revenge, on escaping from the Eagle Eyes, and on life itself.

No.

In that same instant, Reirin’s heart leapt, and an electric impulse shot through her.

I won’t let that happen, Lady Kasui.

She wasn’t sure what name to put to the emotion she felt. It wasn’t sympathy. It wasn’t righteousness. It was something much more harsh, more selfish, more wild.

“Ooh, what shall I tell the Eagle Eyes?” Keigetsu continued to gloat. “Perhaps I should show them the wound on my head. I’ll mention how scared I was after you shoved me into that well. And how admirable ‘Shu Keigetsu’ is for coming to my res—”

“Tousetsu,” Reirin interrupted, calling out to her court lady on the other side of the wall for the second time.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Bring Lady ‘Kou Reirin’ over to the pond and lead the Eagle Eyes away from this storehouse. See to it that they do not find out about my trip down the well.”

“And then—I beg your pardon?”

Keigetsu, who had kept prattling on undeterred, stopped and cast a surprised glance over her shoulder. Reirin said nothing in response. Instead, she found the most run-down patch of bare wood and kicked it to pieces, only to lean out the hole she’d made and exclaim, “Come quick! I found Lady ‘Kou Reirin’ under the pavilion near the pond! She collapsed while she was out for a walk!”

Through the hole, she could see Keigetsu and Leelee gaping at her, while Tousetsu yanked them close from behind.

Reirin reached a hand to poke Keigetsu—who was looking particularly dumbfounded—on the forehead. “I do love how fierce you can be, but you went overboard.”

Though she was tickled to see her friend show her such favoritism, it was hard to watch her acting the heel. Plus one more thing.

“It’s dangerous to hang near this decrepit storehouse, and it’s unwise to get so agitated on the heels of a concussion. As you refuse to heed my advice, I’ll trust the Eagle Eyes to take you into custody and force you to rest.”

“Excuse me?!”

Despite her constant urging, Keigetsu adamantly refused to lie down. Reirin was becoming earnestly concerned for her health.

“Go on, Tousetsu, Leelee. Hurry along now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“B-but…”

Tousetsu scooped up Keigetsu after a moment’s hesitation, while Leelee looked back and forth between her two mistresses, trying to decide whose commands to prioritize.

“Lady Kasui no longer poses a threat. May I reiterate: ‘Kou Reirin’ was hit on the head and submerged in a well for hours. Need I explain whose orders you should obey?” Reirin admonished her with a sweet smile.

Leelee nodded her head, practically quaking. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good girl.”

The two court ladies walked off toward the pond with Keigetsu flailing in their arms, and Reirin watched until they were out of sight.

“Now then.” Once she was equally sure that the Eagle Eyes’ footsteps had receded into the distance, she turned back to Kasui. “Allow me to move this wardrobe.”

“…”

“Oh dear, there are quite a lot of items tangled together… It might be quicker for you to pull yourself out. If I hoist you up by the arm, do you think you can manage?” she asked, but Kasui didn’t answer. As the Gen Maiden stared vacantly into the distance, Reirin softly called her name again. “Lady Kasui.”

“Leave me be.”

She sounded so small and young. It was the voice of someone who had given up on everything, so bereft that the well of her tears had long since run dry.

“Get your act together, Lady Kasui. Would you let all your efforts to restore your sister’s pride go to waste?”

“When the outcome is that I almost killed an innocent person?” Without warning, Kasui’s face crumpled. “I’m no better…than the monsters who murdered my sister.” She clenched her fists atop the floor, fighting to stifle the waves of emotion raging inside her. “Here in this dark, nebulous world… vengeance was all I had to sustain me. And that drove me to the most despicable act imaginable.”

Gen Kasui was no doubt a good person. A simple one too. She had idolized her sister and survived on her affections alone. Such roiling waves of hatred and despair could never hope to be contained in such a young and unassuming vessel. The overflowing resentment had run riot through her very being,

haunting and tormenting her. Just when she'd finally found a container for those emotions by the name of revenge, even that had been shattered.

Kasui slowly unfurled her fists, letting her head droop listlessly. "I'm tired of it all."

"…"

The moonlit dust was all that glittered in the quiet storehouse.

After a long stretch of silence, Reirin spoke. "That must have been hard." Gently, she reached out to touch Kasui, who was still hanging her head. "It's hard to lose someone you love and be left the only one alive. You wish it could have been them. All you want is to punish whoever's to blame, but you can't. It's unfair, it's demoralizing. It leaves you bitter and resentful."

Reirin cradled Kasui's head with the careful touch of someone handling a fragile object.

"I understand that all too well."

Then Reirin grabbed the other girl's face with enough strength to make her gasp, forcing her to lift her head.

"But even so…no, for that very reason, you mustn't ever wish for your own death."

They were so close that the white clouds of their breath clung to each other's cheeks. In the moon-dappled room, Reirin looked Kasui in the eye with a light of will far more brilliant than that pale, silvery glow.

"Didn't your sister tell you to 'live a happy life'?"

"Ah…!"

"She told you to live. Isn't that the task she entrusted to you? Wasn't that the last request she made of you?"

Her voice cracked. It was at this point that Reirin realized her own body was trembling with emotion.

And that emotion was anger.

She was angry that Gen Kasui would forfeit her life so readily. Reirin was far

more upset with Kasui for choosing death than for throwing her into the well.

“There will be hard times. Painful trials. But your sister will never even know those experiences. Then, as the recipient of her last wish, you must accept the suffering it entails.”

She knew how hard it was for those left behind to live “happy” lives. She had been through it all: Illness thrust upon her like a punishment. The ever-present temptation of death. She couldn’t count how many times she had found herself drawn to the abyss in moments of weakness. Nevertheless, she was in this world because someone had wanted her to be. She’d been granted life at the expense of someone she held dear. Her awareness of that fact, along with her mother’s hopes for her, had always held her back at the brink.

Hence why she couldn’t bear to see Kasui, who had similarly been entrusted to live by her sister, give up so easily. It felt like being confronted with her own weakness.

“I stand before you now because I trampled over someone precious to me,” said Reirin. “She wished for me to live happily until her very last moments… So I must do exactly that. No matter what.”

It was a selfish assertion. Kasui had her own personal hell, and Reirin hers, and it was nobody’s place to tell someone else how to live their own life. All the same, Reirin found herself seized with the urge to shake Kasui by the shoulders. Was it because she currently inhabited the body of the fiery Keigetsu, she wondered? A frenzy of emotion surged through her, and she vented her feelings knowing full well how self-absorbed they were.

“You should think the same, Lady Kasui. No matter how much you blame yourself—no, all the more *because* of that—you must go on living. No matter how much it hurts, no matter how many mistakes you make along the way. Whether you take your revenge or let go of your grudge.”

Stunned, Kasui stared at the Maiden before her for some time. This woman had the face of Shu Keigetsu, yet she had a commanding aura about her the likes of which Kasui had never felt from the Shu Maiden before.

She had commanded Kasui to suffer. Her advice had been stern, not kind. She hadn’t reassured her fellow Maiden that she’d done nothing wrong but instead

incited her to live as a means of making amends.

Yet Kasui felt no urge to refute her. To frame her survival as a self-inflicted punishment was much more palatable to her at the moment. Furthermore, she could sense that the girl before her had weathered the same torment she had.

“You must live, Gen Kasui,” the freckled girl declared once and for all. She let go of Kasui’s cheeks, instead clasping the hands the girl had dropped limply to the floor. “If you don’t know what to do with yourself, I’ll tell you. You went about things the wrong way. The first thing you must do is apologize. After that, you must ask for help.”

Slowly, the warmth of Reirin’s hand seeped into Kasui’s. Feeling that rush of heat in the ice-cold storehouse stirred the Gen Maiden to the depths of her soul.

“Now give me your hand so I can warm you up.”

Bushou’s voice played back in her mind.

“I’ll be fine. We have nothing to fear if we stick together.”

The conversations the sisters had shared in the snowbound Gen estate began to shine their light on Kasui’s heart once more.

“I have no right to talk, but you’re not very good at depending on others, Lady Kasui. In times like these, you’re supposed to lean on the people around you. It’s a lesson I’ve recently learned myself.”

“You’re the younger of us, yet you can be so uncomfortable with emotions. It’s okay to cry for help when times are hard. I’ll always come to your rescue.”

Bushou’s awkward smiles had always been so tender. Her fingertips would gently stroke Kasui’s hair as it fell loose, her lips would speak assurances not to worry, and her eyes would smile and say that everything was going to be all right. Every little gesture had been packed with a deep love, and each time Kasui found herself on the receiving end, all the fear and loneliness that had frozen her heart melted away.

Big Sis…

Kasui’s lips quivered. Heat bubbled in her eyes and throat, thawing the ice in

the deepest recesses of her body and manifesting as tears and sobs.

“Ha…”

The contours of the world came back into focus. The black mist that had shrouded Bushou’s image suddenly lifted, revealing her smiling face.

“There you are, Kasui. It must be cold in the dark. Come here.”

When Kasui’s hands trembled, the girl with Shu Keigetsu’s face blinked as if something had just occurred to her. “That reminds me. There’s a certain line I’ve been dying to say.”

Then, for whatever reason, she curled her mouth into the taunting sort of smirk that screamed “Shu Keigetsu.”

“Go on and grovel. I *might* feel sorry enough to lend you a hand. So get on with it—ask me for help!”

“It’s okay to cry for help when times are hard. I’ll always come to your rescue.”

The moment she felt a gentle squeeze of her hand, fat drops of tears ran down Kasui’s face.

Big Sis… Bushou…

Between convulsive sobs, she had an overdue epiphany. Back when she touched Bushou’s ice-cold corpse, the first thing that had tried to climb out of her throat was a desperate cry for help. The timid little sister had wanted to cling to her older sibling all her life.

But Bushou wasn’t around to save her any longer. Besides, she had no right to ask for her help after leaving her to die. She had pursed her lips and swallowed her screams, and deprived of an outlet, her emotions had raged through her body and consumed her whole. Her world cloaked in a fog of hatred and despair, she hadn’t known where to go next.

“Help…me,” Kasui whispered, at last uttering the words she couldn’t say three years ago. At once, all the emotions she’d bottled deep inside came spilling piecemeal from her lips. “It’s hard. I’m…in so much anguish. I didn’t want to lose her like that. I didn’t want my sister to meet such a grisly, p-painful end. I feel…so terrible for her. She was too kind to go through that.”

The Maiden before her listened to her halting, incoherent ramblings with a grave expression. “Mm.”

The tighter she gripped Kasui’s hand, the harder Kasui’s tears came down.

“I want to reclaim at least a fragment of what my sister lost. I must. That way…Big Sis can rest in peace. I must restore her pride. I don’t know what I can do…but there must be *something*.”

“Yes. That’s precisely what we’re going to do,” came the girl’s gentle, resolute voice. She gave a firm nod of her head, and Kasui was overcome with the steadying sensation of planting both feet on solid ground. “Without fail.”

She hadn’t given up on her revenge. She hadn’t let go of her grudge. Still, just by expelling all those murky emotions, just by having someone else acknowledge them, Kasui felt like she could finally move forward.

First, she would apologize to Kou Reirin. She would make amends, and then she would clear her sister’s name, this time without straying from the right path.

“And the first step toward that is to get you out of here. Come, give me your hand.”

The so-called sewer rat of the Maiden Court elegantly extended a hand. Only a few stray moonbeams filtered into the late-night storehouse, yet her smile looked positively radiant.

“Why…would you go so far for my sake?” Kasui murmured, dazed by the beauty of the offered hand.

This was the woman whom the entire Maiden Court derided as a villainess. Kasui had never once been a recipient of her goodwill, nor had she made an effort to interact with the Shu Maiden at all.

So why?

What she got was a surprising answer. “Because when you dropped Kou Reirin into that well, she hoped that you would meet the same fate.”

“The same fate?” Kasui parroted, not immediately clear on her meaning.

“Yes,” the other girl said with a straight-faced nod. “Kou Reirin was hit over

the head, plunged into a dark, cramped well, and needed Lady…*me* to pull her out in just the nick of time.”

“Yes. My sins are heavy indeed. So why—”

“Now you, too, have been struck on the head, and you wallowed for three years in the dark, cramped pits of heartbreak.” She gently traced the wound on Kasui’s temple, as if to silence any rebuttal. “If we let Shu Keigetsu pull you out now, the score will finally be even.”

Then she grabbed Kasui’s hand and tightened her grip.

“I’ll pull you up on the count of three. Let’s do this with a bang!”

And thus did a warm, strong hand lift Kasui from the abyss of despair.

Chapter 2:
Keigetsu Blows It

THE TRIO HURRIED BACK the way they'd come: Tousetsu carrying Keigetsu, Leelee chasing after them.

"Let go of me! Put me down!"

"Quiet, Lady Keigetsu! You'll bite your tongue if you carry on screaming!"

"I'll get you for this, Kou Reiriiiiin!"

"Please desist from flailing like a beached fish."

Leelee and Tousetsu took turns pacifying Keigetsu, who was fighting to wrench herself free. Thanks to Tousetsu's remarkable agility, the trio managed to reach the pavilion near the small pond before the Eagle Eyes could.

"I suggest we go with the story that Lady 'Kou Reirin,' still distressed over her quarrel with Lady Keigetsu, went out for a nighttime stroll, lost her way, and collapsed under the pavilion due to the cold."

"Seriously, Tousetsu?! I see you subtly trying to shift the blame onto me!"

"Now, now. It's the most compelling reason for Lady Reirin to be out of sorts. Wouldn't you agree?"

After seating Keigetsu under the pavilion, the two court ladies made swift preparations for the Eagle Eyes' arrival.

"And after finding my mistress unconscious at the end of a long search, I, Tousetsu, am in a state of panic. We ought to hide the blankets and medical supplies. They'll look out of place."

Tousetsu bunched up the blankets and threw them under the table along with the first-aid kit. There wasn't a trace of hesitation in how she nudged them aside with her foot.

"Then I'll be the court lady whom Lady Keigetsu ordered to look for Lady Reirin when she heard the news of her disappearance. My search just so

happened to bring me here, and I was the one who called for help earlier. Let's say that I was running around seeking backup on your behalf, Lady Tousetsu, since you were otherwise occupied." With a quick nod of her own, Leelee called out, "Someone! Come quick! Over here! Lady Reirin collapsed under the pavilion by the pond!"

"That's enough, you two!" Keigetsu slammed her hands on the table, face convulsing with anger. "Why are you both listening to Kou Reirin?! Why are you protecting Gen Kasui?! She hit a sickly girl and dumped her in a well! We should turn her over to the Eagle Eyes and let them tear her to pieces!"

"But, Lady Keigetsu, Lady Reirin is the victim here, and she said she doesn't want Lady Kasui to die."

"And I'm telling you, that's because she's a pushover!" the Maiden yelled back, red-faced. "In times like these, isn't it up to her associates to take action, even if it means disregarding that big dunce's wishes?! It's for her own goo—"

"You know, Lady Keigetsu," said Leelee, a hint of exasperation on her features, "you're a lot like Lady Reirin sometimes."

"Ex*cuuuuse* me?!" came Keigetsu's shrill cry in response.

The court lady closest to her of all heaved a helpless sigh. "Don't you realize what you're doing? Lady Reirin says she's fine, but you want to go crazy trying to protect her and invite her wrath. The current situation is the inverse of what happened at the Violet Dragon's Spring."

"Oh…!"

The surprising observation struck Keigetsu speechless. Now that she thought about it, Leelee was right.

Is that what I'm doing? Going crazy to "protect" Kou Reirin?

The realization was staggering, but the more she reflected on it, the more it dawned on her that she had no personal axe to grind with Gen Kasui. The reason she had thrown down the gauntlet nonetheless was that she'd found the act of chucking Reirin into a well inexcusable. She'd been worried that the defenseless butterfly would get attacked the moment she let her guard down.

“I-I’m not…”

She tried to argue, but she wasn’t sure how to finish the sentence.

In a rare display, Tousetsu showed some consideration for Keigetsu, adding, “Of course, in your particular case, your own body is at stake. It’s only natural that you would be bothered.”

The woman known as the glacial court lady kneeled before Keigetsu with her usual deadpan expression. However, her touch was gentle as she smoothed her mistress’s hair.

“But Lady Reirin is a woman of the Kou,” she went on. “She has an inclination toward self-reliance. If someone raises a hand against her, she will insist upon dealing with them herself. She wishes to stand on her own two feet. As the person you are now, I trust you can sympathize with the sentiment?”

Tousetsu stared down at Keigetsu, gently covering her wound in a gesture that could only be described as reverential. “But so too was I moved by your entreaty to disregard her wishes and protect her. As her head court lady, I am truly grateful for the friendship you have bestowed upon my mistress.”

“W-we’re not *friends*—”

“Something tells me the ideal balance might be to add Lady Reirin’s self-sacrifice to your selfishness and halve the sum,” Leelee said with a shrug of her shoulders, speaking up in Keigetsu’s place when the latter flustered at the explicit thanks. “I do feel bad that our plan requires us to use you as bait, but we need you to bear with it. Just think of it as leveling the playing field after the fight at the Violet Dragon’s Spring.”

“Consider it a request from me as well. As a court lady, I cannot help but do all in my power to carry out my mistress’s will.”

As the two court ladies implored her with grave expressions, Keigetsu squinted and shot back, “So you say. Are you sure you didn’t just let Kou Reirin pressure you into it?”

They averted their eyes simultaneously.

“Oh, come on!” Keigetsu’s lip twitched, but after some thought, she let the

matter drop with an exaggerated sigh. “Whatever. I suppose we *do* have a better chance of hiding the truth if the Eagle Eyes catch me being ‘Kou Reirin’ than her being ‘Shu Keigetsu.’ I’m an excellent liar.”

“It is as you say.”

“Of course. Unlike Lady Reirin, you’re the ‘number one’ villainess, after all.”

The two court ladies nodded solemnly, only to flash Keigetsu conspiratorial smiles a moment later. The old Keigetsu undoubtedly would have started smashing teacups over a pair of court ladies being so cavalier with her, but strangely enough, she had come to enjoy the sense of rapport.

“Sit back and watch. Your average Eagle Eye is an easy mark. Bemoaning my plight with Kou Reirin’s pretty face is all it will take to get them off my back. For now, I’ll hide what happened with Gen Kasui and the well and do my best to play the poor, exhausted Maid—”

Just then, a nearby bush rustled, and a man jumped out.

“There you are!”

The Eagle Eyes’ voices tended to be high-pitched, but this one was a deep baritone. The instant the trio realized the identity of the visitor tossing his raven hair in the evening twilight, their faces froze in horror.

“Ca…”

“Are you all right, Lady Reirin?”

“Captain!”

Of all people, it was Shin-u—the one who would prove the most difficult to “get off her back”—who had arrived on the scene. Leelee, who had been in his clutches once before; Tousetsu, who was confronted with someone even more skilled in the martial arts than herself; and Keigetsu, who had no defense against his piercing gaze, all broke out into a cold sweat.

“Erm… What brings you here in person, Captain?”

“The others should catch up to us soon enough. I heard voices, so I rushed over as fast as I could,” Shin-u nonchalantly replied.

Did that mean he had instantly outpaced his subordinates as they made steady progress toward the pond? “Fleet-footed” didn’t even begin to cover it.

“Why are you out here this late at night, Lady Reirin?”

“Er… Well…”

Shin-u closed in on Keigetsu, who had halfway risen from her seat, his shoes scraping against the ground. He peered into her eyes from point-blank range. “Explain yourself.”

He had a frigid demeanor under normal circumstances, but whenever he narrowed his blue eyes—a rare sight in the Kingdom of Ei—he exuded an exceptionally intimidating aura. Completely overwhelmed, Keigetsu all but collapsed back into her chair.

Tousetsu was quick to come to her rescue. “Lady Reirin was so distraught over her quarrel with Lady Keigetsu that she went for an unsupervised walk in the gardens. When I discovered that she had gone missing, I was so alarmed that I filed a report with the Eagle Eyes. As it turned out, Lady Reirin had briefly fainted from the cold, but she was otherwise unharmed. I apologize for the commotion.”

Her unfaltering response put the girls’ worries to rest. Coupled with the way Keigetsu was shivering, it was a flawless explanation.

“Unharmed, you say?” Alas, Shin-u furrowed his shapely brow, only to touch Keigetsu’s temple with a slender finger. “That doesn’t explain this wound.”

He was a sharp one indeed.

When Keigetsu froze up, this time Leelee stammered an excuse in her stead. “Wh-when she passed out from the cold, she smacked her head on the table! It’s swelling a little, but it’s only a scrape! Stone tables are too hard for their own good, huh? Ha ha ha!”

One look at the stone table seemed to satisfy Shin-u, fortunately enough, but as soon as he turned back to Keigetsu, he smoothly lifted her into his arms. “We should get that looked at.”

“Huh?!” Suddenly finding herself in the handsome captain’s embrace,

Keigetsu's voice cracked with dismay. "Wh-whatever for? I need only return to my palace and rest…"

"It's dangerous to trust an amateur assessment on a head wound. We should have a doctor check it out. I'm going to bring you to His Highness's personal court physician."

"The court physician… Wait, you're taking me to the main palace?!"

"Yes. His Highness has already heard word of your disappearance. We'd better report to him while we're there."

"To His Highness?!"

The mere mention of him drained the blood from Keigetsu's face. She flashed back to the first switch, when he'd terrorized her with his dragon's qi, and the switch in Unso, when he'd forced her to cross a river. Every time Gyoumei saw through one of their body swaps, somehow *she* ended up with the short end of the stick instead of the reckless Reirin. As a result, the bet aside, her instincts were ringing alarm bells at the prospect of being brought before him mid-swap.

Yes, she could picture it already. Even if the swap itself had been a rescue attempt, she had sat on her hands and let Reirin push her luck, ultimately waltzing back to the pavilion all on her own. He was going to be absolutely furious with her. Keigetsu knew this because if she were in his shoes, she'd be the one yelling, "Why didn't you keep a better eye on that raging boar?!"

"P-please don't… We mustn't trouble His Highness. W-we should at least save the report for a few days' time."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm taking you to him because he's already troubled. He's been fretting enough to kick up a storm, so the sooner we see him, the better. Is it okay if I start running? I promise I won't jostle you around."

Shin-u pulled Keigetsu even closer, but this was no time to be enchanted. Tears sprang to her eyes as the situation deteriorated faster than a boulder rolling down a hill.

"Stop, Captain!" she said, clinging to his shoulders and shaking his robe. "I don't want anyone making such a fuss over me!"

“Please, Captain! Allow me to attend to my own mistress!”

“Please reconsider! Allowing His Highness proximity to one of his Maidens during the Rite of Reverence will invite unwanted speculation!”

Tousetsu and Leelee made their own desperate attempts to stop him, but Shin-u was too loyal to his duties to give them the time of day.

“I know of several hidden passages that connect to the main palace. It is important for His Highness to see that Lady Reirin is safe and sound. Court ladies are to remain in their respective palaces.”

And thus did he set off at a brisk pace, handling Keigetsu as if she were light as a feather.

The “hidden passage” Shin-u chose was a special tunnel for Eagle Eyes to pass through when bringing confidential inner court matters before the imperial family. It was a narrow passageway tucked away in the walls of the inner court, which could be used to reach the main palace without being seen from the outside. Though brawny guards were stationed at regular intervals along the way, one look at Shin-u’s face was all it took to make them bow their heads and hang back against the walls.

As such, Keigetsu had spent the entire journey cradled in Shin-u’s arms without a single interruption. Even after holding a grown woman for such a long time, his muscles didn’t so much as quiver. The breastplate he pressed her against, perhaps in an attempt to stabilize her, was equally solid.

When Keigetsu chanced an upward glance, she found his azure eyes and well-defined nose very close to her own.

“What is it?” he asked.

“N-nothing.”

“How are you feeling?”

“…Fine.”

The rhythmic up-and-down movements had a calming effect on Keigetsu. At the same time, her heart had begun to race for an unrelated reason: She was

spending an awful lot of time in close proximity to a gorgeous gentleman.

I-I see how it is… The captain barely seems to register my existence, but he'll react the moment Kou Reirin glances at him. Not to mention starting a conversation of his own accord.

The slightest of movements would cause him to look in her direction. Expressionless though he was, it was clear from his behavior how much he cared for her.

You know, I don't mind having a looker to rival His Highness so worried about… No, scratch that.

Her mind had almost wandered in an untoward direction, but she scrambled to get her thoughts back on track. She was a Maiden. The crown prince's betrothed. Even entertaining the thought of something so blasphemous could earn her divine punishment.

Calm down, Shu Keigetsu. This is no time to be bewitched. Don't forget that His Highness is waiting at the end of this tunnel, she told herself in a panic, her heart fluttering over the body heat of the man pressing so very close.

Indeed, Prince Gyoumei was the man imbued with a tremendous dragon's qi. His perfectly proportioned features and masculine good looks were enough to command a crowd all on their own, but he also possessed a powerful magnetism that could take one's breath away just by meeting his gaze. As someone with magic, Keigetsu became a nervous wreck in his presence.

During the Unso trip, His Highness saw through our switch in an instant. I have to be more careful this time. I should refrain from conversation as much as possible, so I have fewer chances to mess up…

For the umpteenth time, her mind ran through what not to do.

In the past, for all he was a born ruler, Gyoumei had seemed too arrogant to pay much attention to those around him. But ever since the Lion's Judgment, he seemed to be exercising more prudence. Once teeming with yang energy and bursting with confidence, he had now learned to closely observe others and cast them concerned glances.

That was no doubt a wonderful sign of growth for him, but it also happened

to be very inconvenient for Keigetsu at the moment.

I wonder if I can get him to let me go before he can bring me to His Highness…

Having lost her confidence, Keigetsu began to look for an escape route out of habit. For instance, she could claim that her condition had taken a turn for the worse. She could get off the hook by insisting that she wanted to see a doctor before explaining the situation to the prince. Heck, she could even go for broke and pass out.

Or she *could*, if she hadn't told Shin-u she was fine only moments ago. It would be too implausible for her to have a sudden fainting spell.

But considering how much he cares for Kou Reirin, perhaps he'd overreact?

She glanced up, and her eyes caught Shin-u's again. He looked deadly serious.

"Is something wrong?"

Keigetsu saw herself at the center of the world reflected in his blue irises. An indescribable rush of ecstasy and excitement came over her.

Yes! I'm positive this man is in love with Kou Reirin.

She thought back to the exchange between Shin-u and "Shu Keigetsu" she'd witnessed via flame call on the trip. By then, he'd already known that it was really Kou Reirin he was talking to. And knowing that, he had still approached her. He had touched her skin, grabbed a lock of her hair, and threatened to take her as his wife.

A dark obsession smoldered in those blue eyes of his, too strong to be suppressed.

He wants to make Kou Reirin his, even if it means pushing his half brother aside.

And right now, she was that very same "Kou Reirin."

Keigetsu had never felt particularly offended that the captain wouldn't spare the real her a passing glance. Yet here she was now, attracting the attention of such a gorgeous man, and the thought intoxicated her. She, whom no one had ever bothered to notice, was soaking up the passionate gaze of the entire Maiden Court's envy!

Elated, Keigetsu nuzzled her cheek against Shin-u's chest. "Erm…" she began in a fragile voice.

Instantly, she felt his grip on her tighten a fraction. The eyes staring down at her widened in surprise. They held ill-concealed dismay—as well as immense joy.

With a faint sigh, Keigetsu feebly murmured, "I'm feeling a good deal worse all of a sudden…"

She shot him a dewy-eyed gaze—or thought about it, at least, before deciding that it would be overkill. Still, it wouldn't be out-of-character for Kou Reirin to glance up at him with a hint of guilt, and seeing the slightest of frowns on that beautiful face was sure to turn any man to jelly.

"Won't you please take me to the physician, Captain? I'm scared to see His Highness…" She adopted a slightly less formal tone and pressed a hand to Shin-u's breastplate, as if to emphasize that he was the only one she could rely on.

The captain fell silent, never once slowing his pace as he strode down the passage. Eventually, he muttered, "That took me by surprise."

"Huh?"

The look he gave her was the definition of intense. Upon closer inspection, she could see that there were rings of dark indigo at the center of his blue irises, with flecks of almost silver scattered around them. His chillingly beautiful face was reminiscent of ice, and as it slowly drew closer, a strand of lustrous black hair spilled over his shoulder and landed on Keigetsu.

The two were close enough for their breaths to mingle.

W-was he surprised by the intensity of the impulses surging through him…?

But his next words made Keigetsu freeze. "It's amazing how much someone's expressions can change when the person inside is different."

"Pardon?"

"I suggest you don't come on to me with Lady Reirin's face, and especially not in front of His Highness. Otherwise, you'll have no right to complain when your head is on the chopping block, *Shu Keigetsu*."

“Wha…”

He’d figured it out.

S-since when, exactly?!

She was so sure he’d been shooting her impassioned looks until just moments ago.

The corners of Shin-u’s mouth lifted in a loose grin. It wasn’t the tender sort of smile reserved for a precious girl but a sneer at a shameful woman who had been caught in the act of flirting, and Keigetsu knew it. Tears welled in her eyes. It was so humiliating. Had it been so wrong of her to fawn over another hunk when she had a fiancé in the crown prince?

Divine punishment came way too soon!

The overwhelming embarrassment and distress put Keigetsu on the offensive. “Hah… What a creep! I noticed you’d been staring at me for a while now. So, what, you were just inspecting me the whole time?!”

“I wasn’t staring. It doesn’t take great powers of observation to notice such indecent behavior.”

“Hmm, I wonder about that! I could’ve sworn I felt you boring holes into me with your gaze!”

The fact that his hold on her remained nothing less than respectful, even after he had discovered her true identity, only heightened her irritation. Physically helpless, Keigetsu stepped up the intensity of her verbal onslaught. “You only found out who I am because of how intently you watch ‘Kou Reirin.’ To a degree that goes far beyond what your duty requires, I’d say!”

It was too late to stop herself now. Keigetsu threatened Shin-u with whatever came to mind, searching for the words that would instill the most fear in him. “If you report to His Highness that you saw through our switch, it will only make him question your loyalty. It’s nothing short of disrespectful for a man to look at his brother’s betrothed with such passion!”

“…”

“Say, why don’t I let you in on a little something? His Highness already knows

that you made advances on Kou Reirin in the Untouchable Village. *You're* the one in danger of finding his head on the chopping block," she said, careful to punctuate each and every word. "Know your place. It's a crime for you to lust after Kou Reirin."

Shin-u silently furrowed his gorgeous brow. The notoriously apathetic man was actually reacting to her words. If she could just push the right buttons, she might be able to force him to keep his mouth shut about the switch.

Confident that she was on the right track, Keigetsu took an even more emphatic tone. "You heard me. You would never be permitted to gaze—"

"Your voice is grating on the ears, Shu Keigetsu."

His voice held the chill of a blade to the throat. Keigetsu instinctively shut her mouth in the face of his spine-chilling aura.

Not long after, the wall sconces increased in number, and the passageway became brighter and wider. It seemed they'd made it to the main palace.

At what appeared to be the final barrier, they were greeted by a surprising watchman. "Oh, Reirin! Thank you for tracking her down, Captain!"

He was wearing a military uniform with a yellow motif and carrying what was presumably his most trusted weapon, a longsword. The man who rushed over in relief the moment he caught sight of Keigetsu was none other than the second son of the Kou clan, Kou Keishou.

"I was so relieved your fight was finally going to be over! You can't imagine how devastated I was when you went missing right afterward! If it hadn't been my turn to stand guard here today, I would have marched right into the inner court myself. His Highness has been anxiously awaiting your arrival." Keishou came closer, wearing his concern on his sleeve. The moment he saw "Kou Reirin's" wounds, he exaggeratedly lamented, "This is a disaster! Your fair skin has been damaged! But never fear, Reirin. I will bring you to the greatest physician in the kingdom at once, even if it means blowing off His—"

But then he suddenly trailed off and stared long and hard at Keigetsu's face. "Hm…?"

The warmth left his eyes as he narrowed them in suspicion.

“No… Something’s off…” He tilted his head as far as it could go to one side, then asked before Keigetsu could utter a single word, “Did you two switch bodies again?”

How sharp can one person be?!

This time, she hadn’t even outed herself with her flirting; one look at her face had been enough to give her away. Was this the power of sibling love at work?

Whatever the case, Keigetsu trembled before Keishou’s unfathomable powers of observation.

Still, the crucial difference between him and Shin-u was that Keishou was a good deal more sympathetic to Keigetsu after all they’d been through together during the trip to Unso. He flicked his gaze to the door behind him, took Keigetsu from Shin-u, and asked in a whisper, “What on earth happened? Are you all right? Shall we keep the switch a secret from His Highness for the time being?”

Of course, he had likely offered in consideration for the ongoing “bet” between his sister and the crown prince.

“In the main palace, we ordinary military officers have more sway than the captain of the Eagle Eyes,” he went on. “I could dismiss him without much trouble. What would you like me to do?”

Even if the gesture didn’t come from a place of genuine concern, in that moment, Keishou was Keigetsu’s sole beacon of hope.



Keigetsu thrust herself forward in a fluster. “P-please do—”

“There’s no point in trying,” Shin-u interrupted her from behind. He swung his arms idly, now freed of their burden, then added in a bored tone, “She’s the sort to blush and nestle against me as soon as our eyes meet. No matter how you try to hide it, it won’t take His Highness long to figure out the truth.”

“You…” Keigetsu’s face twitched at the scathing assessment. “You didn’t have to put it like that!”

“Oho?” came an interjection from beside her.

Sensing a sinister note to the word, Keigetsu whirled around in a fluster. Keishou had a smile on his face, but there was something awfully daunting about it.

“How very interesting.”

“Huh?”

“So the captain is your type. I see.”

Both his tone and gait were as breezy as could be—but she could tell he was in a terrible mood. Why was that?

“Uhh…”

“He has a point. If His Highness is bound to find out one way or another, we might as well come clean and get it over with. Ready? It’s time to give the prince a thorough and expeditious report on the circumstances leading up to the switch.”

“Wh-why?! You just said you’d keep it a secret for me!”

His abrupt change of tune had Keigetsu sweating bullets. Unfazed, Keishou steadied her with one hand and pushed the door open with the other, grunting with the effort.

A blast of crisp winter night air rushed in to greet them. The door led to a lookout tower with an excellent view. Wind and cold streamed in through the sizable windows.

“Yes, I’d say so,” came yet another voice.

A pair of elegant shoes clicked against the floor. Keigetsu was halfway to tears, wondering how much misfortune she would have to endure before the night was over.

“Y-Your Highness…”

“Your voice is loud enough to carry through the door, Shu Keigetsu.”

A bolt of lightning streaked the sky outside the window.

Dressed for bed and with his hair down, Gyoumei had a seductively masculine air about him, but needless to say, Keigetsu was in no state of mind to be mesmerized.

A thunderclap cracked in the distance. Though there had been a clear view of the moon only moments ago, a storm was rapidly approaching—and gathering right over the exalted one’s head.

As Keigetsu went white as a ghost, Gyoumei smiled ever so tenderly. “I agree with Keishou. Why don’t you give me a thorough and expeditious report on what led to the switch…and what manner of reckless stunt Reirin has pulled this time?”

Chapter 3:
Reirin Infiltrates

KASUI GLANCED HEAVENWARD as a bolt of lightning streaked across the winter night sky. A few beats later, thunder rumbled in the distance. Its striking resemblance to the howl of an angry beast gave her a sinking feeling about the events to come.

"Thunder in the middle of winter? There was no sign of a storm only moments ago…"

"No need to fuss, Lady Kasui. We should count ourselves lucky that it lit up our path. Look over there. Those ruts were made by a cart carrying casks of wine."

In contrast to the frowning Kasui, Shu Keigetsu—or rather, Kou Reirin in her form—cheerfully pointed to the ground.

"It looks like they continue north from here," she went on. "We can't afford to carry a torch with pursuers on our trail, so we're fortunate to have a natural source of light to guide our way."

Her gaze was fixed on a patch of earth that had been tinted for a fleeting moment with the glow of lightning. There, a cart used to carry wine casks had left its tracks in the dirt. Alongside them were the unmistakable prints of a court lady's shoes.

"When I was submerged in the well earlier, I heard people hauling liquor and utensils through the area…is what 'Kou Reirin' said. The sounds came from her left and right, and she was facing eastward as she drowned. In other words, the footsteps were moving from south to north." Undaunted by the unseasonable rumble of thunder, Reirin's eyes shone with a growing conviction. "There's a small watchtower on the northern fringes of the court. It's tucked away in the bushes of a deserted area, and unlike the pavilions, it's surrounded by walls on all sides, so it's difficult to find even with a fire in hand. It's the perfect place for a secret banquet."

Indeed. The two girls were in the process of pinpointing the location where either the Kins or Rans would be hosting the shaman.

Kasui, who had disguised herself as a court lady to snoop around the inner court, claimed to have seen some fine fruit wine and the ingredients for a vegetarian dish being delivered to the kitchen. Judging by the quantity, the food was meant for a small group. That, combined with how tightly the information had been kept under wraps, suggested that the banquet was a confidential one.

Most likely, sometime soon—perhaps even that very night—a banquet would be held in the shaman's honor.

In terms of personality, the only two who would conspire to win over the judge of such a solemn ceremony were Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran. The pair was probably planning to hold a banquet in private and bribe the shaman there.

Despicable an act though that was, it worked to Kasui's advantage to have the shaman, who rarely visited the inner court, show up so lightly guarded. She just had to sneak into the venue of the banquet and abduct the old woman as soon as she saw her chance. Then she would interrogate her about the events of three years ago.

Why had Bushou been apprehended under false charges? Who had ordered her arrest? Why had the Kin and Ran court ladies resigned from their posts all at once? Who had permitted the Trial by Fire to be conducted, and why had the shaman—who wielded more influence than even the empress—allowed such injustice to transpire? Who among the Pure Consort, the Virtuous Consort, and the shaman had been involved, and to what extent?

Once she'd gotten to the bottom of the matter, depending on the answers, Kasui planned to take her revenge right then and there. Unfortunately, she had no idea where the banquet in question was going to be held.

After leaving the storehouse, Kasui had been ready to head straight for the kitchen when Reirin abruptly snapped to attention. "A secret banquet for a small group…? Oh!"

She had recalled the noises she'd heard while she was trapped in the well.

No one would transport liquor and utensils in such cold weather without a compelling reason. In which case, it stood to reason that the dinner would be held somewhere outside. It hadn't been difficult to connect the dots between the court ladies' ruckus and Kasui's "banquet." Nearly drowning in a well certainly had its perks.

Thus did the duo make their way north, relying on the occasional flash of lightning as they kept their eyes glued to the ground.

"Oh, look, here comes another flash! How convenient. Come along, it's this way. Let us make haste."

Reirin got the sense that the Heavens were on her side.

When she cheerfully took Kasui's arm, the Gen Maiden's face fell apologetically. "I'm sorry to ask so much of you. I can't believe you're accompanying me all the way to the banquet venue. It's not as though you're getting anything out of this."

All traces of maturity and composure had vanished from Kasui's expression, leaving diffidence and confusion in their place. It was quite possible that this was a better reflection of her true nature.

The sight of the eldest Maiden acting so timid drew a giggle from Reirin. "I've come too far to back out now. Besides, if your speculation about the Kins or Rans trying to buy off the lady shaman is correct, that's plenty of reason for me to get involved. I do happen to be part of a rival clan."

As a matter of fact, Reirin hadn't planned on letting the shaman, the Kins, and the Rans get any closer.

Leelee warned me that the Ran clan is plotting to bring me down in the final trial.

She thought back to when Leelee had visited the pavilion to talk some sense into her. The redhead had claimed that the Ran clan was conspiring against her. In the end, Reirin had never read the letter from Keigetsu, nor had she had the time to get the full story, but if the Rans were planning to ruin her during the final trial, it was entirely possible that they might bribe the shaman to falsify her evaluation.

And judging by her behavior during the first trial, Lady Houshun isn't happy about that.

"I've already picked the daffodil."

An image of Houshun speaking without her affected stutter, allowing a glimpse of her true intellect to shine through, flitted across Reirin's mind. That had probably been her idea of a warning—a hint that she had mixed poison into the liquid face paint. It was a roundabout piece of advice that skirted the line of what Reirin might or might not pick up on, the sort that left things to chance—and that wasn't the Ran Maiden's style at all.

Lady Houshun has been eager to defeat me with her own intellect, and I was under the impression that she hated the Virtuous Consort. So why would she fall in line with clan policy and plot to sabotage me now*?*

It didn't take Reirin long to arrive at the answer: The consort had forced her Maiden to act against her will.

Reirin wasn't sure what had transpired between Virtuous Consort Ran and Houshun, but whatever the case, she had no intention of going down without a fight.

Speaking of consorts forcing their Maidens' hands, there's also Lady Seika.

She reflected on Seika's behavior as well. When she had looked down from the stage during the first trial, the Kin Maiden's face had been conspicuously pale. In fact, she had been acting strangely ever since their conversation under the tent. During her visit to Reirin's pavilion, she had spent the entire time staring at the floor beside the Pure Consort. *Her*, that noble girl who had always stood with her head held high.

Moreover, she had seemed deeply uncomfortable about corroborating the Pure Consort's claims. At the time, Reirin had been too fixated on her fight with Keigetsu to notice, but now that she had come to her senses, she realized just how odd Seika's behavior had been.

The girl had seemed conflicted—perhaps, say, due to a guilty conscience.

Did Lady Seika know that the tent was going to collapse? She convinced me to be the last one to leave, only to go ashen with guilt once the disaster came to

pass. Is that really a plausible scenario?

After giving it some thought, the answer Reirin arrived at was affirmative. On one side, there was the greedy and cold-blooded consort, and on the other, the Maiden who couldn't defy her despite her scruples. Assuming that Seika had been ordered to sabotage Reirin and reluctantly complied, it all added up.

I remember the looks the Virtuous Consort and the Pure Consort shot me when I gazed down at them from the stage…

Reirin hadn't missed the brief flash of surprise in their eyes or the bitter glares that followed. The same went for the horrified looks of the two Maidens beside them.

I made up my mind to get to the bottom of the matter, only to leave everything hanging.

It was stunning how useless the last few days of heartache had rendered her. Though deeply ashamed of her blunder, Reirin had found her resolve by the time she next blinked. All the more reason she had to recover the lost ground.

"Don't mind me. I have my own agenda here."

She smiled with a burst of determination, at which Kasui fell silent, looking more and more discomfited.

"You're an enigma," the older girl murmured at length. "To tell the truth, I used to look down on you. You were always yelling at those beneath you, and it never seemed like you put much effort into anything. I never would have imagined that you were so brave and considerate all along."

"P-please, you flatter me!"

"No… In hindsight, you *have* demonstrated those qualities on a few other occasions. You got angry on your court lady's behalf during the Ghost Festival, and you performed a magnificent dance for the Harvest Festival. Frankly, I was impressed enough to consider you a match for Lady Reirin."

Reirin's smile stiffened, and a cold sweat ran down her face.

Yes, I'd imagine so! Since I am *Reirin!*

Now this was a bind. Kasui had managed to zero in on the times when she

and Keigetsu had swapped.

“I-Indeed. The truth is that I work very hard behind closed doors. And I perform strongest under pressure. Wouldn’t you agree that my speech for the first trial was quite impressive?”

That one was Keigetsu’s own accomplishment. If Kasui insisted on praising her, Reirin prayed she would recall that example instead.

“True,” Kasui said with a nod, then cocked her head to one side. “But that felt different somehow. It came across more like strength born of desperation. Though you demonstrated the same courage as when you danced onstage or exchanged blows with me in the storehouse just now, it was a bit less… Forgive me, I’m not very good at putting my impressions into words.”

“Oh, that’s quite all right. In fact, it’s more than all right! You’re free to keep the thought to yourself indefinitely.” Reirin pushed through with a strained smile.

“Fair enough… Still, I can’t shake the shock I felt when you blocked my blow with the inkstone. That was a well-rehearsed, coolheaded maneuver. It felt incongruous with your emotional, blustering persona.”

“You’re overthinking it. Don’t they say a woman’s heart is as fickle as the autumn sky? There are times when I’d rather let my emotions take over and scream, and there are times when I’d rather calmly parry an inkstone. That’s all there is to it.”

Even the girl in question wasn’t sure what she was babbling about.

Blinking at the sight of Reirin’s eyes darting wildly back and forth, Kasui simply nodded. “If you say so.”

She actually bought it!

A wave of relief washed over Reirin. If Keigetsu had been there, no doubt she would have retorted, “Don’t be ridiculous,” her face twitching.

“I do. See? It’s all very simple.”

“Yes. I’ll take your word for it.”

And indeed, Kasui resumed walking, seemingly unconcerned with any

misgivings she might have.

“Your hand is warm, and that’s all that matters to me.” Part of the way, she stopped to toss Reirin an ingenuous smile over her shoulder. “I trust you.”

It was such a hopelessly pure and earnest thing to say that Reirin instinctively clutched at her chest.

Oh no. Lady Kasui is too cute…

She was starting to understand how the girl’s late sister had felt. No doubt Kasui had idolized her older sibling in the same innocent manner.

Some things were precious, and others weren’t. It was in the blood of the Gen clan to mercilessly cast aside all outsiders, intent on providing warmth to the sole possession in their grasp. That warped, unrestrained, even infantile way of being had an endearing quality that made it hard to repudiate.

I must be sure to protect Lady Kasui’s heart as well.

The recent uptick in people she had to protect and dote on had Reirin all fired up.

“I’m happy to hear it. Let us be off, then.”

The pair exchanged nods before swiftly advancing toward the watchtower. The surroundings were thick with bushes, and several unique rock formations loomed overhead. Had there been a clear view of the moon, it might have made for a magnificent sight, but the sky had been obscured by a film of clouds.

Eager to make their move before it started raining, Reirin and Kasui hid the sound of their footsteps and pressed their backs up against the tower wall. The first floor consisted of a stone corridor, while the second and third floors had rooms with large observation windows. If someone was going to hold a banquet there, it would be on one of the upper floors.

Just then, an exceptionally bright bolt of lightning flashed across the skies, accompanied by the screams of women coming from a higher part of the tower.

“Eep! Not another thunderbolt!”

“Save us, Lady Anni!”

Kasui and Reirin automatically exchanged glances. “Ah!”

The high-pitched shriek and childish whine belonged to none other than Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran.

After nodding to each other, the two Maidens crept into the first-floor corridor in perfect sync. Their plan had been to knock out any guards they encountered, but as luck would have it, the handful of court ladies stationed around the area had dozed off in their chairs—perhaps exhausted from the long banquet. Amid the chorus of soft snoring, the only movement was the lazy flicker of a candle placed at the bottom of the stairs to light the way.

The girls exchanged glances. Kasui went in first, with Reirin following close behind.

And so they began their silent ascent up the narrow staircase that led to the second floor.

“Goodness, all this thunder is giving me such a fright!”

“I couldn’t agree more. Why, it’s even started to rain! Here, Lady Anni. Have another drink to keep warm.”

Kasui and Reirin crouched atop the stairs, straining their eyes to see inside the room peeking over the landing. Candles were lit here and there along the walls, and the table was practically buried under plates of food. The air was thick with the scent of high-grade incense and the suffocating stench of alcohol.

Three chairs were set out. In the middle was Anni, seated upon the most luxurious of them all. Pure Consort Kin sat to her left, and Virtuous Consort Ran to her right.

As befitted a watchtower, the chairs and tables faced the window. With their backs to the door, none of the trio seemed to notice the intruders in their midst. The consorts had obviously done a thorough job of clearing out the room, as their head court ladies were nowhere to be found.

The Pure Consort—Reiga—held up a bottle of alcohol, which she sloppily poured into Anni’s cup. “One cask of this vintage wine is worth an entire

mansion. When I heard you liked strong liquor, the whole Kin clan set out to find the finest of offerings."

Diehard merchant that she was, Reiga didn't stop schmoozing for even the few seconds it took to pour the wine.

From Anni's other side, the Virtuous Consort—Hourin—was quick to undermine her efforts in a cloying tone. "Dear me, Pure Consort Kin. This thunder could put a damper on even the most exquisite of liquors. Shouldn't we have held the banquet somewhere other than a watchtower? I feel sorry for Lady Anni."

Apparently, the Pure Consort was the one who picked the venue. Hourin criticized her arrangements under the guise of apologizing to Anni.

"Don't be silly, Consort Ran," Reiga argued in the voice of someone talking down to a child, giving her ample bosom a disdainful jiggle. "The miraculous Lady Anni can't be compared to the likes of us. She would never cower in fear of lightning. Isn't that right?" she prompted Anni, peering into the old woman's face with a gleam of cajolery in her eyes. "You are favored by the Great Ancestor. I can't imagine how many unfortunate women have sought help from the talismans you so generously provide. Water that can dissolve iron, drugs that can bring pleasure… I am truly awed by the many 'miracles' you can perform. I hope to never stop sharing in the wonders."

Her wording clearly carried a double meaning. She spoke like a shrewd merchant who knew there was a trick to the "miracles" but nevertheless feigned ignorance to heap praise on the performer.

Hourin inserted herself into the conversation again, this time tugging at the shaman's robes and purring, "She's right, Lady Anni. You are the almighty shaman—His Majesty's most trusted associate. You need only name the most auspicious direction, and the palace there will be sure to prosper." Well into her cups at this point, she didn't even bother to lower her voice as she pleaded with the old woman. "His Majesty so rarely comes to visit these days. The eastern palace is drowning in solitude."

A soft huff escaped Anni's lips. She was either smiling or sneering, though it was impossible to tell which from behind.

The elderly shaman drained her cup, shoved it back at the Pure Consort, and croaked, “To be of service to the most exalted figures in our kingdom is the best a lowly crone like me could ask for.” Then she paused to give the two women a slow, sweeping glance. “That said, performing those ‘miracles’ can take quite a toll on these old bones.”

“I’m sure it does.”

Picking up on her meaning, the two consorts fished through their sleeves, then offered what they’d retrieved to Anni.

“I imagine it would take a decent sum of money to take the edge off your fatigue. Please allow me to be of assistance.”

Reiga was holding out a deed that probably had an exorbitant figure written on it.

“This is the largest sum I could prepare… However, in the hope that it might beguile your ennui to read about the goings-on of the inner court, I also compiled a summary of the most recent developments within our walls.”

Perhaps having anticipated she would be no match for a Kin in a battle of riches, Hourin held out a thick tome alongside a modest bag of gold.

Aha.

Everything clicked into place as Reirin observed the trio’s conversation. She was indeed witnessing a bribery scheme in real time.

The consorts provided the shaman with money and confidential information pertaining to the inner court. In exchange, the shaman gave them dubious drugs and passed on “oracles” that worked in their favor to the emperor. The talismans probably served as receipts of purchase.

Water that can dissolve iron, hm?

Reirin surmised that the tool used to bring down the tent had been procured from the shaman. It must have been quite convenient for her to be able to come and go from the inner court without arousing suspicion.

“I appreciate your efforts. And what do we have here, Consort Kin? Your faith appears stronger than ever.”

When Anni exhaled softly upon unfolding the deed, Reiga obsequiously leaned in closer. “Oh, yes. I’m not the only one this time. My Maiden, Seika, would also like to receive your blessing. She has been giving her all for the Rite of Reverence,” she said in a sickly-sweet voice. A vicious smile rising to her lips, she added, “She’s a very good girl. I’ve worked hard to teach her who she ought to obey. I imagine she’ll become a loyal servant to you in the future.”

“Is that so?” Hourin cut in, incredulous. “I’d always taken Lady Seika for a rather strong-minded girl. I’m amazed you managed to bring her to heel. Quite impressive.”

It was a question disguised as a compliment, but Reiga’s smile only widened in response.

“Hardly. She’s a bright girl. Though she was a touch reluctant at first, once I showed her the proper way of things, she was quick to get the picture.” She then went on the counterattack, narrowing her eyes at the Virtuous Consort. “In that respect, Lady Houshun seems too timid to even think about talking back. I’m jealous.”

Reading between the lines, that comment meant: *Your Maiden is a pushover who doesn’t have the brains to think for herself.*

Despite how sensitive the Virtuous Consort usually was to that sort of snide remark, for once, she simply broke into a smile. “True. She really is an obedient girl. It makes my life much easier.”

For some reason, she looked down at her carefully manicured nails in satisfaction.

Reiga scrunched her brow into the slightest of frowns, but she soon turned to the shaman and put the ingratiating smile back on her face. “As I was saying, Lady Anni, we Kins, our Maiden included, are your faithful servants. Please do let us know if you require any assistance. We will do everything in our power to aid you.”

Hourin was quick to chime in. “Indeed. We Rans may not have the Kou clan’s massive influence, but that makes it all the easier for us to maneuver without getting caught.”

Annoyed by the interruption, Pure Consort Kin shot Virtuous Consort Ran a slight glare. “Is that so? I’ve spent a fortune to prove my devotion to Lady Anni, but when have *you* ever ‘maneuvered’ for her sake?”

“Hee hee. What sort of question is that? Who do you think you have to thank for covering up your money-crazed shows of ‘devotion’?” the Virtuous Consort shot back without so much as a flinch.

The two of them were so clearly drunk that their conversation was gradually stripped of any inhibition or euphemism.

“Oh, please. *I’m* the one who’s always done the work to accommodate Lady Anni. This banquet is a perfect example. All you did was take me up on my proposal.”

“I think not. Recall how I polished your half-baked idea into something worthwhile? And three years ago, you would have faced an interrogation had I not hidden who was responsible.”

That remark drew a gasp from Kasui, who had been eavesdropping on the discussion alongside Reirin.

“Three years ago, hm? Yes, I remember that.”

Oblivious to the audience behind them, the consorts became absorbed in their conversation—one scowling, the other grinning.

“You can’t blame me for that. Lady Anni was insistent that we silence her within the day.”

“The request was to kill a court lady-in-training, wasn’t it? Surely you had the authority to execute her without a trial if you so pleased, Lady Anni. It was kind of you to go through the motions to get rid of her.”

“Not quite. If memory serves, that court lady-in-training used to come and go from the Worthy Consort’s palace, and you know how scary the Gens can be when they’re angry. I suggested she invent a reason just to be on the safe side.”

“Right. It’s all coming back to me.”

The consorts talked about ending another person’s life as nonchalantly as if it were an unwanted accessory they’d thrown in the trash.

“Ggh…!”

“You must stay strong, Lady Kasui!” Reirin pleaded in a whisper as Kasui trembled with rage.

Getting as much information as possible was their current priority.

“If I remember correctly…Lady Anni had come to hand out talismans that day.” Pure Consort Kin threw herself against the back of her chair, her head swaying drunkenly. Her better judgment dissolved in alcohol, she began to recount the past in good spirits. “She had arranged to pick up a ‘package’ from the inner court while she was here. Unfortunately, the court lady-in-training showed up at just the wrong moment and saw what the ‘package’ was. Why, I’d never seen our lady shaman in such a panic before.”

She grinned, shooting the shaman beside her a teasing look. Anni tipped back her cup and said nothing.

“We had our favorite Eagle Eyes take her into custody right away, but she was awfully calm for a little girl. And when I conducted my own personal investigation, it turned out that she was a court lady-in-training who had been making frequent visits to the Palace of the Darkest Edge! I didn’t want to prolong the investigation and risk incurring the wrath of that possessive Worthy Consort. I was the one who stepped up and called for her to be killed immediately.”

“Excuse me. Before that, *I* looked through the court lady-in-training’s garments,” Hourin interjected. She, too, was rocking back and forth, spilling wine from her cup as she sipped. “I’m the one who found the ornamental sword hidden on her person—*and* the one who came up with the brilliant idea to spin that into a charge of treason. If she had meant His Majesty harm, no one would question why she was executed the same day she was arrested.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Consort Ran. I’m the one who thought to conduct the Trial by Fire. It’s permissible to hold rituals in the inner court with only women in attendance. The Lion’s Judgment can’t be held without a lion, but for the Trial by Fire, all we needed was Lady Anni, who just so happens to have command over fire. We were already scheduled to hold the regular talisman exchange within the hour, so the timing couldn’t have been more

perfect.”

The two consorts had been glaring at one another as they vied for the credit, but at some point, their shoulders began to shake with mirth. Apparently, they found something amusing about the whole affair.

“My, but did we have our work cut out for us! First, we had to get our story straight with Lady Anni, and then we had to burn that mystical incense in the meeting hall to rile up the court ladies. ‘We have a traitor in our midst!’ Lady Anni said as she held up the sword, putting on the most convincing performance I’ve ever seen. ‘Kill her!’ came the chorus of shouts. Hee hee, it was like a scene right out of a play.”

“I still can’t believe how effective a stimulant Lady Anni’s custom-made mystical incense was. Everyone was so caught up in the heat of the moment that they condemned the ‘accused’ without even stopping to consider the situation. With how hazy their memories of the event were, we were free to tamper with the records as we saw fit. Such a pity that the court lady-in-training’s blade wasn’t a concealed weapon at all but the most beautiful ornamental sword.”

Giggles rang out. The two consorts bent over backward laughing.

“Fair point, Consort Ran. I suppose you *did* do a splendid job of obscuring who said what.”

“Oh, no, Consort Kin. In the end, it was the empress dowager’s gag order that helped us out the most. Thanks to that, the records up and vanished without any work on my part! Hee hee. No doubt her intention was to protect the Gen clan, but *we’re* the ones who ended up reaping all the benefits. How ironic.”

“You said it. It was so cruel of the family to not even make a show of investigating after the fact. Do you think that maybe the Worthy Consort had it out for that court lady-in-training? She was even making trips to the pottery unit like some kind of servant girl.”

They both had the smug attitude of someone confident they had gotten away unscathed.

As the two women cackled together, a complete departure from their earlier

squabbling, Anni said, “It was indeed when she showed her face around the pottery unit that the girl’s luck ran out.” She picked up her cup again and gulped down its contents. “For she foolishly dared to touch the source of my mystic powers.”

Perhaps it was because she was drunk, but her deep voice sounded more slurred than usual.

“I will never fail to eliminate those who cross me. I’m most grateful for your devotion to my cause, venerable consorts.”

These words of thanks were coming from the mighty shaman, she who was allowed to speak her mind to the emperor. A flush spread across the two consorts’ cheeks, and they soon scrambled to butter Anni up from both sides.

“Oh, nonsense! All you did was pass judgment on a wicked soul. We require no thanks for our part.”

“Exactly. You did what was right, Lady Anni. Why, not only did you put out the fire, but you even administered treatment to the sinner. You’re such a gracious lady.”

Anni nodded, satisfied with their responses, then leaned back in her chair. She had let down her guard completely. “The key to the Trial by Fire is the treatment, not the trial itself.”

“Pardon?”

“The fate of the wicked is sealed not by the flames but by how much impurity is introduced to their burns.”

Treating a wound prevented “impurities” from entering, increasing one’s chances of survival. Taking her statement to mean the obvious, the two consorts nodded uncertainly and said, “Yes, that’s true.”

But Kasui and Reirin had wildly different responses to what they’d just overheard. They realized that the shaman was implying the exact opposite.

“It was the ‘treatment’ that did her in!”

Bushou’s burns had refused to heal no matter how much medicine she took. Pus had crept over her whole body, and her fever had run high. She had died

not from the burns themselves, but from the impurities rubbed into her wounds under the guise of treatment.

"That blasted shaman! I'll kill her alongside those treacherous consorts!"

Kasui finally cracked and made to bolt up the stairs. Reirin scrambled to cover her mouth from behind, just barely managing to hold her in place.

"You mustn't, Lady Kasui! If you murder three people at once, it will make it very difficult to come to your defense!"

Judging from their conversation, the consorts still didn't know who Bushou really was. They had bought the fake "court lady-in-training" identity the Gen clan had constructed for her, then eliminated her to win the shaman's favor.

While they were guilty of giving unilateral permission to hold a trial and setting fire to someone they knew full well was innocent, the difference in status between consorts and court ladies was such that they could take the ladies' lives with impunity. Moreover, supposing that the shaman really had killed Bushou through her "treatment," there was no evidence besides Anni's own confession. If they apprehended her right then and there, she was unlikely to reveal the trick she'd used, and the two consorts would be more than happy to jump to her defense.

"If we want to arrest her for good, we must either gather material evidence or get her to confess her guilt in a public setting."

"I don't care about arresting her. I'm sending her to the grave."

"You would make Lady Bushou into the sister of a murderer? And willingly provide grounds to wipe out the entire Gen line?"

Kasui had struggled against Reirin's hold, only to let up the moment she heard Bushou's name. "But…"

"That reminds me. Speaking of the wicked," Anni drawled at that precise moment, "there's Kou Reirin. The girl clearly doesn't know her place."

Both the Maidens and the consorts exchanged surprised glances. No one had expected *that* name to come up.

"A common Maiden like her dared to challenge me, the one who hears the

voice of the Great Ancestor, and forced me to retract my words. That is tantamount to blasphemy against the gods themselves. The inner court has no future so long as irreverent girls like her remain in power."

The Pure Consort looked taken aback. "Goodness. Lady Reirin did such a thing?"

"She talked back to our most venerable Lady Anni during the second trial, remember?" said the Virtuous Consort, as if she found the very idea upsetting.

Deep down, the consorts could hardly contain their excitement at this riveting new turn of events. Kou Reirin was the prince's "butterfly," the front-runner to become the next empress. If she were to fall, their own clans would gain the upper hand.

"True. I did find her behavior at the Violet Dragon's Spring quite concerning. Forcing Lady Anni to recognize Shu Keigetsu's composition as an auspice right after she had declared it to be a bad omen? Despicable!"

"Right? The nerve of her to humiliate Lady Anni by making her go back on her words. How does she plan to take responsibility if it truly *was* a harbinger of misfortune?"

"Precisely." Anni nodded in agreement. "She can insult me all she likes, but to bring His Majesty into contact with a bad omen is an act that borders on treason. An impious and brazen girl indeed."

It was a rather far-fetched accusation of "treason." And yet, apparently satisfied with that pretext, the shaman tilted her head to one side as she held out her empty cup.

"It is my humble belief that all traitors should be subjected to the Trial by Fire," she went on. "However, it would behoove us to wait until we have proof of her villainy."

In other words, they needed an equivalent of Bushou's ornamental sword—some sort of planted evidence on which to base their accusations of treason.

"Well now…"

The two consorts jumped at the suggestion almost simultaneously.

“My Seika cares deeply for her friends. Perhaps she’ll pay Lady Reirin a visit soon, since she’s been in such low spirits.” The corners of her eyes generously smeared with vermillion, Reiga wore the smile of a cruel cat. “And perhaps she’ll forget something of hers when she does. Like, say, an arcane sort of doll.”

Basically, she would send Seika off with a cursed doll and have her plant it among Kou Reirin’s belongings. Seika would hate the idea, to be sure, but all Reiga had to do was give it the appearance of a charm for good health. If she smuggled the doll into Kou Reirin’s room, it would stand watch over her from the shadows—if she could get Seika to believe that, the girl who so adored the butterfly would leave the doll behind without even mentioning that it was a get-well present.

“If the doll contained an evil talisman meant to curse His Majesty, it would create quite the scandal. I should warn Seika to ensure that doesn’t happen.”

“My little Houshun can have such a one-track mind when she’s focused on something. It’s quite worrisome.” Hourin pitched forward, loath to let the Pure Consort hog all the limelight. “I imagine she’ll want to pay Lady Reirin a visit as well. But she *is* a daughter of the clan of wood. She loves plants so much that whenever she lays eyes on one of the other clans’ lonely flower gardens, she itches to spruce it up a bit.”

The Virtuous Consort knew that Houshun had no interest in nurturing plant life, but she couldn’t have cared less about that.

“She might plant a gorgeous flower there with all the best of intentions. But did you know, Lady Anni? A great many flowers are toxic to some degree. If the flower she plants happens to be considered poisonous, it could get Lady Reirin into quite a bit of trouble. Something to watch out for.”

Rather than handing over a tool of witchcraft, her idea was to coax Houshun into planting a poisonous flower that could be presented as evidence of rebellion.

“Then again, who could imagine a timid girl like Houshun tampering with another clan’s gardens?”

In other words, no one would even think to suspect her.

“Oho.” Anni’s lips curved into a smug smile as she listened to the consorts’ proposals. “You ladies think of everything. You are bound to find more favor with His Majesty soon enough.”

Seeing that the shaman was pleased, Reiga and Hourin huddled close to her and resumed their toadying.

“Such kind words…”

“In that case…”

“Take this. Burn it in a censer and inhale it, and it will empty your mind of all thoughts. Light it in His Majesty’s bedchamber, and he shall become the most dashing of stallions.”

What she handed over to the consorts, their breaths bated and hands held out in expectation, was a dried leaf of some sort.

“Allow me to return your generosity in kind. I shall grant you twice as much as last time.”

“Goodness! We cannot thank you enough!”

“Thank you so much. I’ve never been able to get the day I first used it out of my head!”

It was hard to make out the shape of the leaves from where Reirin was standing, but she could make an educated guess based on their conversation.

It must be a highly addictive stimulant.

She furrowed her brow, a hint of contempt washing over her.

Just as she had leaned toward the room to get a better look at the leaves, something gave her pause.

“Kou Reirin!”

Sensing that someone had whispered her name, Reirin whipped around to look behind her. Upon closer inspection, the flame of the candle at the bottom of the stairs was swelling and shrinking erratically.

“What are you doing?! Get over here!”

Did this have to happen now*?!*

Lo, it was Keigetsu's flame call.

Fortunately, the court ladies sitting nearby were still asleep, and the pelting rain drowned out the voice emanating from the flame so that no one upstairs—not even Kasui—could hear it. Still, if Keigetsu spoke any louder, there was a natural risk that the people around them would notice.

Panicked, Reirin tiptoed down the stairs. If she didn't wrap up the conversation quickly and hurry back, Kasui would almost certainly fly off the handle.

"Shh! Quiet, Lady Keigetsu! My apologies, but now isn't—"

"Where on earth are you, Kou Reirin? Are you and Gen Kasui still going at it?"

"No. That's over and done with, and the two of us have reached an understanding. At the moment, Lady Kasui and I have infiltrated the place where the targets of her vengeance are hiding. It's a watchtower to the north, and we are at the most critical juncture as we speak."

Keigetsu sucked in a deep breath. *"Wha—"*

Reirin anticipated her screech and preempted her by whispering, "Please don't shout! We'll be in trouble if they realize we're here. Let's both keep it down!"

Her obvious distress succeeded in making Keigetsu swallow her outburst.

Relieved, Reirin moved to blow out the candle. "So if you'll excuse me, I'm going to cut off the ca—"

"Hold it." Keigetsu stopped her in a menacing growl. Or maybe that wasn't the right way to describe it, given the slight tremor in her voice. *"Kou Reirin. A-apologize this instant and explain what's going on."*

"I'm afraid I cannot. I'm otherwise occupied at the moment."

Though Keigetsu's behavior worried her, she was far more concerned about Kasui, who seemed ready to barge into the room any moment now. Her eyes darted frantically back and forth between the upper and lower floors.

"You have to. C'mon, Kou Reirin! Or else His Highness will unleash his thunderous fury upon us!"

“Thunderous?”

What an inquisitive girl Keigetsu was, going so far as to invoke Gyoumei’s name to get an explanation.

Still, Kasui took priority. Her fists were trembling. Would Reirin be capable of holding her back if she sprung at her from behind?

“Oh, let him unleash it. A little lightning to guide our way never hurts.”

“Kou Reirin!”

Kasui was seconds from springing to her feet. This was the make-or-break moment.

On the other side of the flame, Keigetsu had gone past the point of pallor, tears forming in her horror-stricken eyes, but Reirin failed to notice.

“I promise it will be all right. A perfunctory report would only cause him undue worry. In times like these, as Leelee would say, um…”

Kasui was already in motion. This was it. Reirin would force the call to an end if need be.

Spinning back toward the flame, she confidently declared, “We should keep things ‘on the down-low’ from His Highness!”

“Oho.”

Before she had a chance to blow out the fire, she heard the dark voice of a man on the other end and froze in her tracks. “Huh?”

It was a rich baritone that sounded beautiful even over the call. The one who came up beside Keigetsu and stepped into the view of the flame…was none other than Gyoumei himself.

Uh-oh.

This was bad.

*“Give me a break! I got off easy for coming clean, and **you** had to go and ruin it!”*

Seeing Keigetsu cover her face and Reirin’s fiancé break out in a dashing smile told her everything she needed to know.

With that exact timing, a bolt of lightning ripped across the night sky outside the tower, followed by a roar of thunder.

“Do you have anything to say to me, Reirin? I’ll let you go first.”

“Er…”

How curious. His expression was so charming, yet it exuded an ineffable pressure. His offer to hear her side of the story ought to have been magnanimous, but it sounded more like an executioner asking for his victim’s last words.

Reirin put a hand to her cheek, her eyes flitting around the room. “L-Lighting does more than just guide our way. It is a harbinger of a good harvest and provides hope to farmers all over the kingdom.”

“What a novel attempt to get in my good graces.”

There wasn’t so much as a crack in Gyoumei’s smile.

Lady Keigetsu!

What was I *supposed to do?!*

Reirin and Keigetsu communicated through only their gazes, then squeezed their eyes shut in perfect sync. Despite the worrywart prince’s repeated attempts to keep his beloved in check, he had caught her red-handed pulling a reckless stunt in Keigetsu’s body.

I-I am in for such a lecture… He’s going to make me empress for sure… No, one as fussy as my dear cousin would place me under house arrest in a heartbeat… Will Lady Keigetsu end up penalized in the crossfire?

What kind of punishment awaited them now that they had incurred the prince’s wrath?

“You’re really in for it, Reirin.”

His voice came out low and furious. That same moment, the contours of the flame quivered as though the fire itself were cowering in fear. Keigetsu squealed in the background, on the verge of tears.

Reirin recognized this atmosphere. It was the same as when her brothers’

anxieties hit astronomical levels and they sat her down for a no-holds-barred lecture.

I-I'm in trouble…

Bullets of sweat poured down her face. In truth, ever since the failed execution attempt, she had been under the vague impression that her cousin would pardon anything she did, but she really had pushed her luck this time.

And yet, after heaving a deep sigh, Gyoumei spoke in a shockingly mild tone. *"The north watchtower, you said?"*

"Huh?"

"I'm sending the Eagle Eyes over. You two should hurry and evacuate the area. The Eagle Eyes and the crown prince are the ones responsible for apprehending and prosecuting criminals. Everything from this point onward falls under our jurisdiction."

Reirin hesitantly cracked open an eye. "Um… But as regards to my punishment—or rather, our bet…"

"Now isn't the time for that," said Gyoumei, looking disgruntled. *"We can discuss this later. Just get out of there. If you're at risk of being found out, you're free to extinguish the flame, and if you're pressed for time, you can wait to report back to me. Either way, the crown prince and his Maidens are forbidden to have contact for the duration of the Rite of Reverence."*

"Thank you, Your Highness!"

What an understanding man he was. Reirin pitched forward, her eyes sparkling—but then his next words made her go rigid.

"Be prepared to revisit this when the Rite of Reverence is over."

His voice was low enough to hit the floor. Sensing a profound anger within him that belied his calm demeanor, Reirin's smile stiffened.

"Yes, sir…"

"That's all I have to say. Be safe."

Perhaps that was Gyoumei's version of Keigetsu's "die and I'll kill you dead"

threat.

As the prince snuffed out the flame before she could, Reirin was tempted to bury her face in her hands.

Clang!

A loud noise from upstairs prompted her to whirl around.

“What was that?!”

“Who goes there?!”

The women in the room appeared to have heard it too, and the air suddenly crackled with tension.

This is bad!

Kasui must have jumped to her feet, unable to stand by and watch any longer —or so Reirin thought, but no matter how hard she looked, she couldn’t find anyone where Kasui had been crouching at the top of the stairs just moments before.

What?

Just as she had furrowed her brow in disbelief, a voice rang out right next to her ear. “Don’t make a scene.”

Reirin gasped. She tried to spin around in alarm, but she wasn’t quite fast enough. A hand reached out from behind to swiftly cover her mouth, and its powerful grip was enough to yank her entire body backward, dragging her into the darkness behind the stairwell.

“Agh!”

The Maiden struggled, but to no avail.

“Who is it?!”

Just as she was getting into position to bite her assailant’s hand, the Pure Consort came down the stairs with a candle in hand, forcing Reirin to huddle in on herself.

“No one’s there…?”

“Perhaps the wind knocked something over. How disorienting.”

Fortunately, the two consorts stopped after the first few steps, apparently reluctant to go all the way down to the first floor. Unaware that Reirin and the stranger were holding their breath and hiding right under their heels, they waved their candles around before retreating back up the stairs as if they had lost interest.

“Our apologies, Lady Anni. Our imagination was playing tricks on us.”

“Yes. Perhaps all this thunder and rain has put us on edge.”

“Come, let’s keep the drinks flowing.”

The women apologized to the shaman in turn and resumed the banquet.

Reirin finally released the breath she had been holding. That was when she realized the hand that had been clamped over her mouth was already gone. She had assumed that she was under attack, but maybe the opposite was true.

Were they protecting me?

It was too dark to see the mystery person’s face. As Reirin strained her eyes to get a better look, she noticed that Kasui was standing on the stranger’s other side, likewise leveling them a cautious stare. She, too, had been thrust into the cover of darkness.

“What are you doing here…?”

Outside the window, the slowly dying thunder rocked the night sky in one last hurrah. For a brief moment, a flash of lightning illuminated Kasui’s stunned face, along with the person who was silently staring down at the Maiden.

“Worthy Consort Gen?”

Kasui’s tremulous murmur was lost in the next clap of thunder.

***

Afterward, Reirin and Kasui were ushered out into the rain, still debating how to open the conversation. The person walking ahead of them—Worthy Consort Gen Gousetsu—showed not a trace of hesitation in her gait, perhaps having calculated that the rain would wipe away her footprints. She was also clearly

uninterested in entertaining questions as she strode ahead, so the three women spent the entire journey in silence.

“Come in.”

The place they arrived at was a familiar one to Gousetsu and Kasui: a room in the Palace of the Darkest Edge, located not far from the northern watchtower.

“I’ll get a fire started. Have a seat.”

The room, which they had entered through the back door, was apparently the Worthy Consort’s personal chambers. There wasn’t a single court lady in sight—perhaps because they had all hunkered down for fear of the storm—so Gousetsu attempted to light the candles herself. Alas, holding the flint in her wet hands turned out to be an exercise in frustration. After clicking her tongue and roughly casting the rock aside, she instead tossed Reirin and Kasui towels and instructed them to dry themselves.

A long silence hung over the trio.

The first to break the ice was Kasui, clutching the towel in her hands where she sat. “What were you doing there, Worthy Consort Gen?” She rose to her feet, having found her resolve. “And what are you wearing? Why did you drag us away from the scene?”

The girl’s eyes were fixed on the Worthy Consort, who was dressed almost like a military officer. No, it was too simple an outfit to be described as such. Her long hair was pulled up into a single bun atop her head, and underneath her jet-black robes, she wore men’s trousers instead of her usual ruqun. Prior to her arrival at the palace, there had even been a black cloth tied over her mouth, giving her the appearance of an “assassin” more than anything else.

With her tall stature, male attire suited Gousetsu quite well.

“I could ask the same of you,” the Worthy Consort said in lieu of answering the question, narrowing her eyes coolly as she pulled her hair loose from its bun. “What were you doing there?”

“Answer me! Why did you—”

Smack!

A sharp crack filled the room before Kasui could finish her sentence.

It was the sound of the Worthy Consort striking her Maiden across the cheek. She hadn't held back, and even an experienced fighter like Kasui failed to stand her ground, collapsing on her backside into the chair behind her.

As the Maiden pressed a hand to her cheek, the Worthy Consort spoke in a spine-chilling voice. "I told you to keep your head down. You were a fool to bring another clan's Maiden into this."

Reirin nearly forgot to breathe while she observed their exchange. As much as she wanted to intervene, the tension in the air was such that she hesitated to take even a single wrong step. It seemed like a good time to connect to Keigetsu and Gyoumei via flame call, but there was no fire in the vicinity.

"Excuse me…" Reirin began, finally daring to speak.

Gousetsu shot her a stony glance. "Forgive me, Lady Shu Keigetsu, but may I request your silence on this matter?" Despite the polite phrasing, it came across more like a command than a request. "If you do choose to talk, I will be forced to respond accordingly. Isn't it better for you to keep your enemies to a minimum, Lady 'Sewer Rat'?"

Her icy tones didn't seem to carry disdain so much as a desire to spell out the situation for her target. As such, Reirin didn't feel any particular antipathy toward her.

Kasui, on the other hand, staggered back to her feet and said, "Should I regard you as an enemy?"

Her voice shook, her usual calm and impassive demeanor nowhere to be found. Wearing an almost savage rage on her sleeve, she glared at the Worthy Consort.

"Whose side are you on, Worthy Consort Gen?" She gripped the back of the chair, the intricately carved wood creaking under her hand. "It seemed like you were protecting us earlier. Yet one could also argue that you led us away from the scene and prevented me from learning the truth…"

Putting power into her stride, Kasui walked right up behind the Worthy Consort, who had picked up the flint in a second attempt to make a fire. "You

always do that. You never so much as mention my sister's death, nor will you allow me to do so. Whenever I try to look for clues, you rush over to stop me. Why? Are you hiding some sort of secret?"

"Of course not."

"Yes, that's what I used to believe. You are a kind person. You are principled. You have none of the greed or ambition of those other sneaky consorts. Hence why I never pressed the issue. But I have reached the limit of what I can abide! Why do you insist on standing in the way of my revenge?!"

Now that the dam had broken, Kasui couldn't stop her emotions from pouring out.

When the Worthy Consort still refused to make eye contact, Kasui grabbed her by the arm and wrenched her around. "The Pure and Virtuous Consorts called you cruel. They speculated that Bushou had fallen out of your favor. Is that true? Is that why you did away with her?"

"I told you, that's ridiculous."

"Then why won't you let me investigate?! Was Bushou… Was Big Sis so unworthy of your regard?!" Kasui howled in a heart-wrenching cry.

Gousetsu's reaction to that accusation made Reirin's eyes go wide as saucers.

"Enough!" bellowed the supposedly calm and collected consort, spinning on her heel.

She chucked the flint in her hand aside once more, and not content to stop there, she swung her arm to knock all the candles and decorative vases off the shelf in front of her.

"I've never forgotten Bushou for a single day of my life—nay, not even a *moment*!"

The furnishings crashed to the floor, shattering into pieces. The sharp shards ought to have been a hazard, but the Worthy Consort crunched them underfoot without a care.

"I have no regard for Bushou, you say? I didn't favor her? Absurd… It's outrageous to even suggest it."

“What…?”

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve fantasized about tearing that accursed shaman limb from limb? How desperately I’ve wished to avenge her? I…”

It was the first time anyone had heard her voice waver.

When she saw Kasui go stiff—she likely didn’t even register “Shu Keigetsu” at this point—Gousetsu exhaled a deep breath and buried her face in her hands. “I was the one who named her,” she all but moaned. “I pitied you girls, born to self-centered parents and forced to live in a snowbound land. In the hope of providing what little warmth I could, I gave you names that evoked spring. And in practice, I considered you sisters my one ray of sunshine in this overshadowed Palace of the Darkest Edge.”

As Kasui stood there, stunned, the consort began to tell her story piece by piece. All of it was new to the Maiden.

“Bushou was a warmhearted girl. Though quiet, she always had a smile on her face and so much love to give. I found her wholehearted devotion to her little sister to be dazzling. I only experienced it through letters, but it was equally gratifying to observe how deeply you adored your older sister.”

Gousetsu had no children. Although the emperor cared about her, she had never received his favor, nor had she particularly sought it. Her role was to reduce the influence of the Gen clan, which had made great strides after producing an emperor, and restore the balance of the five clans. From the start, there had been a tacit understanding that she would end up the lowest-ranking consort.

For a brief period, the Palace of the Darkest Edge, which had orchestrated the systematic murder of Genyou’s half brothers to propel him to the throne, had been embroiled in a tempest of controversy. After finding herself the target of multiple assassination attempts, Genyou’s mother, the current empress dowager, had concluded that the next generation of Gen had no need for power.

No one expected anything of Gousetsu, and she expected nothing of anyone else. She would simply pass her days in the dormant northern palace, sitting at

the end of the consorts' table. That was her life.

Amid days painted in silence and nothingness, the one splash of color was being entrusted with naming the Gen patriarch's daughters.

From the patriarch's point of view, he was just passing off the chore of naming his unwanted children to someone else. It may have been nothing more than a gesture to prove that the Worthy Consort and the Gen clan were still on good terms. And yet, to see a gift of hers bless another's life filled her with a joy as vivid and vibrant as a flower bursting through the snow.

Gousetsu spent days upon days brainstorming. Years later, when she learned through her correspondence with the elder daughter, Bushou, that the girls liked their names, she swelled with an almost dizzying pride.

That was all she needed. Gousetsu was more than satisfied with the modest glimmer of light she held in her hand.

That is, until Bushou came to her palace for an initiation prior to joining the court. As soon as she experienced the warmth of a child for herself, her greed grew.

"Bushou made for pleasant company. She never laughed out loud, but she always had a smile on her face. For as mild mannered as she seemed, she would then turn around and do such outrageous things as hammering iron with her own hands. I never tired of watching her."

In the flesh, Bushou had been so full of life. Her unadulterated kindness had shone straight to the depths of Gousetsu's heart. The air around her felt refreshing. Even if they sat in silence, it was comfortable just to be in her presence.

"Every time I saw her, she became that much more dear to me."

As Reirin listened to the consort's tale, a vision of the two Gen women sitting across from each other flashed through her mind. It was unlikely that they had ever slapped their knees and roared with laughter together, nor were they the type to joke around. Still, perhaps the two of them would exchange soft chuckles, their white puffs of breath melting into the frosty air. And that was enough for them.

No, better than that—it was a sunny kind of warmth, the perfect temperature for those accustomed to the freezing cold of winter.

“Yet the moment I took my eyes off her, look what happened…”

The Worthy Consort’s voice suddenly grew darker. Her eyes glinted through her fingers, burning like will-o’-the-wisps.

“Not a day goes by that I don’t regret what I did on the day she died. If only I hadn’t left the inner court that day. If only I had left a court lady with her. If only I had come back sooner. If only I had made Bushou’s true status known. All those thoughts swirl around in my head until I fear I might go mad.”

Kasui choked with surprise. “Worthy Consort Gen…”

The consort’s struggles sounded all too familiar. The strong regret, the despair. The resentment.

Never had Kasui imagined that someone other than herself was so emotionally drained by the loss of Bushou.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything? And…if you truly hold such a deep grudge, why would you stop me from getting revenge?”

Only moments ago, Gousetsu had called the shaman “accursed.” She, too, was close to uncovering Anni’s part in Bushou’s death. In all likelihood, she had begun her investigation long before Kasui even learned of the banquet that night.

“You knew that the shaman was corrupt…and that she was the one who hurt my sister. Then why did you silence me when I tried to voice my suspicions?!” Kasui demanded, grabbing the woman firmly by the arm and shaking her.

A smile like a sigh came to the Worthy Consort’s lips. “Tell me, Kasui. Do you know how much a human body can bleed?”

“Pardon?”

“Do you know how much force it takes to break someone’s neck? Or how deep you must cut into a person’s organs to end their life? Do you know the sound skin makes when peeled back, or how it feels to the touch? For all you talk of ‘killing,’ you don’t know any of those things, do you? But I do. I know it

all.”

There came the *snap* of Gousetsu crushing another broken shard underfoot. The slippers she had probably worn to muffle the sound of her footsteps were so soft that it must have hurt, but she didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow.

“Her Majesty the Empress Dowager loved her son more than anything. Like any woman of the Gen would, she eliminated his competition by ruthless means and thrust him all the way to the position of emperor. Once upon a time, the Palace of the Darkest Edge was engulfed in a maelstrom of hatred, and countless assassins were sent after me, their Maiden. I survived it all. My hands are already stained with the blood of many.”

Kasui swallowed hard upon hearing the Worthy Consort’s shocking past.

Gousetsu held up her fair, bloodless hands as if to show them off. “I can picture it so vividly. I see it in my mind’s eye. What would happen if I plunged my hand into the shaman’s entrails? If I gouged out her eyes? If I hacked off her limbs? I imagine it over and over and over and over again…” In a rising fit of rage, she clenched her outstretched hands into fists. “She will answer for her crimes. So long as I can have my revenge, I care not if this body of mine is torn to pieces. But…”

As her fingernails tore into her palms, her voice suddenly began to tremble.

“I won’t allow that to happen to you, Kasui.”

“What…?”

“You mustn’t become trapped in this darkness.”

“You mustn’t let emotion consume you.”

Kasui recalled what the consort had said to her when they exchanged blows over Bushou’s letter. She had assumed that it was a platitude to calm her down when she grew belligerent. But she had been mistaken.

Gousetsu’s plea had been dozens of times more earnest than Kasui could have ever imagined.

“Anyone would want to avenge the murder of their own child. Yet still. Still, Kasui. You too…are my precious, darling daughter.”

The warblers sing and the swallows dance. Kasui's name rolled off the consort's tongue as if she wanted to cherish the sound, to savor the spring sunshine.

"You are the last bit of sunshine I have left. My priceless daughter. I want you to live your life looking to the future. I don't want you to wallow in the throes of hatred or be woken by nightmares. I want you to be at peace. I don't mind if you forget everything, if that is what it takes to relinquish your anger. You are even free to hate me and Bushou."

"Oh, Consort Gen…"

"The days leading up to one's revenge are agonizing. And once the deed is done, you will be branded a criminal, and society will cast stones at you. I don't want you to suffer either of those things."

The targets of their vengeance were the shaman, who was powerful enough to speak her mind to the emperor, and the other consorts. The case had long since been made a secret by the Gen clan, and the empress dowager had even imposed a gag order. It wouldn't be easy to uncover the truth, and if they brought the guilty parties to justice outside the law, even the rest of the Gen would renounce them as heinous criminals.



“Don’t tell anyone it came from me.”

Suddenly, Kasui remembered what Gousetsu had said to her when she gave her the rouge.

“I’ve barely played a role in your education.”

She had provided the Maiden such kind guidance for so long, only to cast her aside out of the blue. Gousetsu had done her best not to associate herself with Kasui—all so that if she was caught, at least Kasui would be able to walk away unscathed.

Kasui couldn’t believe how much love and kindness she had received from the woman standing before her. A heat welled in her throat.

Gousetsu gently reached out to stroke the trembling Maiden’s cheek. “And I was right to worry. You are still so immature that you would storm the enemy’s base looking like this. You didn’t even take steps to hide your presence… Heh heh. If only you hadn’t shown up there tonight, I would have made it rain with the blood of those witches. To what end do you think I drugged their drinks?” she said, somewhere between tears and a smile.

With that, Kasui and Reirin realized the answer to several of their questions. Why had the Worthy Consort shown up to the watchtower dressed like an assassin? Why had the court ladies standing watch on the first floor been asleep? Why had the shaman and the consorts rattled off a list of their crimes?

“They confessed to their crimes at last… That wretched shaman finally came back to the inner court. Tonight was the night I would tear her asunder with absolute conviction!”

Like Kasui, she had gradually closed in on the truth. Suspicious of the shaman, she had waited for the day when Anni would return to the inner court for the first time in years, and the moment Gousetsu had become certain of her guilt, she had been on the verge of taking her revenge.

“I will bear this darkness alone.”

The Worthy Consort stared straight at Kasui, her black eyes betraying no emotion.

“So I beg you, please wash your hands of this matter. Don’t stray down the wrong path.”

The single tear that trickled down her cheek was surely hot enough to melt any ice.

“Worthy Consort Gen…”

And indeed, Kasui’s once-frozen heart thawed in the blink of an eye. The melted water turned to tears, which then spilled from her eyes in an unstoppable stream.

“Oh, Consort Gen. Consort Gen. I…”

Before she realized what she was doing, Kasui had reached for Gousetsu and pulled her into a hug, burying her face in the older woman’s chest like a little girl clinging to her mother. The tight embrace was soon reciprocated, at which her tears came down harder than ever.

“I was a fool.”

Why hadn’t she flung herself into Gousetsu’s arms sooner? She had always known what an honorable woman she was. Yet still she had failed to notice that the consort held within her both a darkness and a love even deeper than her own. The pair had always kept a careful distance, drawing an undefined line between them.

If only she had bared more of her heart, the two of them could have come to an understanding. They could have huddled together for warmth.

With their combined powers, they could have come up with a much better plan.

“Have I made myself clear, Kasui? I want you to stay out of this.”

“But, Consort Gen…I can’t leave you to shoulder the burden alone.”

“Please. I don’t want you to become a criminal.”

“Ahem,” Reirin sheepishly interjected just as Kasui and the consort were about to launch into another tearful argument. “Sorry to ruin the moment…”

The Gen women looked up with a start. They had completely forgotten

another Maiden was in the room.

“I beg of you, Lady Shu Keigetsu,” said the Worthy Consort. “I will assume full responsibility for everything. I only ask that you keep this matter to yourself.”

“I cannot.”

Despite Gousetsu’s apologetic attitude, Reirin’s response was so firm that the Worthy Consort was taken aback. “Excuse me?”

Then the follow-up left her speechless.

“That is to say, Lady Kasui has already taken a sharp turn down the wrong path and made an attempt on Kou Reirin’s life.”

“…What?”

“Um, Worthy Consort Gen, that was—”

“Lady Kasui mistakenly believed that Kou Reirin was to blame for the miracle hemp shortage three years ago and threw her into a well. Fortunately, I, Shu Keigetsu, managed to rescue her in time, and Kou Reirin has no desire to press charges. Nevertheless, the Kou and Shu clans are already entangled in this vendetta.”

After oh-so-pleasantly exposing Kasui’s misdeeds, Reirin smiled tenderly. “And here is what I think as a third party listening in on your conversation.” She rose from the chair she had been sitting in with perfect posture. “Why not take your revenge and get it over with?”

Kasui and Gousetsu gaped at the Maiden who had delivered such an outrageous suggestion in a perfectly mild tone.

“Don’t you agree? The reason you two have been mired in such despair and resentment is because you’ve been either unable to identify or unable to reach the target of your revenge. What we have before us is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If you can take your revenge right here and right now, you will finally be free.”

As she took a graceful step forward, she exuded a formidable aura. Even Gousetsu, a more experienced warrior than Kasui, had to gulp in spite of herself.

“And one more thing. You both wish to take things upon yourselves because you assume that your vendetta will end in criminal charges. But by taking our revenge aboveboard, we can eliminate that risk.”

“Aboveboard?” Kasui parroted, thrown for a loop.

Reirin gave a solemn nod. “Yes. Revenge must be audacious and swift. That is my personal belief.”

Her sweet smile broadened. Although her grudge wasn’t as strong as that of the Gens, she was still livid with the shaman for insulting Keigetsu and backing her into a corner. Of course, she also felt a righteous fury at the thought of the shaman murdering a virtuous girl like Bushou without a second thought.

Furthermore, she found it unconscionable that Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran had used drugs given to them by the shaman and even manipulated their own Maidens in a bid to dethrone the Kou clan.

Reirin now knew it for a fact: Those women were the filth that had infested the garden known as the Maiden Court.

And it was precisely when a garden was about to drown in the mud that the lotus had to overcome the sludge and burst into bloom.

“However, this plan will require everyone’s cooperation. The cooperation of all five Maidens, to be exact.”

After taking turns looking at the Gen women, who stared back at her blankly, Reirin extended a hand.

“Come. Let us take our revenge with a bang.”

Her rain-soaked skin was already beginning to dry.

Reirin’s freckled face relaxed into a smile.

Chapter 4:
Keigetsu Threatens

IT WAS A MIDAFTERNOON only five days out from the final trial of the Rite of Reverence. Not a cloud could be found in the sky, but the wind carried with it a biting chill. Though the sun was shining, the winter garden was so frigid as to be inhospitable.

A package in her arms, Kin Seika made her way across the quiet yard without a word.

What a beautiful courtyard. Quite a difference from the Kins' weed-infested gardens.

The trees had been planted at regular intervals, and the pavilions made the most of their stony texture. The cobblestone path curved as if it were a natural construct, but in reality, it followed a carefully calculated trajectory as it wound through the courtyard. Seika marveled at the sight of the perfectly manicured garden, just to hang her head a moment later.

If only the path to the pavilion were overgrown with weeds. If only the cobblestones were crumbling, snakes popped out at every turn, and no one could walk it.

The absurdity of her own wish brought a smile of self-deprecation to her lips.

It had long been Seika's goal to pluck the vulgar wildflowers ravaging the Kin gardens and bring pure flowers to bloom. Yet now here she was, wishing the entire courtyard would fall to ruin.

Why must the road to evil be so smooth?

Struggling to push on, Seika stopped in front of the meticulously paved cobblestone path. Why wasn't there anyone else around? Oh, how she wished that a court lady or an Eagle Eye would show up and spot her. All they had to do was reprimand her for approaching another clan's pavilion and keep an eye on her. Then she could give herself the excuse of "It's over now that I've been

seen” and immediately turn back the way she came.

Yet no matter how long she stood around and waited, not a single person passed by. The Maidens and court ladies were probably busy relaxing after finishing their lunch. It was the perfect time of day to make a courtesy call.

And that was exactly why the Pure Consort had instructed her to go now.

What lay at the end of Seika’s path was the pavilion where Kou Reirin was supposed to be resting.

“Say, Seika. Lady Reirin has been in low spirits for quite a while now, hasn’t she? I think you should pay her a visit.”

The Pure Consort was usually grumpy in the mornings, but for once, she had been in an awfully good mood. As soon as she’d dragged Seika into the courtyard, she started to chatter away in her typical ingratiating purr.

“She’s the type to refuse an overly expensive gift, so I’d like to send you off with a modest confection and a doll imbued with get-well wishes,” she went on, holding out a lovely doll carved from wood. The red-cheeked little girl had a gentle smile etched into her features, and it was a gift that even Seika would have been honestly happy to accept.

Seika was incredulous, finding this to be a surprising choice given the Pure Consort’s tastes, but Reiga’s next remark quickly turned her skepticism into caution.

“Inside is a talisman made by the miraculous shaman herself. But as is the case with most wishes, it will only come true if you keep it a secret. So I want you to hide this doll in Lady Reirin’s pavilion, somewhere she won’t find it.”

The consort who so prided herself on her bewitching beauty peered into Seika’s face as if to tempt her. Whatever liquor she had been drinking the night before had left her smelling of a particularly pungent flower, but Seika was more concerned with the shady nature of her request. “You want me to leave her a get-well gift without her noticing?”

“Yes. It would seem patronizing to make a big deal out of it, wouldn’t it?” said

Reiga, a light flush on her cheeks. She seemed to think that her argument made perfect sense.

"But—"

"Look here, Seika. I'm trying to be nice." When the Maiden leaned forward to argue, Reiga cut her off with a singsong note in her voice. "Have I ever been anything less than polite in my requests? Not many consorts would be so accommodating of a mere Maiden. If I still can't get you to fall into line, I'll have to find someone else to discipline you." Propping her chin on the stone table, she dropped her voice an octave as she added, "I hear your future husband is good with a whip."

The double threat of her ominous smirk and the warning itself made Seika gulp. "Wha…"

"He went out of his way to send me a letter. It came with a gift of ointment. He said he wants his bride to have soft, fair skin. Otherwise, it won't be nearly as fun to see it dripping red with blood. Quite thoughtful, isn't he?"

The Pure Consort giggled, followed by an enormous yawn.

"So," she went on, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes before shooting Seika a listless look, "you *will* pay her a visit, won't you? Right after lunch would be perfect. I hear she gives her court ladies a break around that time."

She made it sound like she was asking for a favor, but it was an order. She had even specified the time of day. It seemed the Pure Consort knew everything, right down to when the Kou court ladies would be away from the pavilion.

"I'll have the ivory silks and Eagle Eyes hanging around our pavilion step away as well. No one will see you. Here's the get-well gift to take with you. Oh, right, I've also had the artisans prepare a work of jade to present to His Majesty in the final trial. The whole stage is set for you."

The consort must have been quite tired, as she then let her cheek drop to the table and looked up at Seika with a glazed look in her eyes.

"Aren't you fortunate to have such a mindful guardian?"

Contrary to her words, the contempt in her voice was sharp enough to stab

Seika through the heart.

This doll must have some sort of trick to it… Something to ensnare Lady Reirin.

Seika pressed a hand to her chest, where she was keeping the doll separate from the confection. She could have sworn she smelled the foul stench of malice emanating from the small, seemingly adorable trinket.

If she placed the doll in the Kou clan's pavilion, something terrible was sure to befall Kou Reirin in the near future—something that would drag that beautiful, benevolent, and noble girl from her pedestal. But if she didn't, *she* would be the one dragged to the depths of hell. She would be dressed in nothing but a sheer cloth and turned into a bedchamber diversion, all the while trembling in fear of a man's unchecked violent urges.

I can't take any more of this.

Seika squeezed her eyes shut. She wanted someone to stop her. To stand in her path. To demolish the smooth road to ruin.

Yet no one appeared on the cobblestone path before her. Not even a single weed. She was the only one who could stop herself.

I'd rather just…

Her pulse quickened. As she squeezed her arms tighter around the package she was holding, something hard rattled in the breast of her garment. It was the knife that she had brought to cut up the confection and stowed together with the doll.

I'd rather just…

She was on a path coated in evil. Whether she continued down it or turned back, she would still walk away tainted. In that case…

"…"

Chewing hard on her lip, Seika focused her eyes on the road ahead. After exhaling a short breath, she began to walk the path to the pavilion with purpose.

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“Lady Kin Seika is almost here.”

At Tousetsu’s hushed warning, Kou Reirin—or rather, Shu Keigetsu with her face—choked on one of the mooncakes she had been leisurely snacking on under the pavilion.

“Already? Seriously?”

“Yes. Please wipe the bean paste from around your mouth. Lady ‘Kou Reirin’ would never spill food,” the woman nicknamed “the glacial court lady” said matter-of-factly. Though she had softened quite a bit compared to the old days, she still took every opportunity she saw to nitpick.

“Hmph. Forget spilling, I heard she dropped one of these right out of her hands,” Keigetsu shot back as she dabbed at her mouth with a handkerchief.

Tousetsu shrugged off the snide remark. “*You* were the reason for that, lest you forget. Well then, I will be taking my leave. Do the rest as we planned.”

“Wait—”

“Rest assured, I will be hiding just behind the tent.”

And with that, she stepped outside. Left alone in the pavilion, a fur pelt draped over all four of its sides, Keigetsu heaved a gigantic sigh.

Things always go exactly how you envision them, Kou Reirin.

She couldn’t help but grumble about the owner of her current body. The girl was hopelessly bold, impertinent, and had the devil’s own luck, and Keigetsu berated her for it all in the privacy of her own mind.

Last night, after Keigetsu had been “taken into custody” in the Kou Maiden’s stead and blown her cover to Gyoumei and company, she had connected to Reirin via flame call, the men forming a circle around her as she sweated up a storm. Perhaps if Reirin offered a meek apology, Gyoumei’s anger would be soothed. With that hope, she had tried to draw a confession out of her friend, only to hear her say, “Let’s keep this on the down-low from His Highness.”

Just remembering the icy aura that had emerged from Gyoumei behind her was enough to make Keigetsu shiver.

However, what Keigetsu had found most impressive was that the prince had managed to bring his anger under control. What's more, he'd ordered Reirin to concentrate on escaping before worrying about a punishment or a report.

Granted, he *had* warned her that they would revisit the matter after the Rite of Reverence.

Kou Reirin's look of terror throughout the lecture had been quite the sight to behold. While she knew the consequences were bound to bounce back to her somehow, Keigetsu had been tempted to applaud the prince and demand an encore.

I used to be afraid that if she made His Highness too mad, he'd take her on the spot and I'd end up stuck in the position of Worthy Consort…but these days, I'm rooting for him to teach her a lesson…

Keigetsu stared off into space, threadbare and exhausted.

Someone had to instill the right amount of fear into Kou Reirin. Raging boars that threw their surroundings into chaos needed to be locked up in a sturdy cage.

Maybe it's a futile effort. I was sure she had learned her lesson this time, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

Massaging her temple, Keigetsu recounted the events of the previous night in her mind.

It was about half an hour after Kou Reirin had been ordered to evacuate the scene. Shin-u and his Eagle Eyes had raced to the watchtower on Gyoumei's orders, whereupon they had found the two consorts so drunk that they were slurring their words. The shaman must have sensed the team coming because she had already left by the time they arrived.

Since the Pure and Virtuous Consorts claimed to have been sharing a drink alone to strengthen their bond, the Eagle Eyes had been unable to pursue the matter for lack of evidence. Their highest-priority order had been to detain any Maidens who were out and about during the dangerous late-night storm, but seeing as there were none to be found, the group had called it a night.

After hearing the report, Gyoumei came to the conclusion that Reirin and

Kasui must have moved to a safe place. He ordered Keigetsu to tell him if she heard anything from Reirin, then sent her back to the inner court.

Yet for someone who had supposedly “moved to a safe place,” Reirin took her sweet time getting back. Just when Keigetsu—plus Tousetsu and Leelee—had grown tired of waiting and turned to a candle to cast her flame spell, she heard someone call her name.

“Oh, Lady Keigetsu. You’re still up.”

Kou Reirin had cheerfully returned to the Kou pavilion. Alone.

When Keigetsu asked her what on earth she had been doing all this time, she blithely replied that she had been caught up in a discussion with the Worthy Consort and Kasui. Keigetsu flew into a rage, demanding to know how she had gone from evacuating to *that*.

Kou Reirin calmly put a hand to her cheek. “Well, it’s a bit of a long story… The important part is that we decided the five Maidens must unite to catch our enemies in one fell swoop.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, so start over from the beginning.”

It was little wonder that Keigetsu’s voice came out in a growl.

Unperturbed, Reirin went on to explain the “long story,” going all the way back to after she left the storehouse. The more Keigetsu heard of it, the more the muscles in her face stiffened.

“First of all, you heard Lady Kasui’s background, didn’t you? She wants revenge for her elder sister. After she told me the story, I was so miffed that I decided to lend her a hand.”

“What an idiotic note to start on. Why would you agree to help someone because you were ‘miffed’?!”

“Well, her sister left her a note telling her to live a happy life, but she was doing nothing of the sort. Was I to sit back and take that?”

The reasoning made no sense to Keigetsu, but in Reirin’s mind, it was apparently both perfectly logical *and* a key point.

Her unfathomable thought processes had Keigetsu yelling at the top of her

lungs. “Say what you want, but it all comes down to you being soft! Give me a break, I didn’t save you so that *you* could let Gen Kasui off—”

“Exactly. You saved me.”

When Reirin took her hands with a solemn look on her face, the rest of the sentence died on Keigetsu’s tongue.

The woman who had been hovering on the verge of death not long ago wrapped her hands around the Shu Maiden’s with a touch that bordered on reverential. “You are my miracle comet. These hands are always hoisting others up from the pits of despair. Therefore, I wished to act in a way that would do justice to these hands—to the name of ‘Shu Keigetsu.’”

She sounded almost as if she were reveling in her gratitude. Confronted with such sincere, unadulterated affection and respect head-on, Keigetsu was at a loss for how to react.

Reirin, meanwhile, continued her explanation without so much as batting an eye.

“One thing led to another, and I decided to venture to the place where the shaman would likely be partaking in a banquet. There, we discovered that the shaman was the mastermind behind the murder and the Pure and Virtuous Consorts were her accomplices. They also hatched a plot to take down ‘Kou Reirin,’ you see…”

The series of reveals had Keigetsu’s head spinning, and it wasn’t her own delicacy that was to blame. But the most surprising part of all may have been what Reirin casually tacked on next.

“And right after we ended our flame call, a mystery person dragged me and Lady Kasui away from the scene. She was none other than Worthy Consort Gen, dressed in a disguise and prepared to kill the shaman.”

“…Come again?”

“As I said, she was Worthy Consort Gen, dressed in a disguise and prepared to kill the shaman.”

“Why was the Worthy Consort out to kill the shaman?!”

“The truth is, she was just as bitter about Lady Bushou’s death as Lady Kasui, if not more so. She, too, had been hiding her virulent hatred for the shaman, looking for the perfect opportunity to take her revenge.”

As an image of that aloof, so very Gen-like Worthy Consort crossed Keigetsu’s mind, she was momentarily stunned.

At length, she muttered, “The Gens are terrifying.”

“Aren’t they just?”

Reirin bobbed her head in agreement. Tousetsu furrowed her brow, offended, while Leelee looked on with a lukewarm smile.

“In any event, the Worthy Consort insisted that she didn’t want to drag Lady Kasui into her revenge, while Lady Kasui scolded the Worthy Consort for not telling her all of this sooner. The atmosphere between them was getting rather grim.”

“I can imagine…”

“So I suggested they stop dithering and just take their revenge. I agreed to help out as well.”

“Huh?! What part of that made you decide to help?!” screamed Keigetsu.

Reirin cheerfully raised a hand. “Well, it would be terrible to let the murder of an innocent girl go unpunished. Besides, this wasn’t a show of the ‘softness’ you so despise. My plan will benefit us both.”

The sparkle in her eyes was practically begging Keigetsu for praise.

“First of all, since the shaman, Pure Consort, and Virtuous Consort are all accomplices, we can unmask them all at once if we prove the shaman’s guilt. Those two dragged you into their schemes in the first trial and put you through a harrowing experience. We absolutely must get even,” she said, holding up her index finger.

Seeing this, Keigetsu was reminded of just how deep the girl’s anger ran. Kou Reirin was a boundlessly forgiving person, but as soon as someone involved one of her loved ones, she wouldn’t hesitate to retaliate.

“Secondly, I may be overthinking this, but…I’m concerned about Lady Seika

and Lady Houshun.” Her second finger went up, albeit tentatively this time. “The truth is, before the tent collapsed, I received a warning of sorts from Lady Houshun. When Lady Seika came to check on me after the second trial, she seemed preoccupied throughout the visit. I suspect that both of them were working to sabotage me against their will. If we stop the consorts, we should be able to set them both free.”

“Could you please mind your own business?”

What popped into Keigetsu’s mind then was the time she had run into Houshun outside the Ran pavilion. The supposedly blackhearted girl had exuded genuine fear. Her once-calculating eyes had flitted about restlessly, and her face had looked pale.

“You were lucky enough to have someone willing to risk her own life to come to your aid.”

In retrospect, those words had carried not just derision but also a hint of resentment. The implication was that the Ran Maiden didn’t have anyone to come to *her* aid.

“Maybe so,” Keigetsu murmured, stroking her chin.

“If they were attacking us of their own free will, I would be all in favor of crushing them, but I feel bad if they’re being forced to follow orders,” said Reirin, looking mournful. “We must set them free and make them submit to us instead.”

“…Maybe so?”

Was it her Kou blood that made her naturally think like a ruler?

“And thirdly,” Reirin went on, ignoring Keigetsu’s dismay to solemnly raise a third finger, “have you prepared a gift for His Majesty’s birthday yet, Lady Keigetsu?”

“Huh?”

Keigetsu gaped in response to the surprising question. After a few moments of thought, the color drained from her face.

The final trial of the Rite of Reverence was to prepare a gift suitable for His

Majesty's birthday. This was the period when she should have been searching for a top-of-the-line item, her clan's reputation on the line—but with all the fights and conspiracies she'd been wrapped up in, she had completely neglected the preparations.

"I don't have anything ready."

Reirin nodded gravely. "Neither do I, as it happens."

"Wh-what are we going to do? We only have five…no, four days left. Oh, this is all your fault, Kou Reirin! I wanted to talk to you about it earlier, but you ignored me and—"

"You're quite right. It's all my fault." Keigetsu was so upset that she had started to play the blame game, but Reirin was completely unruffled. "As such, please allow me to take responsibility. If you agree to help with my plan, you'll be able to prepare a wonderful gift with only one-fifth of the effort."

"A wonderful gift? Really?"

"Yes. It will undoubtedly rival a national treasure. Moreover, all you need to do is provide the materials. I've already enlisted the help of Lady Kasui."

Could this be what the voice of a wraith who led men astray sounded like? Although she was still unclear about the true nature of the proposal, it sounded remarkably sweet to Keigetsu's ears after being reminded of the matter hanging over her head.

The plan was to round up the arrogant shaman and those pesky consorts, then have a wonderful gift ready to go for the final trial. What in the world could it entail?

Keigetsu leaned forward despite herself. "I-I need a little more explanation—"

"To make it work, we will require the cooperation of Lady Seika and Lady Houshun as well," Reirin said with a smile. "Tomorrow, if I had to guess, they will show up with dolls and poisonous flowers in a plot to ruin 'me.'"

A grin stretching across her freckled face, she clapped her hands together.

With an adorable tilt of her head, she finished, "So let's catch them in the act, blackmail them, and turn them over to our side, shall we?"

Though her intonation rose lightly at the end of the sentence, it was a statement, not a question.

"Did you say *blackmail* them…?"

"Yes. I know you can do it, Lady Keigetsu!" As Keigetsu's face froze in horror, Reirin gave her hands a squeeze, all smiles. "If possible, I would like to recruit them by the end of tomorrow, so let's divide the task of persuading them. You handle Lady Seika. And I'll take care of Lady Houshun, if I must."

"Wait, hold on—"

Things were moving so fast that Keigetsu could barely keep up. Why was she being enlisted to convince Kin Seika? What was Kou Reirin up to?

Also, she *really* seemed to hate Ran Houshun.

"We will exploit their weaknesses and force them to betray their masters. Hee hee, we've both become quite adept at this whole villainess business. I owe it all to your seasoned guidance."

"Huh? Wha…?"

"With us two villainesses working together, we have nothing to fear. Let us all five take this opportunity to embrace our inner evil and unite to vanquish our enemies!"

Heedless of how Keigetsu's eyes darted to and fro, Reirin clenched her fist and declared, "Let's show some backbone!"

The plan she relayed to me afterward was something else…

As she finished her umpteenth flashback, Keigetsu sighed for the umpteenth time.

The audacity of that boar in butterfly's clothing never ceased to amaze. Keigetsu had hoped that someone—maybe Gyoumei—would step up to stop her, but for whatever reason, he had yet to send even a single messenger. This despite how concerned he had been about her reckless stunts.

When she'd grown suspicious and asked Reirin about it, the Kou Maiden had

giggled and replied, “Actually, I called in a favor from Her Majesty.”

Apparently, after sharing her strategy with the Gens, she had petitioned the empress to “leave everything to the Maidens,” using the Worthy Consort as her messenger. Traditionally, the Rite of Reverence was not the domain of the men or the consorts but of the Maidens. Believing the request for outsiders not to interfere for its duration to be a matter of course, Kenshuu had readily complied. In other words, she had prohibited Gyoumei from meddling.

And so, with four days left before the end of the Rite of Reverence, Reirin and friends could relax and devote their efforts to this risky retribution.

“When in doubt, borrow the authority of the empress. This is yet another trick to the villainess trade I learned from you.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m some textbook example of evil! Just putting it out there, but the more you do to stop His Highness from butting in, the worse the repercussions are going to be later. Do you get that?”

“Hrk!” Reirin flinched, recoiling at Keigetsu’s threat. “But…if I put it off for long enough, it’s possible that he might forget his anger. Surely there’s a small chance… Or I certainly hope there is…”

The way her eyes flitted about made her the picture of a child trying to hide the jar she had broken in her mischief.

That reaction of hers took Keigetsu by surprise. She had believed His Highness’s “butterfly” to be someone who never lost her composure or apologized for her behavior.

Kou Reirin has changed a little.

It dawned on Keigetsu that the Kou Maiden had learned to be more open with her feelings. She had learned to be hurt when unjustified insults were thrown her way. She had learned to be sad when she was at odds with a friend. She had learned to get angry and strike back when she was attacked, and she had learned to dread a scolding from a loved one.

Surely that sort of change could be viewed as a corruption of the former celestial maiden. She had abandoned her serenity, become emotionally shaken, and developed anger and cowardice.

Still, Keigetsu found this version of her much more likable than the Kou Reirin who had accepted everything and braced herself for death with a noble smile on her face.

What was so wrong with having a pathetic side? That was what being alive was all about.

For those reasons, she couldn't bring herself to reject the new Kou Reirin…but still.

It's annoying when she has us all dancing like puppets on a string.

As she sensed someone slowly approaching the tent, Keigetsu's expression turned grim.

"Good afternoon. It's Kin Seika. May I borrow a moment of your time, Lady Reirin?"

Seika had finally arrived on the scene.

After clearing her throat, Keigetsu replied in the most ladylike tones she could muster. "Why, certainly."

It was too late to turn back now. She had to set the plan in motion.

She steeled herself and invited Seika into the room. "Please, come in."

"Thank you very much."

The side of the fur pelt facing the cobblestone path parted, and in walked Seika with a graceful stride.

"You've been out of sorts for so long that I was getting worried… I forgot to bring a treat when I came by the other day, so I decided to pay you a second visit."

Keigetsu accepted the package with a smile, hiding the trepidation she actually felt. "My, I appreciate the concern."

According to Kou Reirin, Seika was here under Pure Consort Kin's orders to plant a doll that would serve as evidence of treason. Upon noticing the slight bulge near Seika's breast, she had a hunch that she'd found the item in question.

She better not have put poison in the food while she was at it.

Reluctant to open the package right away, Keigetsu set it down on the table and ushered Seika into the seat across from her.

The extravagant Kin Maiden glanced around the pavilion, then murmured, “I don’t see any court ladies…”

“Correct. This is the time of day they go on break.”

In truth, Kou Reirin had deliberately sent them away to create the illusion of an exploitable opening, and Tousetsu was hanging back just behind the tent—but Keigetsu wasn’t about to mention that.

“I fear the tea I brew won’t be up to the usual standards,” she said. “My apologies.”

“Hardly!” Seika replied, taken aback. Then she dropped her gaze a fraction and added, “I’m undeserving of your hospitality.”

Her voice came out feeble and thin. She was indeed quite conflicted about the scheme she was abetting.

Hmph. Put on a show of angsting all you like if it makes you feel like a better person, but the fact that you came here means you’re still culpable.

The sight of Seika’s gorgeous features contorted in distress elicited nothing but a quiet snort from Keigetsu. She never had liked this girl.

Kin Seika had looks to rival Kou Reirin’s, was an accomplished dancer, and always carried herself with confidence. She was principled. She loved what was beautiful, and she was outspoken about loathing that which wasn’t. Given her consistent standards, she could, in a sense, be described as a straightforward and genuine person.

However, from the perspective of one who had come under attack for being “ugly,” it wasn’t anything so benign.

It might do her some good to experience her first setback. Go ahead, dirty your hands with hideous deeds and get a taste of real suffering.

Keigetsu knew that Kin Seika more or less worshipped Kou Reirin. After all, that butterfly was the embodiment of her ideal: pleasing to the eye, graceful,

and able to answer any question with poise and intelligence. How ugly it must have seemed to her to pluck the wings of the creature she had gazed upon in admiration for so long.

Still, Seika herself was the one who had made that choice.

After an unnatural stretch of silence, the Kin Maiden awkwardly unwrapped the package. “I’ll…go ahead and open this. It’s a rather large confection, so we ought to cut it up to make it easier to eat.”

What she unveiled was a sweet rice cake, magnificent as a work of art. It was, in fact, a bit too big to consume in its current state.

“I can do it, if you’d prefer. Oh dear… Where did I put the knife again? This is so embarrassing.”

When Seika made a show of fumbling around in her robes, Keigetsu’s eyes narrowed sharply.

Is this when she’s planning to plant the doll?

For instance, she could leave it somewhere when she bent down. Or perhaps she could pretend to drop something and use that as a diversion.

And the moment she did, Kin Seika would be at Keigetsu’s beck and call.

“This is so…embarrassing…”

After rummaging around in her robes for a while, Seika abruptly looked to the Heavens and shut her mouth.

“…”

“Lady Seika? What is it?” Keigetsu prompted her, dubious.

A bitter smile rose to the other girl’s face. “How unsightly of me.”

“Huh?”

As Keigetsu blinked, the Kin Maiden straightened her posture and reached a hand toward her own breast. “Lady Reirin. I have something very important to tell you.”

It was a doll that Keigetsu had expected to see in the girl’s snow-white fingers, but she was wrong. What Seika pulled out was the knife presumably meant for

cutting the rice cake. She placed it on the table, still in its sheath, and then looked Keigetsu straight in the eye.

“I respect you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Say what?!”

The surprised voice was Keigetsu’s. It was a reasonable reaction, seeing as the person who had looked poised to set a trap—all her misgivings be damned—had suddenly launched into a monologue with a deadly serious look on her face.

Seika, meanwhile, paid Keigetsu’s confusion no heed. Fighting to keep the tremor out of her voice, she earnestly went on, “As ashamed as I am to admit it, when I lived in my home domain, I was arrogant enough to think myself the most distinguished woman in the land. And so, when I met you for the first time, your beauty, talent, and intelligence struck me like a bolt of lightning.”

“I-Is that right?”

Keigetsu was so lost as to how to react that she gave the most noncommittal response she could. She couldn’t very well act pleased over the confession, nor was it appropriate to feign modesty.

“You are a proud woman, Lady Reirin. As sickly as you are, you never use that as an excuse. You work hard and never show weakness. No matter how much love you receive from those around you, you refuse to lean on them. You never flatter, you never fawn… It’s a world of difference from the vulgar Kin branch line.”

Seika clenched her fists, which lay on the table beside the knife, as if to hold back a storm of emotions. Tears were beginning to form in her almond-shaped eyes.

“The days I spent with you are my greatest treasure. You are my ideal. And I cannot allow that ideal to be sullied by my own hands,” she declared firmly, despite the way her voice shook.

Keigetsu’s eyes widened a fraction.

What did she just say?

Did that mean she was going to betray the Pure Consort?

"But…" Seika's whole body began to quake. "The Pure Consort—that avaricious woman—ordered me to bring you to ruin. If I fail to do so, she will force me from the position of Maiden…sell me off to a lascivious man, and turn me into a p-plaything. I will be locked away in a bedchamber, his crude hands and whip free to have their way with my flesh…" With that despairing declaration, she reached for the knife with trembling hands. "I have considered my options. If I'm going to be stripped of my position either way… If my body is to be ravaged at someone else's whim…I should just…"

Holding the knife in an awkward grip, she clutched it tightly to her chest.

A powerful gleam in her eyes, she announced with dignity, "I believe I should resign from Maidenhood of my own accord."

With the blade in her hand, it was clear what she was actually trying to say. Kin Seika was fully prepared to take her own life.

Oh, please.

Keigetsu's reaction to Seika's tragic resolution was one of disillusionment.

What is she, stupid?

After all, Keigetsu knew the truth: Someone who truly wanted to die wouldn't announce it in front of others like this. She would hide her despair under a smile, forget how to cry, and endure, endure, endure—until one day she disappeared without a trace. Alone, without reaching out for anyone's hand.

Just like Kou Reirin, who had given up on everything and planned to quietly sink to the bottom of a well.

Thus, Keigetsu coolly concluded: *Lady Seika is just drunk on her own tragedy.*

Believing herself to be the most unfortunate girl in the world, she had chosen the path of self-destruction without even trying to fight. What's more, she refused to keep that decision to herself. The situation rang a bell.

The Kin Seika who sat before Keigetsu now was the spitting image of her former self, the one who'd been driven to despair by Noble Consort Shu and begged Kou Reirin to kill her.

Overcome with an immense disgust, the Shu Maiden squinted ominously at Seika. “Did the Pure Consort really tell you that? That unless you sabotage Kou—*me*, she will marry a woman who had once been a Maiden to another man?”

“Yes. The Pure Consort hails from the tawdry Kin branch line. Those lowlifes have no regard for anything but money. They would put the women of their own domain up for auction without a scrap of dignity or common sense.”

“Hmm. Then why not solve the problem with money?”

Keigetsu couldn’t help but blurt out exactly what she was thinking. Seika gawked at her, flabbergasted, but she wasn’t deterred.

“Wouldn’t that make the most sense? The Pure Consort believes that if you serve no use to her as a Maiden, she should use you to make a profit and recoup her investment. That sounds like a perfectly reasonable thought process to me.”

“What…?”

“In a way, an auction is a very efficient method. If all she cares about is money, why not be the highest bidder for yourself? You have your earnings as a Maiden, a talent for dance that could serve as a source of income, and a pretty face, do you not?” A hint of cynicism crept into the question.

Kin Seika didn’t get it. For all she lamented that she was going to be sold, she didn’t even realize what an advantageous hand she’d been dealt. She was a good dancer. The crown prince himself had praised her talents. She didn’t need to get married to support herself. Why, she could probably strike it rich if she tried.

She was also gorgeous. Though it didn’t appeal to the protective instincts like Kou Reirin’s beauty did, she had an eye-catching glamour about her. If she made good use of her lovely, crystal-clear voice, she could easily wrap a man around her little finger.

In short, if she put her mind to it, she could avoid the auction altogether, and even if she were married off to an old pervert, she could leverage her good looks to control his every move. It was a stark contrast to Keigetsu, who was blessed with neither talent nor beauty, had no prospects for marriage, and

would have died on the side of the road if her guardian of the Noble Consort had expelled her from the court.

Were you expecting me to pat you on the head and make it all better? Hate to break it to you, but that isn't this *"Kou Reirin's" style.*

If the real Kou Reirin had been the one sitting across from Seika, she surely would have furrowed her brow and lent her a sympathetic ear. She would have beseeched the Kin Maiden not to do anything rash and offered her a helping hand, suggesting they work together to find a solution.

She was always like that. Though she claimed to have been following Keigetsu's example with Kasui, those were undoubtedly her true colors shining through.

When push comes to shove, she's soft. She'll try to save everyone and anyone.

Even though that trait had led to Keigetsu's own redemption—no, for that very reason—she didn't want her friend to show too much charity to others. It would mean that, in the end, she was nothing but another face in the crowd as far as Kou Reirin was concerned.

"Why not shove some gold right under the Pure Consort's nose? Oh, or would you prefer the Kou clan to take you in? It would be an honor to have a dancer as skilled as yourself as our own private courtesan. Just name your price."

Keigetsu had volunteered the Kou clan's funds in the heat of the moment but shortly realized that it was actually a brilliant idea. Be it the empress or Kou Reirin, the women of the Kou were too infinitely cavalier to make money an object. If it meant they could add a master courtesan to their ranks, they wouldn't hesitate to fork over a large sum. And then, whenever Keigetsu switched places with Kou Reirin, she would be free to toy with Seika, who had been reduced to the Kou clan's prostitute.

"Wha…"

As the Maiden before her burst into giggles, Seika didn't know what to say for several long moments.

Is this really Kou Reirin?



She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She had known that for as lithe as Kou Reirin appeared, the girl had a strong will under the surface. Thus, she hadn't expected to be comforted when she hinted at committing suicide. If anything, she had anticipated that she might receive a stern look and a scolding.

One way or another, Seika had been counting on a more earnest response. Perhaps the Maiden might nod her head and respect her will, or perhaps she might do the opposite and lecture her on the value of life. What she *hadn't* expected to hear was the suggestion to fix her problems with money.

Suddenly, Seika noticed that "Kou Reirin" was propping her chin in her hand as she sneered. Her defiant expressions and crass gestures were all entirely unbecoming of the leading candidate for empress.

Who…?

Something that wasn't based in logic, more a hunch than a thought, ran down her spine with a shudder.

Who is she?

Kou Reirin was the prince's butterfly. Her posture was graceful, and she always maintained an air of elegance. Even after sinking into a frozen lake, she had stood up straight and tall, yet now she sat slouched like a cat, her elbow resting slovenly on the table.

That hunched posture. That sneer that came to her face as she glared. Looking at her triggered a memory in the back of Seika's mind.

"Oh dear, whatever could be the matter, Lady Seika? You've gone white as a ghost!"

Contrary to her words of concern, there was a nasty bounce to the ends of her sentences. As soon as she saw her opponent was vulnerable, she had gone on the attack. The moment she got worked up, her voice would crack—it all resembled a certain someone.

Don't tell me…

For the briefest of moments, an idea flashed through Seika's mind, but it was so absurd that she quickly dismissed it.

And yet, no matter how hard she tried to deny it, it seeped into her mind like a stubborn stain, eventually consuming her entire being.

It couldn't be.

She must have been tired. How could she even entertain such an unrealistic thought?

"Did you say 'aphrodisiac'? Isn't that an object of legend long buried beside the heathen mystic arts? Do you mean to tell me those are real?"

In that same moment, Seika was reminded of the Maidens' discussion at the tea party a while back.

"Rumor has it that Lady Keigetsu's father was an odd man with aspirations of becoming a Daoist cultivator."

One of her parents had been a cultivator. And lately, she had been spending an awful lot of time with Kou Reirin.

What if, just maybe, Shu Keigetsu had inherited the Daoist arts—now considered to be a thing of legend—from her father?

Seika's pulse quickened. Her mouth parched and dry, she parted her lips to say, "Perhaps that's not such a bad idea, Lady Reirin."

"Huh?"

As the other Maiden blinked in confusion, Seika psyched herself up. She had to be careful not to make her suspicion too obvious.

When she was surprised by something, the butterfly Seika so idolized would never wear such a dumb look on her face or leave her mouth hanging open. Why hadn't she noticed sooner? Had all the time she spent studiously examining each and every one of Kou Reirin's graceful gazes and fluid movements been for nothing? Even if the impostor hid her face behind a fan, the way she moved her fingers alone ought to be enough to give her away. *That* was the degree of precision with which Seika had perfected her arts.

"I would love to become a private courtesan of the Kou clan and improve my craft alongside you."

"Uh…"

“Do you remember our promise to face each other in a dance competition one day? As I recall, it was when we were viewing the plum blossoms in early spring, wasn’t it?”

Seika set the knife down and flashed the girl before her an inviting smile. In reality, she and Kou Reirin had never made any such promise.

Yet still she went on, “The swallows sing and the warblers dance. You invited me to join you in a performance that would capture a glistening spring landscape. You said you couldn’t wait to see me put on a dance beautiful enough to put the warbler to shame.”

“Ah…” After a period of confused silence, the other Maiden eventually lifted her chin from her palm and nodded. “I think I remember that.”

Seika made her move right then and there. She leaned across the table and struck out with one hand, holding the unsheathed knife to the girl’s neck.

“Who are you?”

It was a visceral reaction. Her voice was shaking. Her horrifying conjecture had turned to conviction, driving Seika to violence.

“Wh-where is this coming from, Lady Sei—”

“Lady Reirin and I have never promised to compete against each other in dance,” the Kin Maiden growled, pressing the blade even closer.

The girl before her gasped, then laughed awkwardly. “R-right. I was mistaken. Things have just been so hectic as of late.”

“So hectic that you didn’t even notice my gaffe? It’s not the swallows that sing or the warblers that dance. The *warblers* sing and the *swallows* dance. Do you mean to tell me you’ve never heard such a common idiom?” Seika spat.

The other girl clammed up in humiliation. Yet another reaction so typical of *her*.

“I-I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“Refrain from making such pathetic excuses with Lady Reirin’s face. And stop with those obnoxious squeals.”

Though the impostor could manage the bare minimum of conversing like a proper Maiden, she was woefully uncultured. An emotional girl. Her voice came out in a squeak, she whimpered pathetically, and she was quick to make excuses. She was the type who pandered to the strong, tormented the weak, and clung to others the moment she encountered a setback.

“D-drop your blade…”

The girl raised a hand to shove her assailant back by the shoulder. When her fist opened to reveal trembling fingers, Seika’s fury mounted. Kou Reirin’s hands were meant to always be proud and beautiful.

It also served as the final push to make her certain. That awkward posture. Those ungainly movements. This wasn’t the first time Seika had seen them around the Maiden Court.

“Why have you commandeered Lady Reirin’s body?” she demanded, but she already knew the answer.

It was because of the Rite of Reverence—the ceremony to assess and assign a ranking to the Maidens. Realizing that she didn’t stand a chance of winning on her own, the girl had used her magic to steal someone else’s body.

“Answer me, Shu Keigetsu!”

Feeling the sharp edge of the blade against her neck, Keigetsu’s whole body tensed, her breathing growing shallow.

“Am I on the right track? You stole Lady Reirin’s body with the Daoist arts. You knew that a talentless amateur like yourself would never survive the Rite of Reverence otherwise! Here I braved the rite despite how desperately I wanted to run, while *you* tried to solve things by stealing someone else’s form… Despicable. You vile sewer rat!”

Her sharp repudiation hit Keigetsu like a knife in the heart. What could have given her away?

“I was a fool for not noticing sooner. Just look at that crude body language, those gauche expressions, those vulgar ideas. Oh, the harder I look, the more I can’t see anything but *you*!”

Who could have guessed that the slightest of gestures or facial expressions would be enough to reveal not only the truth of the swap but also the identity of the person inside? Kin Seika was much more observant and intelligent than Keigetsu had given her credit for. She broke into a cold sweat as she sensed danger on the horizon.

Yet Seika's next words made her blink.

"Answer me, Shu Keigetsu! Or else I'll turn you over to the Eagle Eyes!"

If Keigetsu were to candidly describe what she felt in that moment, it would be relief.

That's all?

Despite witnessing a strange forbidden art in action, despite the object of her worship being deprived of her body, the most Seika would do was rat her out to the Eagle Eyes?

So, what, she's not going to gouge out my eyes or leave me to be swarmed by insects? She's not going to drag me to the floor, pull out my hair, or douse me in water? She's not going to knock over everything in the vicinity and try to crush me to death?

All of those were things the Kou women would do in the name of retribution.

Upon closer inspection, the knife Seika held to her throat quivered ever so slightly with anger and nerves. With a grip so weak, even Keigetsu could easily give her the slip. As proof, Tousetsu made no move to burst in from behind the tent, indicating that she had deemed it unnecessary to act.

To test the waters, Keigetsu inflated the flame of a nearby candle and briefly coiled it around Seika's hand. The Kin Maiden screamed, kicked over her chair as she leapt to her feet, and tossed the knife aside.

"I-Is this magic?! H-how ghastly!" Clasping her hands to her chest, Seika mustered all her courage to glare at Keigetsu. Still, there was a clear tinge of fear in those gorgeous eyes. "Y-you can't intimidate me into keeping my mouth shut. I'm not the least bit afraid of a shallow woman who would employ sorcery to get what she—"

“Enough.” The more she regained her composure, the more frustrated Keigetsu became with Seika’s yapping. “Give the platitudes a rest.”

Letting her emotions get the better of her, she slammed her hands down on the table before her and rose to her feet. Unaccustomed to such rough language and conduct, the Kin Maiden gasped in a mixture of terror and reproach.

“Yes, you got it. I *am* Shu Keigetsu—the sewer rat of the Maiden Court. I switched places with Kou Reirin using the Daoist arts. But it’s not your place to criticize me for that. Kou Reirin gave me permission.”

“Wha…! You expect me to believe such nonsense?! You stole Lady Reirin’s body for your own personal gain, didn’t you? The nerve of you to commit such a hideous act and then lie about it!”

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s always ‘hideous’ with you. Big words. Then tell me, what good is your ‘beauty’? It’s all talk. Your aesthetic has no backbone!”

After roaring that with all her might, Keigetsu contemplated her mixed feelings about her own speech. Did aesthetic and backbone really go together? She had clearly been too influenced by a certain someone.

She sensed Tousetsu erupting into a fit of laughter behind the tent, while Kin Seika furrowed her brow in puzzlement. “I beg your pardon?”

Alas, there was no taking back what had already been said. Keigetsu girded her loins and tossed a clump of hair hanging over her shoulder.

“Hmph. I can almost sympathize with the Pure Consort. You talk a big game about how you want to be beautiful and upright, but you won’t fight for it.”

Seika retreated a step, and Keigetsu closed the gap. The scrape of shoes against the stone floor echoed.

“You’re afraid you’ll be forced to marry? Then did you tell the Pure Consort no? Did you punch her? Slap her? Did you scream at the top of your lungs? Did you set a trap for her? No! I bet all you did was cower and glare, just like you’re doing now!”

That was normal for a woman of high birth, Keigetsu was sure. All the same,

she couldn't help but think, *I fought. I struggled.*

She had shrieked as loud as she could, bared her teeth, and cursed others with her Daoist spells. People had laughed and called her pathetic, even labeled her efforts a sin, but still Keigetsu had stood strong and fought, bedraggled and unconcerned with appearances.

She had fought against the unfairness of her life, all for the sake of being who she was.

The only one to ever offer her a helping hand had been Kou Reirin. That was the one and only way in which she had ever been blessed.

"You're pretty. You're talented. You have what it takes to fight on your own, unlike me. And just now, you were even offered help in the form of the Kou clan's funds, but you refused to take it."

"…"

"You play the victim without even trying to fight back, and then you turn around and call *my* futile resistance ugly? Who do you think you are?!"

Seika's head jerked to attention at the no-holds-barred dressing-down, and she pursed her lips in a thin line. Her eyes, which had always had a certain poise about them, began to burn with rage.

She pressed a hand to her chest and argued back, carefully punctuating each and every word. "What is ugly is ugly. It is obscene to leech off others and let oneself be ruled by emotion. While the women of the branch line flaunted their ambition, my grandmother and mother said nothing and held strong against their abuse. All with their heads held high."

In her mind's eye, she saw an image of her mother and grandmother clenching their fists in silence before their trampled garden.

They had stood straight and tall. Never once had they raised their voices or vented their frustrations on anything, instead keeping their eyes fixed forward. They had always sat straight at attention in their solitary chambers, and even when those flirtatious voices reached their ears—the voices of those women who hung off others like parasites, parading their desires for all to see!—they hadn't so much as scowled.

Seika had learned from observing them in profile. What true nobility was. What true integrity was.

“The mainline descendants of the Kin must always have pride!”

“So did enduring with pride actually get you out of your mess?!”

Though Seika had shouted hard enough to shake the tent, Keigetsu managed to be even louder. Of course she had. No one could match her in a contest of screaming and yelling.

“The branch line was free to run your clan as they pleased, and the end result is that you’re being forced to sell your body! What’s so great about putting up with that in silence? All you’re doing is cowering!”

“That’s not—”

“Come on. You’re hiding it in the breast of your robe, aren’t you? Hand it over.” Realizing that this argument was going in circles, Keigetsu switched up her angle of attack. “The Pure Consort sent you here with something to sabotage Kou Reirin, right? A doll, if I had to guess?”

“How…?”

Confronted with knowledge no one else was supposed to have, Seika stared back in wide-eyed astonishment. Taking advantage of her shock, Keigetsu forcefully snatched the doll from her.

“What are you doing?!”

“My, what a lovely doll you have here! Did you come here to plant this? I wonder what’s inside. Poison? Or perhaps a shady amulet? Aha, so you wanted to make Kou Reirin out to be a traitor!”

“The consort didn’t tell me any of that!”

“But you had an inkling! And you *still* brought the doll all this way. Integrity? Aesthetic? Don’t make me laugh. You’re just following the Pure Consort’s orders like a coward!”

When Keigetsu slammed her hands down on the table a second time, Seika blanched and fell silent at last. With a small huff, the Shu Maiden dumped the doll she’d stolen onto the table.

“You know what, Lady Seika? This doll is a lot like you. She’s beautiful and has great posture. Well, of course—she *is* carved out of wood. No matter what happens to her, her expression never changes and she bears it all in silence. And she lives at the mercy of whoever owns her.”

Clink.

There came another clatter of shoes as Keigetsu closed in on Seika again. Bringing her face close enough that their noses were almost touching, she glared at the other Maiden.

“Is that really your ideal?”

“…”

Seika’s lips trembled, and her shoulders were beginning to sag.

“Do you understand the position you’re in? The moment I detected your plot, you were finished. Your only options left are to kill me, turn against the Pure Consort, or bring about your own end. I was going to do you the kindness of including you in my plan and pitting you against the consort.” Her mouth twisting in a grimace, Keigetsu went on, “But I don’t want to work with an overgrown doll. If I threaten you into doing what I say, you’ll go right back to playing the hapless victim, won’t you? You’re such an eyesore!”

Seika’s head snapped up at the word *eyesore*. “What did you just call me?”

A fierce glint returned to her eyes, which had lost their luster only moments ago. Something more than just righteous—something sinister—permeated her expression.

“An eyesore? *Me?*”

“That’s what I said. Didn’t hear me the first time? I’ll repeat it as many times as necessary. The way you shilly-shally and spout off pretty-sounding platitudes is an eyesore! It’s ugly! You’re a miserable doll who’s only pretty on the surface!”

As soon as Keigetsu said that, the air around Seika noticeably changed. Her gaze grew sharp, and her beauty, which had once been nothing but glamorous, took on a more commanding aspect.

Without even opening her mouth to argue, she made a grab for the knife lying on the table.

“Ah…!”

The decisiveness of the motion took Keigetsu by surprise. It was the first time that Kin Seika had expressed her intentions through her actions before her words.

What will she do?

Keigetsu braced herself, casually focusing her qi in the direction of the candle behind her. Was the Kin Maiden planning to use the knife in her grip to take her own life, or had she decided to shut her blackmailer’s mouth once and for all?

The moment she takes a swing at me, I’ll set her on fire.

With a gulp, Keigetsu did her best to judge the timing. Seika adjusted her grip on the knife, then raised it high overhead…

Thunk!

She drove it straight into the doll that had been left abandoned on the table.

Startled, Keigetsu watched as the doll sat there in silence, only to split in two with an almost comical *crack* a moment later.

“Take that back. I am not ugly.”

The inside of the doll was hollow, and there was suspicious writing scrawled on its interior in reddish-brown ink. Seika looked down at it coolly, then stabbed the part with the spell once more for good measure.

“Nor am I a doll.”

Even Keigetsu, who had been telling her off moments ago, was cowed by the authoritative aura about her.

It was then that something finally dawned on Keigetsu: No matter how much she struggled to understand the other Maiden’s philosophy, it was an inviolable guideline as far as Kin Seika was concerned. An outsider couldn’t hope to comprehend it; it encapsulated all seventeen years of her life, and perhaps the lifetimes of her mother and grandmother too. No matter who called it

cowardice, the women had all possessed an unyielding passion for beauty on which they refused to compromise.

“I will admit that I have not taken concrete action to this point. I have seen the error of my ways, and I henceforth vow to put forth the proper effort and take a more proactive approach.” Seika had shot past the point of rage, speaking in a completely neutral manner. “But that does not mean I will cease to take pride in beauty.”

Her skin was fair, and her eyes were long and narrow. Her hair was wavy and her posture impeccable. She was indeed stunning to the point of appearing divine.

“I won’t listen to that vulgar Pure Consort any longer. Nor will I escape by means of suicide. Either act would be ugly. Of the paths before me now, taking your hand is the only one I find barely tolerable.” Seika threw down her blade, letting it clatter to the floor, before haughtily declaring, “So tell me about this plan of yours, Shu Keigetsu. I’m willing to hear you out.” She raised one beautifully sculpted eyebrow as naturally as an actress. “Only then will I join your side. I won’t fall in line because you threatened me. I will agree to cooperate on the condition that your idea aligns with my sense of aesthetic.”

Once she had prefaced her choice loud and clear, Seika held out a hand to Keigetsu. The latter stared down at those long, white fingers, then burst out laughing in spite of herself.

What a prideful woman. But that was exactly what made her Kin Seika—the Maiden of the Kin clan, the bloodline of beauty and art.

“You’ve made the right choice. But let me warn you now, your admiration for Kou Reirin will be shattered when you hear the details.”

Things had gone differently than expected, but Keigetsu’s attempts at persuasion had been a success. Kin Seika had destroyed the doll and turned her back on the Pure Consort. She was on *their* side now.

Equal parts relieved and amused by the positive outcome, Keigetsu followed Seika’s example and extended her hand.

Yet as soon as she saw that, Seika frowned and withdrew hers. “The way you

hold out your hand is so uncouth. A pale imitation of Lady Reirin.”

“Don’t make me smack you, wench.”

Of course she had to open her big mouth and ruin the moment.

Instead of shaking hands, the two girls exchanged a high five, scowling all the while.

Chapter 5:
Reirin Lectures

FOR A WHILE NOW, Ran Houshun had been crouching and plunging her hands into the cold earth of the field. The soil was rich, well cultivated, and sculpted into neat rows. The crops were planted as close together as possible without encroaching on each other, and even though it was winter, the frost-rimmed leaves were a healthy shade of green.

"Miss Reirin really is good at anything she sets her mind to," the Maiden mumbled.

This was the outskirts of the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion. She was working in the field in front of the storehouse to which Shu Keigetsu had once been banished.

It had been around the time of the Ghost Festival when the girl suddenly begun to act strangely, ultimately collapsing after working herself to exhaustion for the Kou Maiden's sake. That gesture of goodwill from Shu Keigetsu, previously ridiculed as a sewer rat, had stunned the people around her and left them stewing in shame. Kin Seika and the captain of the Eagle Eyes, as well as court ladies from the other clans, had turned up to pay her a visit, claiming that the dilapidated state of the boundary wall had turned the space into a "common area."

Shortly after, Shu Keigetsu had returned to her normal self and filled the Shu Palace with her shrieking once more, so most people had stopped coming to the storehouse. Only Kou Reirin, perhaps moved by the gesture of friendship, had stayed in the habit of making clandestine visits ever since.

Perhaps due to her affinity for earth, rumor had it that she gardened as a pastime. What Ran Houshun was currently staring down at was the field Kou Reirin tended.

"I figured I'd be dealing with a small flower bed, but this is a full-blown field. She's such a riot."

For someone who was supposedly amused, Houshun's expression was somber. Dazed, she stared down at the toxic flora she had just planted.

This area was known to be Kou Reirin's haunt. It was the perfect place to plant a poisonous flower and lend credibility to the scenario that she was covertly preparing to betray the crown.

One flower is all it will take to end her life. It's almost too easy.

Last night, after the banquet for the shaman was over, the Virtuous Consort had come back shrouded in a strangely saccharine fragrance, whereupon she ordered Houshun to execute a plot to sabotage Kou Reirin. Loath to be outdone by the Kins, who were working on a similar scheme, she had instructed Houshun to fabricate evidence of the Kou Maiden's "treason."

Evidently, Kou Reirin had incurred the shaman's wrath after the incident at the Violet Dragon's Spring, and preparations to condemn her during the final trial were underway. With the all-powerful shaman denouncing her, plus the Kin and Ran clans working together to back those claims with evidence, there was little doubt that she would be promptly found guilty and executed.

Since the script was already written, it didn't matter if the evidence was flimsy. It only had to exist.

Kou Reirin was as good as dead.

"Aww…"

Houshun tried to crack a smile.

She *should* be smiling. This would spell the certain end of a formidable foe.

A formidable foe—the first person who had ever seen through to her true nature.

When Houshun had tried to create her usual smoke screen by hiding her face, the girl had forcefully closed the distance between them and whispered in the sweetest of voices, *"I despise you, Lady Houshun."*

It was the first time anyone had ever told her to her face that they hated her. She had never experienced such fierce emotion directed not at her facade but at her true self, and she hadn't known how to react.

Thus, Houshun's first instinct had been to shield her face behind her sleeves. Yet Kou Reirin had grabbed her by the arms. She had pushed those sleeves aside, forced her to look up, and stared right through her with eyes like jewels.

Houshun was fairly sure that was the first time she had confronted someone head-on.

No surprise there. I've been hiding my face for so long, she thought as she buried her head in her knees.

Born to a prostitute, Houshun had spent her entire childhood making herself small alongside her older brother, Rinki. *Know your place. Never show a hint of defiance,* their mother had told them until she was blue in the face. *Hide your irritation. Keep all your scornful sneers inside and shrink in on yourself. The smaller you look, the better. Be helpless, be harmless, be pathetic. The weak have no choice but to curl up and wait out the storm. No one is going to step up to protect you.*

Her mother had been an intelligent woman indeed—in the sense that she could accurately calculate profit and loss. Weighing the merits of being her authentic self against living a comfortable life, she had chosen the latter without hesitation. Her rational mind was surely part of the reason why the Ran patriarch had taken such a shine to her.

The result was that their mother had maintained a monopoly on the patriarch's affections, and for children raised without great expectations, both Houshun and Rinki had managed to attain status comparable to that of the direct descendants. Her teachings had proved to be correct.

But, man, crouching down sure gets exhausting after a while.

Houshun had never gardened before, so her legs were going numb just from squatting in the field for half an hour. Unable to will herself to get up, however, she stayed there with her face pressed into her kneecaps.

I'm tired…

Since she had done all the digging with her dominant hand, her right arm and shoulder were stiff. She couldn't stand the feeling of the dirt wedged under her fingernails.

Though the Ran clan was indeed the clan of wood, that only encompassed wood as an abstract concept. It meant that they revered plants as a symbol of growth, development, and creation, but Houshun didn't have the slightest interest in gardening as a hobby. Crawling on the ground was not her idea of a good time.

By the same token, she was tired of curling up like a little insect and making herself look stupid.

So she had risen up. She had believed that with her sharp wits and silver tongue, she could make any foe dance to her tune.

And yet…

"I'm so tired…" muttered Houshun, letting her grimy right hand drop listlessly to the earth.

Her feeble complaint hadn't been directed at anyone in particular.

"My, my. What, pray tell, are you working so hard to plant?"

Thus, when the airy voice of a girl greeted her from behind, Houshun's shoulders jumped as she turned her head.

***

Let's turn back the clock a bit.

"I wonder if Lady Keigetsu is doing a good job convincing Lady Seika…" Leelee muttered anxiously, walking a few steps behind her mistress.

Shu Keigetsu—or rather, Kou Reirin in her form—tilted her head to one side and glanced over her shoulder. "My, are you worried? There's no need to fret. Lady Keigetsu assured us that threats were her forte, remember?"

"Well, yes, she's very good at yelling… But this is Lady Seika we're talking about. She's very strong-willed. The more someone screams at her, the more she'll scream back. I'm afraid things could get ugly."

Leave it to Keigetsu's long-serving attendant to make such a prescient prediction.

Reirin, meanwhile, happily crunched gravel under her feet, not the least bit

concerned. “Lady Keigetsu and Lady Seika are quite similar in how straightforward they are. A clash between them could actually serve as the beginnings of a friendship,” she said, brimming with confidence. “Lady Keigetsu is a charming girl. I’m sure she could get along with just about anyone once they’ve had a real conversation with her. I’m more worried about whether I can get *my* part of the job done.”

She waded through the path as it transitioned from white gravel to grass, then ground to a halt.

“It remains to be seen if I can invite someone I hate to fight alongside me.”

What Reirin’s narrowed eyes beheld was a well-manicured field and a storehouse. She and Leelee stood outside the storehouse on the border of the Shu Palace, which had been converted into a communal space.

The area was usually deserted, but she spotted a lone figure crouching in a corner of the field. Dressed in a plain celadon green robe, the girl appeared to be a low-ranking Ran court lady at a glance. However, her well-coiffed hair and graceful body language hinted at her true station.

The girl crouching before the field and hanging her head was none other than Ran Houshun. Judging by the bump in the soil around her, it seemed she had already finished her errand.

“So I was right. She chose to do it here.”

Hiding in the bushes a short distance from the field, Reirin pressed a hand to her cheek and sighed.

At the behest of the Virtuous Consort, Houshun was scheming to plant a shady poisonous flower somewhere near “Kou Reirin.” Normally, one would come to the pavilion where she was staying or some remote part of the Kou Palace under the guise of a visit—Kin Seika was probably planning to do just that—but Reirin had figured that Houshun would be smarter than that.

The Palace of the Vermillion Stallion had been chronically understaffed ever since the Noble Consort’s exile. There were few guards around, and no one would reprimand a member of another clan for coming in and out through the crumbling wall. In that case, it would be much safer to do her meddling in the

storehouse and field right next to the Palace of the Indigo Fox than to go all the way to the courtyard or another clan's palace. Besides, if the story was supposed to be that Reirin was secretly growing poisonous flowers for her rebellion, it wouldn't make sense for her to have planted them out in the open on Kou soil.

Just to be certain, Reirin had gone and checked the scene, and the result was as she suspected.

"She's certainly a crafty one, that Lady Houshun."

In all honesty, Reirin couldn't deny that she enjoyed competing—albeit strictly when it came to board games—against Houshun, who was always trying to outwit her opponent and see several moves ahead. Planting unauthorized flowers in her painstakingly nurtured garden was a different story, though.

If the flower is an allium, I'll let it slide because those can help prevent crop damage…but if it's a mint plant, she's really in for it.

In view of her own frailty, Reirin admired plants in the mint family for their hardiness, but on the other hand, their life force was *so* strong that they encroached on her other plants. It was a love-hate relationship.

Fuming over matters that would surely have Leelee shouting, "*That's* your issue?!" if she could hear her, Reirin snuck up on Houshun from behind.

Oblivious to her presence, the crouching Maiden muttered, "I'm so tired."

Reirin discreetly cleared her throat. Then, eager to show off the fruits of her practice, she kept "Shu Keigetsu's" trademark diction in mind and sarcastically remarked, "My, my. What, pray tell, are you working so hard to plant?"

Houshun whipped around. "Ah!"

"Oh. Aconite. That's rather… I mean, talk about cliché."

It had no petals in the winter, but after deducing the identity of the flower from the shape of its leaves, Reirin shrugged in disappointment.

Of course, that was the least of Houshun's concerns. The color draining from her face, she leapt to her feet. She tried to bolt with all the speed of a small animal, but Reirin caught her faster than she could run.

“Hold it. What were you doing here disguised as a court lady? You still haven’t answered my question, Lady Houshun.”

“Lady Keigetsu…” For a brief moment, Houshun gasped in horror. But when it came down to it, she was the Maiden of the Ran clan, those who prided themselves on their intellect. Her response was swift. She squirmed in Reirin’s grasp and shouted in the direction of the crumbling wall—where the Ran Palace was. “St-stop this at once, Lady Keigetsu!”

“Excuse me, Lady Houshun?”

“I’m sorry! It was wrong of me to trespass! Please don’t be mad! Don’t hit me!”

Her voice trembled ever so naturally, and tears pricked at her eyes. She deserved a round of applause for her performance.

“What is happening over there?!”

“Did Lady Shu Keigetsu raise a hand against our Maiden?!”

There came a storm of footsteps as the court ladies and Eagle Eyes rushed over at the sound of her screams.

Clever. Since she’s already been caught, she might as well make herself out to be the victim.

Reirin had to hand it to Houshun for how fast she could think on her feet. Naturally, her plan had accounted for “Shu Keigetsu’s” status as the maligned sewer rat of the Maiden Court, as well as her tendency to freeze in the face of the unexpected.

Her foremost goal was to throw off her opponent and spin the scenario as “Shu Keigetsu tormenting Ran Houshun.” While Shu Keigetsu was tongue-tied and scrambling for excuses, she could come up with a cover story. It was a trick that truly highlighted her relation to Ran Rinki, who had once betrayed Lord Koh during the Unso excursion.

Due to her personal circumstances, Leelee was also at higher risk of being framed. Shooting nervous glances back at the wall, she tugged on Reirin’s sleeve with a panicked look. “Hey! Th-this isn’t good. Lady Rei…er, Keigetsu,

let's retreat for now and—"

Believe it or not, I perform quite well under pressure.

However, it was Kou Reirin who currently inhabited the Shu Maiden's body. Neither flustered nor stunned, she instead reacted by punching herself hard in the cheek. Then she pulled Houshun into a tight embrace.

"You're all right!"

"Huh…?" Houshun jumped in her arms. "Hey!"

"You're going to be fine, Lady Houshun! I'm right here. The hallucinations will pass soon enough. There's nothing to be afraid of anymore!"

In a reversal, it was now the Ran Maiden who gawked in astonishment.

With an emphatic nod, Reirin shouted to the other side of the wall, "Is anyone there?! Somebody, come quick! Lady Houshun mistook a daffodil leaf for a leek and ate it! She's hallucinating and going berserk! Someone call for a doctor! Come on, Leelee, give me a hand and rub her back!"

"Wha…?!"

That was the scenario Reirin had come up with on the spur of the moment.

As Houshun flailed and struggled to break free, Reirin grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard. "You're safe, Lady Houshun. Calm down. No one here is trying to hurt you. It's all an illusion! A bad dream!"

"Stop—"

"Slap me across the cheek again or scratch me all you like, I don't care! Don't worry about it! Just get a grip!"

While Reirin concentrated her efforts on rubbing the girl's back, court ladies streamed into the storehouse area one after another. Their faces were flushed with alarm, but as soon as they laid eyes on the two Maidens, their jaws dropped.

"Erm…?"

What they found was Houshun flailing with a red and swollen face and "Shu Keigetsu" patting her on the back. It appeared to them that she was struggling

to calm the younger Maiden, whose delusions had sent her into a frenzy.

"What happened here, Lady Shu Keigetsu?"

"Didn't you hear me the first time?! Lady Houshun is in pain because she accidentally ate a daffodil leaf! She vomited earlier, and now she's hallucinating and seeing everyone else as some kind of hideous monster. The poor thing even started crying and begging me not to hit her."

"That's not—"

"Come, empty the contents of your stomach!" Just as Houshun tried to argue, Reirin silenced her by shoving a hand into her mouth. "Hey, Eagle Eyes! She wouldn't want men to see her like this. Get out of here and call for a doctor! You court ladies over there! What are you standing around for? Go fetch hot water, a cloth, and a washbasin this instant!"

"Um, but what in the world was Lady Houshun doing near this storehouse? And why is she dressed like a court lady?"

"That's what I'd like to know! Just concentrate on helping her for now. Are you planning to stand by and watch your mistress die?!"

When one court lady expressed her legitimate concerns, Reirin forced her hand into cooperating. The key here was not to give Ran Houshun a chance to say her piece.

"Hurry!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, at which the court ladies scattered in every which direction.

After that, only Leelee, so overwhelmed that her jaw was set; Houshun, utterly stupefied; and Reirin were left at the scene.

"Phew. Thank goodness I… Wait, scratch that. Heh heh, looks like I managed to pull the wool over their eyes."

"You can't be serious." Houshun's lips quivered. It was hard to tell whether it was from shock or rage. "A leek? You think I'd mistake a daffodil for a leek? *Me?* And then start hallucinating?"

"Why not? It's a bit far-fetched for the Maiden of the wood-aligned Ran clan, but I bet people would buy it in your particular case." With a gentle smile, Reirin

added, “Since your selling points are your childlike innocence and naivety.”

“You know, as soon as the doctor takes a look at me, he’s going to find out that I didn’t eat any daffodils. Once the truth is revealed, you’re going to come out of this looking awfully shady.”

Houshun shot Reirin a glare so sharp it practically cut through the air, but the latter didn’t so much as flinch.

“I could say the same of you, considering you were snooping around another clan’s storehouse dressed in a court lady’s uniform. Which of us do you think will be in a worse position when the full story comes to light?” she said, flashing an enchanting smile.

Her eyes widening, Houshun took a step back. “You *are* Lady Keigetsu…right?”

The moment she was exposed to even a hint of malice, Shu Keigetsu would always fall to pieces. Houshun seemed to find it strange that she was acting so sure of herself all of a sudden.

Before she had a chance to cotton on to the swap, Reirin decided to go in for the kill. “Don’t you realize, Lady Houshun? The moment I caught you planting aconite in Kou Reirin’s garden, your fate was sealed.”

“Aconite can be used to make medicine. There’s no shame in planting it in another clan’s field.”

“Maybe not—*if* you had come here as a Maiden. But you went to the trouble of disguising yourself as a court lady. It’s obvious you were up to no good. So that’s a pretty weak excuse, don’t you think?”

Houshun pursed her lips in a thin line, but by the next moment, she was back to tilting her head in mockery. “Still, I can set someone else up as the mastermind. For instance, let’s say that after your falling-out with Miss Reirin, *you* forced me to sabotage her as payback.”

She clearly didn’t know that the two girls had already made up. Houshun put a strong emphasis on the word “falling-out.”

Taking the other girl’s silence to mean that she was on the right track, she took her time flooding “Shu Keigetsu’s” ears with her poison. “You stupid sewer

rat. You're the most reviled person in the Maiden Court, and now even Miss Reirin—your only patron—has turned her back on you. Under the circumstances, who do you think people are more likely to believe: you or me?"

Leelee, who had been observing the conversation from the sidelines, gave a start when she saw her mistress's hands discreetly curl into fists.

Houshun was too focused on exploiting her enemy's weakness to notice. "Who's going to believe that someone as 'meek and harmless' as me would sabotage Miss Reirin with a poisonous flower? No one, that's who. Even the way you looked after me just now could easily be written off as an act. Everyone knows that a villainess like you would never rush to the aid of another."

"…"

"Still want to go to all this trouble for Miss Reirin? It's a waste of time. No matter how much you cozy up to her at this point, she's already washed her hands of you."

"…"

As Leelee watched a thin smile rise to her mistress's face, she broke into a cold sweat.

"I'm amazed she put up with you for so long. I can't believe she ever considered someone like you a friend—someone without a scrap of beauty or talent, who leeches off her protection like a parasite only to turn around and scream at her in a fit of rage."

The higher the corners of her mistress's mouth curved, the harder Leelee's heart pounded. She was tempted to warn Ran Houshun to quit while she was ahead, but she was so intimidated that she couldn't move a muscle.

"No matter how hard you try to make it up to Miss Reirin, a broken friendship can never be repaired. Actually, it never counted as 'friendship' in the first place. It was just your one-sided depen—"

Houshun never got to finish the words flowing from her tongue with a steadily growing ease.

The reason being that Reirin had tugged on both of her cheeks with a bone-crunching sort of *snap*.

“Eep?!”

“You…big…sourpuss!”

Taking full advantage of the large mass of Keigetsu’s body, right down to the size of her palms, she yanked on Houshun’s cheeks with all her might. Though she still had a smile on her face, she was so mad that her words came out in staccato.

Hee hee. Lady Houshun’s cheeks are so soft. It feels so pleasant to twist them.

Could Houshun have said something similar to Keigetsu herself?

No, of course she had—and it was when she was talking to her outside the Ran pavilion that day. That was the whole reason she and Reirin had been dragged into that ridiculous fight.

Reirin twisted Houshun’s cheeks so hard they made a grinding sound, and only when the other girl sobbed in pain and fear did she finally let go.

“Could you kindly keep that loathsome mouth of yours shut? Don’t come crying to me if it gets you in trouble.”

“There’s no point saying that *after* it got her in trouble…” Leelee muttered.

Houshun, on the other hand, was in no mood to be making wisecracks. Pressing a dirt-caked hand to her swollen cheek, she slumped over on the spot. “Ow…”

“Allow me to correct you on behalf of Kou Reirin, who is not here at the moment.”

Reirin knelt in front of Houshun’s crouching form and brought her face right up to the other Maiden’s. She reached to touch the cheek Houshun wasn’t cradling, stroking it gently. Somewhere down the line, she had reverted to her normal way of speaking, but she was too livid to notice.

Now, how best to drill the facts into the squirrel’s conceited little head?

“Kou Reirin regards me as a wonderful friend. However emotional I may be, I

never pretend to be something I'm not. I have a wealth of knowledge, I am a hard worker, and it's absolutely adorable how fast I flit through facial expressions. It's ridiculous to suggest that I do nothing but rely on her. I never run from anything, and I fight my own battles." Narrowing her eyes, she added in a frosty voice, "I am the picture of independence. Unlike a certain someone at the Virtuous Consort's beck and call."

"…"

Houshun's head snapped up.

Reirin slowly rose to her feet, washing her hands of the girl going pale before her. "I must confess that I'm disappointed in you. Wasn't the Virtuous Consort supposed to be your 'stupid aunt'? Now look at you, spreading lies and hurting people at her behest."

"…"

"Back when you made a mess of the southern territory, you were arrogant and wicked, but at least you were smart. Though you left it to luck whether your plan would bear fruit, it was all your own idea. And now? You planted a toxic flower as cliché as aconite on someone else's orders. You no longer have the brains or the ability to think for yourself."

Houshun stared up at her, the color draining from her face.

For the finisher, Reirin made a point of calling her the word she hated the most: "You're incompetent."

"…"

Still crumpled on the ground, Houshun clenched a fistful of dirt in her right hand. She tried to sneer, but her mouth quivered in the process, until she ultimately bit down on her lip and hung her head.

"Then what was I supposed to do?" A lock of hair slid over the girl's small, hunched shoulders. Leaving her tresses to fall into disarray, as if hoping that they would block her view, she looked at the ground and demanded, "What would you have me do?! Fine, you win. But that's easy for you to say. Are you telling me that you could stand strong against *this*?"

Her voice cracked, and at last Houshun stuck out her left hand, which she had been hiding all this time.

“Look at what she did to me!”

With that heart-wrenching cry, she raised her hand high. The fingernails she’d concealed under her sleeve were dainty and looked like beautiful pink shells—except for one that had been torn off her little finger. Leelee gasped at the sight of her red, swollen fingertip. Reirin’s brow furrowed as well.

“The Virtuous Consort did this?”

“Yes. She called me a pompous brat, but since she couldn’t beat me in a war of words, she chose to resort to violence. She slapped me, shoved me aside. She even ordered the court ladies to hold me in place! Then she took a nail, and…!” In a departure from her earlier despondence, Houshun had launched into a frenzied tirade as she lifted her head, only to be abruptly choked with tears. “I hate it…”

She buried her face in her left hand, stripped of its nail, and her right hand, caked in mud. Lolling her head from side to side and sobbing raggedly, she was the picture of a small child.

“I hate getting hurt. I *hate* it. No more!” All traces of sarcasm were gone from her voice. Houshun curled up into a tiny ball and hunkered to the ground once more. “I have no choice but to listen to her! I don’t want to get hurt! And no one will protect me!”

No one was going to protect her. That cursed knowledge had been etched into Houshun’s being since she was a child.

“Listen here, Houshun. At the end of the day, you and I are nothing but a prostitute-turned-concubine and her daughter.” Houshun’s mother, who had captivated the hearts of men in the red-light district and held them prisoner forevermore, had doled out such instruction with the sort of stony expression she would never have worn in her husband’s presence. *“Don’t put on airs and graces. No matter how stupid someone may be, they are still the ones holding our lives in their hands. Rinki is a man, so he can take care of himself. We women have no choice but to look small and make others adore us.”*

Under her mother's tutelage, Houshun had learned to craft her facade. She would never show her contempt. She hid her emotions and her intellect, behaving like an innocent little girl.

What was the harm in being a schemer? She could get away with it in the shadow of her sleeves, anyway.

Every time Houshun shyly hid her face, she was usually sticking out her tongue. No, eventually she had ceased to do even that, instead staring blankly at the shadows her sleeves cast on the floor. During conversations that failed to hold her interest, she would determine her answers based on whether she could make out the shadows through the gaps in her sleeves.

None of it mattered. There wasn't a single choice she could make because she sincerely wanted to. That which was required of her was not her will but her judgment. Which option was the rational choice? Which would allow her to survive more comfortably?

Decisions she couldn't put her heart into were dull. Of course she would grow passive after a while.

And thus had Houshun lived out her life, muttering to herself about how stupid it all was.

That is, until she had meddled in Unso's affairs out of boredom and got her comeuppance at the hands of Kou Reirin.

"I…" Her hair plastered to her wet cheeks, she looked up unsteadily at the other Maiden. "I *did* try to rise up once."

"I despise you, Lady Houshun."

When she was forced to lift her face, more than the fact that someone hated her, her heart had pounded at the prospect of staring someone straight in the eye for the first time.

She no longer had to hide. She could lay bare her true self, the one who belittled those around her and sneakily worked the room, to another person.

It didn't bother her that the elder Maiden looked so annoyed throughout their every interaction. Even when Houshun came at her with all the emotions

and skills she had once masked, Kou Reirin never faltered. Instead of flying into a rage and getting violent, she brushed her off as easily as she would swat a gnat. It was stimulating yet safe.

Houshun had enjoyed those days in the Maiden Court. She had wished that life could go on like that forever.

In hindsight, she had gotten too carried away. She had skills, as well as an opponent to test them against. If the need arose, she could play up her innocence to the hilt and get the court ladies in her pocket. Then what was the point of continuing to cower before that shortsighted consort?

"But that was a mistake."

Tears spilled from her childlike eyes. Houshun covered her red, swollen fingertip with her other hand for protection.

"My aunt is stupid…but that just makes it impossible to predict when she might fly off the handle. She easily turns to violence without regard for logic. She knows it's the easiest way to get things done. In a way, maybe it's rational." Though dripping with cynicism, her voice was not as venomous as it had once been. Instead, it was almost inaudibly small. "The court ladies talked a big game about protecting me…but once Aunt Hourin raises a hand against me, they just stand there looking pale. They turn their backs on me without a second thought. And the only one who Miss Reirin bends over backwards to help is you."

The court ladies cherished Houshun as they would a small pet. With how thoroughly she had captivated their hearts, the Maiden had been sure they would protect her from the consort's violence, yet all they had done was tremble in fear. They stood by and let her suffer.

Kou Reirin was no better. She hadn't shown the slightest interest in Houshun's plight. When Houshun first warned her about poisoning her white powder with the daffodil, she had hoped in vain that the other girl would notice that something was wrong.

"No one will protect me. So…what other choice do I have?!"

She hung her head again, her tears dripping onto the dirt below.

As Houshun's shoulders shook, Reirin took a silent step toward her. Just as she was about to reach a hand for the other girl, Leelee swiftly snatched it up from the side.

"Don't," said the redhead.

"Don't what, Leelee?" her mistress asked, looking over her shoulder.

A conflicted expression on her face, Leelee said, "Don't let her win you over so easily. You're too quick to forgive."

In her mind's eye, the court lady saw an image of her past self brandishing a blade in desperation, then her mistress forgiving her and pulling her into a hug. She saw Reirin stopping Tousetsu from committing suicide and scolding her to live. She saw the Maiden accepting even Keigetsu, who had stolen her form, with a smile.

It was true that Reirin's merciful spirit had saved her from despair. No doubt it would also take a great burden off Houshun to hear, "I promise to protect you. Now come join my side."

But in the end, that would only put more on Reirin's shoulders. She was the sort to push her limits for the sake of others without any regard for herself. One consequence of that reckless behavior was her recent fight with Keigetsu. Since she had been run ragged trying to mediate, Leelee had some strong opinions on the matter.

Even though Reirin had been her own salvation—no, for that very reason—she didn't want any more people to start relying on her.

To make Lady Reirin's plan a success, all we need to do is win Ran Houshun to our side. It's not our job to heal her heart, Leelee concluded, suppressing the pang of sympathy she felt at seeing the nasty wound.

"Think about it, milady. She may have had her reasons, but she brought down a tent and tried to kill you. You can't let her get away with that," she said earnestly.

A blank look came to her mistress's freckled face before she cracked a smile. "Not to worry." With a serene expression, she turned back to Houshun and said, "I was planning to tell Lady Houshun to get up."

Her voice was soft but stern. Houshun looked up in surprise. “What…?”

This time, Reirin gazed down at the other girl without stooping to her level. “No one will protect you. It’s a hard thing to accept. But you are also correct. You are the only one who can protect yourself. One’s suffering is something that must be borne by oneself.” Her eyes narrowed. “If there are but two exceptions, only subjects who have crowned a ruler or one who has made a sincere effort to forge a friendship may unburden their pain to another. But you are a Maiden, not my subject. You are my foe, not my friend.”

Reirin wasn’t about to forgive Houshun for endangering the denizens of the southern territory and driving Keigetsu into a corner all “out of boredom.”

“Ha ha… So I deserve to suffer?”

At this point, Houshun was torn between smiling and crying.

Reirin declined to answer her, instead turning her gaze to the grass growing around them. “The way I see it…”

The vegetables and flowers planted in the field were all meticulously nurtured, but compared to the height of summer, they inevitably looked like they were wilting in the cold. Some had crumbled under the frost. Others were stuck as seedlings or bulbs, waiting out the winter.

It was impossible for the entire field to remain intact. The weakest plants would be the first to wither and die.

“When exposed to the harsh cold of winter, the most vulnerable plants are the first to perish. The biting winds do not come for the well-insulated flowers first. They begin by killing the thin, undernourished leaves exposed to the elements.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You said that the Virtuous Consort is quick to resort to violence. Choosing to do harm is second nature to her,” Reirin said quietly. “Then how do you believe she grew so comfortable with it in the first place?”

Houshun’s eyes went wide. “Huh…?”

“Do you think that when a lowlife like her resolves to hurt someone, she goes

after an authority figure like a Maiden first? Wouldn't it stand to reason that she started out beating those even more powerless than yourself, who have nowhere to run?" The other girl's melancholy gaze landed on a listlessly drooping weed. "If the Maiden falls victim to the malice of one, I imagine her retainers have already suffered the misfortune of ten. Have you noticed anything unusual about your court ladies? Did any of them seem especially frightened?"

At her question, numerous scenes flooded Houshun's mind.

The court ladies had scrambled to press their foreheads to the floor whenever the Virtuous Consort appeared on the scene. She had always assumed it was a show of modesty, but it was hardly necessary to kowtow in the presence of their own clan's consort.

When they rushed over to Houshun after she was hit, they had kept their voices down. It was almost as if they were afraid their criticism of the consort would be overheard.

The hands in which they'd held their handkerchiefs had trembled. Their faces had been ashen as they watched the violence from the sidelines.

"We all consider your carefree innocence to be an irreplaceable treasure."

"Your smile is our sole source of comfort."

The court ladies had adored the helpless and harmless Maiden. They had claimed that seeing her smile was their sole comfort. Did that mean the women's lives were so full of hardship that something so trivial could bring them joy?

Houshun's face went paler still. "No way…"

"That time under the pavilion when you doused yourself with ash from the incense burner, and again just a few minutes ago, your indigo blues took exceptional care of you. It was almost like an overprotective mother sheltering her innocent child." Reirin turned to face the Ran Maiden again. "Do you think, perhaps, the Virtuous Consort has been tormenting them at her whim, and they endeavored to keep you from finding out?"

The question sounded to Houshun like this: *Your court ladies didn't turn their*

backs on you. Weren't you the first to leave them out to dry?

"Oh…"

She felt a chill settle over her head.

"It's much easier to leave scratches with my nail guards."

The Virtuous Consort knew that it was best to wear nail guards when slapping someone, and she was aware that a nail was the easiest way to remove a fingernail.

How on earth could she have known that?

"Oh, but I'd better avoid her face."

She had specified that she had better avoid *Houshun's* face. Because she held respectable status as a Maiden.

But what of the court ladies she could execute at will? What if the Ran Palace's high turnover rate was not due to their fickle nature but rather a product of abuse?

Houshun's relentless stream of tears dried up in an instant. What had stopped them was a mix of astonishment and shame.

Yes. To her own surprise, Houshun felt ashamed. Ashamed that she hadn't understood a single thing. Ashamed that her court ladies—whom she had thought of as mere pawns—were far more thoughtful, loving, and devoted than she could ever hope to be.

"I do feel bad that your nail was torn off. If you were either my subject or my friend, I would seek revenge on the Virtuous Consort at once."

The girl's freckled face tilted invitingly to one side. The look in her eyes urged Houshun to rise, and the younger Maiden gazed up at her in rapture.

"But you are not my subject. You are a Maiden. So you must rise to your feet. You must protect those weaker than yourself."

The way her lips moved was awfully well defined and decisive.

"But…" Houshun mumbled as she stared at the girl's face. "What am I supposed to do?"

Her voice sounded lost even to her own ears. She really didn't know the answer. She used to consider her sharp wit and silver tongue to be her greatest weapons, but they had been easily shattered by violence. Now she was suddenly being told to stand, but after all the time she had spent crouching down and relying on verbal attacks, she had no idea what to use as a foothold.

"Both the court ladies and I are powerless before the Virtuous Consort."

"Perhaps so."

The girl with the Shu Maiden's face nodded her head. Then, for whatever reason, she reached for a patch of weeds near Houshun and ripped the grass from the earth. She clenched her fist around the dark-green tuft, grabbing the Ran Maiden's arm with her free hand.

Instinctively, Houshun lifted her sleeves to cover her face. It wasn't to hide her expression—it was because she was terrified. Ever since she had been stripped of her fingernail, it was a struggle to watch anyone reach a hand toward her.

Is she going to hit me?!

She was forced to her feet. Houshun arched her back to escape, but when she felt a chill on the hand of her seized arm, she angled her head to see what it was.

And what should she find but the juice of kneaded mugwort dripping onto her red, swollen pinky.

"Fingernails regrow within a month or so. If you keep the affected area clean, the pain will subside soon enough. The reason it's still swollen is because the wound is infected. I shall teach you how to treat it with fresh water, alcohol, and herbs."

With a comment that first aid was the best place to start, the girl carefully pressed the squashed mugwort to Houshun's finger, then showed her how to lightly apply pressure with her other hand.

"Topical medicines are good for clearing up an infection, but a truly dire situation will necessitate a decoction. This case calls for bellflower, dried bitter orange, and peony. I have all three on hand, so I will share my supply with you."

“…”

The juice of the mugwort slowly oozed over Houshun’s burning hot fingertip.

A strained voice rushed from the little girl’s lips. “You’re going to protect me?” she asked, leaning forward despite herself.

“No,” the other Maiden replied firmly. “Someone who would hurt my loved ones without so much as an apology is no friend of mine. I will not protect you.”

Her impassive response came as enough of a shock to Houshun to make her flinch. “Then why?” she mumbled, ducking her head, at which her benefactor grabbed her by the cheeks and forced her to look up.

“I am healing your wounds because I want you to learn how to heal your court ladies’ wounds.”

“Ah…!”

“Stand, Maiden Ran Houshun.”

This girl was looking at Houshun. Steadily, head-on.

“This is no time to break down and cry that no one will protect you. You must protect your court ladies as their Maiden. You are a woman destined to stand by the emperor’s side.”

Her unquestioning faith in Houshun’s abilities, as strict as it was, inspired the girl to summon her courage. Blood rushed to her limp legs, and before she knew it, she was standing on her own two feet.

Houshun stared back at the other Maiden, devouring every detail.

“I know all too well the suffering that pain brings. However, if you can stand strong and care for your retainers, they will surely come to your aid. Even if you are all individually powerless, you can fight back with the power of numbers on your side.”

She peered into the “Shu Maiden’s” pair of upturned eyes, neither overly large nor small, as eagerly as if she were studying a jewel.

“A Maiden as intelligent as yourself ought to be capable of that.”

That was the first genuine praise she had ever received from another person.

It wasn't a compliment of her facade, like innocent, adorable, or virtuous. Nor was it a hostile accusation, like blackhearted, sneaky, or cunning.

Her words were heartening, highlighting Houshun's weakness while still believing in the skills that lay dormant within her.

Intelligent.

That simple descriptor moved Houshun to an almost curious degree.

"And having the skills to assume control over your court ladies makes you an invaluable asset. You are neither my subject nor my friend…but if you can prove yourself useful, I would be willing to ally with you for a time."

She wouldn't protect her.

But she *would* be her ally.

The Ran Maiden felt her withered, shriveling heart recenter itself at the declaration. Her nose burned, and tears welled in her eyes for a very different reason than before.

It was the first time anyone had recognized her as an equal. The older girl wasn't interested in petting her like a small animal or crushing her underfoot like an insect crawling on the ground. She was offering Houshun a hand on even footing.

Perhaps that was even better than being protected.

"I'm seeking revenge on the Virtuous Consort myself. As much as I detest you, I need your help to get it done. Come, Lady Houshun. Join my cause. Surely you can see what the wisest choice is here, yes?"

Amid the process of treating Houshun's wound, the pair had inadvertently found themselves clasping hands. Across from where the Ran Maiden's sleeves would have been, had they not been pushed aside, the taller girl stared at her unflinchingly.

"Finish her, Lady Houshun."

As the girl's wicked smile filled her tear-blurred vision, Houshun abruptly forgot to breathe.

“Inept as I still am, I’m a villainess.”

She had a hunch that she’d seen another girl smile the same way before.

“I will crush you on my own terms. Whether that means going against the order of things or acting on my emotions, I’ll be sure to see it done.”

It was the girl who, despite looking like she wouldn’t hurt a fly, would stop at nothing when it came to revenge.

“I despise you, Lady Houshun.”

It was the girl who had forced Houshun, who had always kept her true self concealed, to look up and step into her direct line of sight.

It was the girl who quietly terrorized others with eyes like gems and a smile like a celestial maiden.

Kou Reirin.

“Heh…”

In a single breath, Houshun felt the grains of doubt that had subconsciously amassed inside her penetrated by the thread of truth. A chuckle escaped her lips before she could stop it.

“Heh… Heh heh heh…”

Why hadn’t she noticed sooner? Only now did Houshun realize the full extent to which she had lost perspective, too absorbed in her own tragedy.

Shu Keigetsu had no knowledge of medicinal herbs. She wasn’t this polite. She didn’t weave words with such elegance.

Houshun couldn’t believe that she, who was supposed to be more attuned to language than anyone else, hadn’t even noticed that something was wrong!

This is crazy. Did they swap bodies? What’s going on? How many times can one girl exceed my every expectation?

Even she wasn’t sure why she was laughing. At first she’d assumed it was a mocking snicker, but she felt far too amused for that to be the case. It had to have been at least half a month since she had laughed from the heart like this.

In that moment, Houshun felt both excitement and delight.

“Lady Houshun?” the other Maiden prompted, withdrawing her hand as Houshun suddenly burst into giggles.

There it was! That face that, for all its decorum, made her look like a farmer discovering an aphid on one of his crops!

Houshun threw back her head, laughing harder than ever. “Ha ha ha ha ha!”

She had no idea what to make of any of it. Why had Kou Reirin and Shu Keigetsu switched bodies? How had she foreseen the Virtuous Consort’s schemes and gotten the drop on her? Why did this girl always, *always* show up when Houshun was hanging her head and force her to lift her face?

“Oh dear… I’m afraid she’s lost it. Just how much damage has that awful consort done to her?”

“She was clearly so overwhelmed by your presence that she went mad!”

The Maiden pressed a hand to her cheek—yes, there was that familiar gesture—while her redheaded court lady cast a helpless glance to the sky. It was chaos.

Under normal circumstances, Houshun would have found such an unrealistic and utterly illogical scenario anathema, but right then, the absurdity of it all struck her as absolutely hilarious.

Laughing until tears of mirth formed in her eyes, she at last gasped out the words: “Ha ha ha… Sure… Sure thing…”

“Pardon?”

Houshun caught her breath long enough to succinctly reply, “I’ll do it. Let’s team up.”

Perhaps startled by the abruptness of her decision, the other girl’s eyes went wide. This time, Houshun stepped forward to bridge the gap between them.

“I mean, you already caught me planting aconite. What other options do I have left? My only choice is to betray Aunt Hourin.”

Like a leaf tickled by the winds, the flutter of her heart carried equal parts joy and trepidation. Her rational mind told her to ask what this team-up entailed, to find out what the other Maiden was truly after, but Houshun brushed those thoughts aside.

There was no point. This Maiden always upended even her most minute predictions. Logic was useless before her.

Leaving aside all those trivial considerations, Houshun’s entire being yearned to form a common front with Kou Reirin. Before she even had to think about it, she knew that taking her hand was the right thing to do.



“Let’s join forces,” she repeated, extending a hand.

She spoke not in the timid manner of a small animal but with a decisiveness befitting a Maiden. She looked her ally straight in the eye, making her intentions clear.

Houshun was done curling up like a powerless insect. A certain someone had already shoved her sleeves aside and forced her to lift her gaze.

“My, it didn’t take long for you to snap out of your funk.”

“True.”

With a touch of apprehension, the other Maiden held out her hand in return, and Houshun gave it a firm squeeze.

Then, after taking a deep breath, she smiled and asked, “So what role are you expecting me to play in all of this, Miss Reirin?”

“Oh, well—”

Her reaction was truly a sight to behold. The girl with Shu Keigetsu’s face opened her mouth to answer without hesitation, then went white as a ghost a moment later.

“…Huh? Wh-what are you talking about?”

Only moments ago, she had exuded all the dignity of an empress, but now she was caught completely off guard, a hitch in her voice.

“Please, Lady Houshun. Don’t be stupid. Have you lost a few of your marbles? Well, with all the pressure you’re under, I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Her offended snort and her choice of words were indeed a faithful reproduction of Shu Keigetsu, but it was too little, too late.

“Oh? I’m stupid, am I? I thought you just said I was intelligent.”

“You were hearing things. Must have been the wind.”

“You know, Miss Reirin, you may be a quick thinker, but between the leek thing earlier and the wind thing now, you come up with some pretty lame excuses.”

“Excuse me?”

While her mistress scowled at the insult, the redheaded court lady looked torn between panicking and agreeing with Houshun.

“Forget it. You can try to cover it up all you want, but I’m already convinced. Since we’re working together now, you’re going to explain *everything* to me, right?”

Instead of hiding her face, the Ran Maiden flung open her sleeves and threw herself at Reirin in a hug.

Yes. Houshun was sure of it. The girl before her was Kou Reirin. Beautiful, stern, and merciless to her enemies—but the one and only person who, when all was said and done, would never turn her back on her.

The finger missing its nail still throbbed, but thanks to the mugwort, she could have sworn that the swelling was starting to go down.

“It’s not for me to decide exactly how much I tell you…but for starters, I’d like you to provide me with some timber without the Virtuous Consort knowing.”

The freckled Maiden—Kou Reirin—attempted to peel off her new attachment, looking like she had swallowed about a hundred lemons.

Houshun pulled away reluctantly, then gave a devious tilt of her head. “Timber, you say?”

“Yes. We’re going to need fuel. I’d also like to use it for the mold and various other purposes.” Reirin began listing the things she would require, counting them off on her fingers. “We need Lady Keigetsu of the Shu to provide fire. We need Lady Kasui of the Gen to provide plenty of water and gold dust. We need Lady Seika of the Kin, with her mastery of the arts, to help with the design. I, the Kou Maiden, will provide quality soil.”

“What exactly are you planning to do?” asked Houshun, genuinely curious.

“On the occasion of the final trial—His Majesty’s birthday—I propose that instead of competing, we Maidens collaborate and present him with a joint gift.”

The same moment she broke into a smile, the court ladies came running back

with washbasins and water in hand.

Chapter 6:
Reirin Puts on a Performance

THE MORNING OF THE FINAL TRIAL, every inch of the imperial palace was bedecked in lavish decorations, and the sky was a clear, gorgeous blue. This year, the last part of the rite would be held on the emperor's birthday, making it a prelude of sorts to the joyous occasion.

When the time came for the ceremony to begin, the emperor and his son were still nowhere to be found in the spacious arena erected in the main palace, with only the consorts, Maidens, and subjects lined up with gifts in hand.

Incense sticks were lit here and there, white smoke wafting lazily through the air in an offering to the Great Ancestor.

Military officers and bureaucrats from the main palace, along with the court ladies and artisans from the inner court, were packed over the stone floor by the hundreds. They were grouped according to their affiliation, and the higher their rank, the closer to the palace they knelt.

On a makeshift stage, one step above the crowd and draped in five colors of cloth, were the five Maidens. A long staircase led from that stage to the palace, with the four consorts positioned on either side of it, the shaman on a landing toward the middle, and the empress on the top step. All of them were seated with solemn expressions on their faces.

In spite of the cold, there was a long program scheduled before the emperor would be arriving on the scene, including waiting in prolonged silence for the entire crowd to assemble, praying to the Great Ancestor, and presenting their gifts to the empress, the facilitator of the celebration. Even still, the faces of the gift-bearing subjects were tinged with excitement. If one of their offerings happened to catch the eye of the emperor or the crown prince, it wasn't pure fantasy to think that they could rise to glory in a single bound.

A military officer might perform a martial arts demonstration, whereas a

bureaucrat might compose a poem. A court lady from the embroidery unit might sew a robe with peacock thread, while a eunuch from the pottery unit might present a curious vase molded from exotic clay.

The presenters eagerly awaited the moment of their evaluation, each proud of their respective techniques or creations. Their cheeks were flushed, and the ambition oozing from them threatened to rise in a cloud of steam.

Hmph. Look at how the rabble's eyes are shining.

Meanwhile, someone was gazing coldly upon the passionate crowd. It was the shaman, Anni, standing upon the landing of the wide staircase and dressed in a white robe.

Perhaps I mixed a bit too much miracle hemp into the incense offering for the Great Ancestor.

As she glared at her surroundings with her one exposed eye, she took special care to check on the incense altars set up in various spots.

It was vital to this ritual that the props were all in order. Her "divine gift" and the various "wonders" she performed were largely the work of said tools.

When she saw that the props all seemed to be in working order, Anni's mouth twisted into a grin under her face mask.

Who needs the divine gift to rise to the highest rank?

Pleased, she stroked the rim of the sacred mirror that hung around her chest.

She had the power of clairvoyance, a magic circle that could burst into flame, and spells that stole lies from others. All of these were examples of the divine gift Anni claimed to possess, but ultimately, they amounted to nothing more than a combination of steady information gathering and foreign innovations.

If she pieced together what she'd learned from the court ladies and her protégés, she could predict the happenings of the court to an extent, and if she drew her circles with highly flammable paint, scrubbing it with her robe would be all it took to start a fire. To stimulate a crowd and make them hallucinate, she could have them inhale smoked miracle hemp while distracting them with her incantations. Anni had a wonderful talent for making a glorified street

performance seem mystical and divine.

The locations of the sacred grounds where the shamans practiced asceticism were not known to the common folk. Using this to her advantage, she had turned hers into a hiding place for foreign dignitaries and scholars. It was something of an inevitability that Anni, who was less cultured than most shamans and had started out as a mere servant, would come to absorb their knowledge.

She flattered those eager to flaunt their know-how and got them to talk. Once she had claimed their exotic innovations or expertise for herself, the next step was to “dispose” of them. Thus had Anni slithered her way into her current position.

When she first began serving the emperor—a reputedly wise ruler—she had feared that her divine gift would be exposed as a sham, but as it turned out, he did nothing but smile serenely and never once bothered to verify her “miracles.” No doubt he was completely convinced of her powers.

Anni played up her image as the “mystical shaman” in both appearance and speech, never letting her guard down for a moment, and she was careful not to speak of her powers in any detail. That was for the best.

Indeed. If there was but one key to keeping her position, it was not letting anyone discover the trick behind her “miracles.”

In that respect, I made quite the blunder three years ago.

Whenever Anni remembered that incident, it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Three winters ago, a court lady-in-training had learned of her methods through a slight mix-up.

Anni’s so-called powers of combustion were in fact the simple result of heating and igniting a specially processed ore. This handy ore, which could be set ablaze simply by the heat of intense friction, had a reddish-brown pigment reminiscent of blood. Anni had accordingly dubbed it the “sacred bloodstone” and turned it into a powdered paint, which she used in holy emblems and the like so that she could start a fire on demand.

The one drawback was that if the sacred bloodstone was processed

incorrectly, its ignition point would drop so low that it would start to burn at room temperature. Since she couldn't afford to leave the task to an amateur, Anni eventually bought off a superior craftsman from the inner court. It wouldn't be surprising if exotic ores passed in and out of the pottery unit where the court furnishings were made. If, after reciting her prayers in the main palace, she paid a visit to the inner court and thanked the artisans for their hard work, she could obtain her arcane materials without suspicion.

That was how Anni had been getting her hands on sacred bloodstones for decades.

Three years ago, however, the craftsman involved in the illicit manufacture of bloodstone had fallen ill and been ejected from the inner court without warning. His successor had narrowly managed to take over the work, only to make the grave blunder of mistaking a court lady-in-training, who just so happened to be visiting the pottery unit, for Anni's errand girl.

When Anni arrived a little late to the pottery unit, the craftsman was already talking to the court lady-in-training, all but rubbing his hands obsequiously as he said, "I have kept the sacred bloodstone you requested in safe custody."

The fine-looking court lady-in-training had tilted her head, confused, at which the man had offered her the powdered bloodstone, saying something like, "Please make sure the quality is to your satisfaction." Perhaps he was nervous to be in the presence of such a beauty, as his voice had squeaked as he went on to add, "However, take care not to rub it too hard!" That was the point where Anni had rushed over to interrupt their conversation.

I'm not sure that the court lady-in-training even understood what she had seen.

Anni could have chosen to leave the court lady-in-training and her unfortunate timing be. But nipping the buds of unrest while they were still small was the secret to holding any position for a long time. Ultimately, she had ordered her two protégés—Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran—to frame the court lady-in-training and subject her to the Trial by Fire.

To avoid suspicion, Anni had offered to tend to the burned girl herself. The "ointment" she had applied to the girl's skin during her treatment was yet

another gift of knowledge on which Anni prided herself. If filth was rubbed into a wound, germs would spread and kill the afflicted.

Thus had Anni plucked the bud that threatened to grow lush and vibrant.

Buds of unrest must be eradicated before they blossom.

The shaman chuckled low in her throat, her eyes clouding as she looked over at the group of Maidens. The five of them were seated at even intervals upon a stage adorned in five colors of cloth. Anni narrowed her wrinkled eyes at the Maiden dressed in an elegant golden robe: Kou Reirin. At the moment, she was the bud of unrest that posed the greatest threat to Anni's position.

How dare she force me to overturn my verdict in the second trial!

The words of the shaman were the words of the Great Ancestor. If Anni declared something to be a good omen, it was good; if she declared something to be a bad omen, it was bad. Yet this girl had drawn the attention of the crowd with her unexpected plunge into the waters, then forced the shaman to retract her judgment. Although Anni had backed down quietly in front of the emperor, she had been seething with anger on the inside.

It was especially intolerable that the Maiden had made her admit a mistake in front of the crown prince, the future emperor. Unlike Anni with her fake "divine gift," he was said to be endowed with the true dragon's qi. All too aware that the slightest misstep could prove fatal, Anni was always very anxious in his presence.

Kou Reirin is rumored to be the prince's favorite. If she were to discover the true nature of my divine gift and divulge that information to the crown prince, the consequences would be disastrous. I must eliminate her while I still can.

The Kou Maiden was likely an intelligent girl. She was also brave and resourceful. As far as Anni was concerned, that was all the more reason to get rid of her as soon as possible.

I shall return the insult I suffered in the second trial here in the final one.

With a snort, she turned her head to look at the two flanks of the wide staircase, where a couple of chairs and tables had been set up. Pure Consort Kin, who thought of nothing but sex and money, and Virtuous Consort Ran, who

fancied herself a schemer despite her thoughtlessness, caught Anni's gaze and smiled back at her from behind their fans.

That meant all the preparations were in place.

Excellent.

The false evidence that would drag Kou Reirin through the mud was in place. All that remained was for Anni to posture as a divine prophet and proclaim her a terrible villainess harboring thoughts of treason.

The more exaggerated her performance, the better. The more enigmatic, the better.

Let the Trial by Fire begin.

After glancing up at the sun, its white rays of light shining down on the crowd below, Anni closed her eyes.

Then, she sat still and waited for the ceremony to begin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming. Prior to the celebration of His Majesty's birthday, the shaman and I, the empress, shall hereby conduct an inspection of the presents you have brought. Our appraisal of the Maidens' gifts, combined with His Majesty's later remarks, will determine their evaluation in the final trial of the Rite of Reverence."

It was Empress Kenshuu who announced the start of the rite from her place at the top of the stairs leading to the palace. The moment she rose from her seat, the consorts, Maidens, and subjects all dropped to their knees and pressed their foreheads to the ground.

Kenshuu's voice carried well through the thick silence. "His Majesty is due to arrive in an hour. As we must finish cataloging the inventory before his advent, I ask that all civil servants step forward in groups of ten, and the court ladies and artisans according to their respective affiliations. The inspection of the Maidens' gifts will be left for last."

As the empress smoothly recited the opening remarks, Anni stood about ten steps lower on the stairs, waiting for her moment. The emperor and the crown prince both favored Kou Reirin; now, in their absence, was the best time to take

her down.

Still, Anni knew the value of patience, so she recited the prayers she was in charge of without incident. When the subjects nervously presented their gifts, she kept her face schooled into a solemn expression and handed out appraisals proportional to the bribes she had received.

Only after all that did the wily shaman make her move.

Once the low-ranking officials had submitted their gifts for the inventory, it was finally the Maidens' turn. Just as the five girls rose from their seats and bowed to the shaman, Anni gasped in horror.

"Ah…!"

She looked toward the Heavens, brow furrowed and fear on her face.

Waiting for the moment when the most attention was focused on her—the crowd abuzz over the shaman's odd behavior, the empress leaning forward from the top step to see what was going on—Anni announced, "There is treachery afoot."

Those few pithy words from her raspy voice sent a hush over the area.

"Excuse me?" Kenshuu asked.

"Your Majesty, I have heard the words of the Great Ancestor in these aging ears. There is a heinous traitor among the Maidens who plots to harm our esteemed emperor."

As soon as Anni answered, both the Pure and Virtuous Consorts let out a scandalized gasp.

"What?!"

"How inauspicious!"

Their reactions were perfectly coordinated.

With the help of the smoked miracle hemp, which acted as a stimulant, astonishment and unrest spread among the populace in the blink of an eye.

"What's going on?"

"One of the Maidens is a traitor?"

Yet a clap of the empress's hands was all it took to settle the crowd once more.

"Silence," said Kenshuu. She looked down at Anni with a dignity befitting the head of the consorts. "That's a rather extreme accusation, Lady Shaman. You dare suggest that one of the Maidens, whom I think of as my own daughters, seeks to betray the crown?"

"So says the Great Ancestor," Anni said gravely, turning to face the empress.

"Ridiculous." Kenshuu laughed, refusing to give her the time of day. "The Maidens who stand before you now have toiled for ten long days to honor His Majesty. Their efforts have pleased the Heavens, and thus we are blessed with these clear skies. What place does a prophecy of ill omen have here?"

She held her palm up to the Heavens. Her aim was to dismiss Anni's divination on the basis of good weather.

Indeed, it was hard to swallow such a disturbing prophecy under such calm, sunny skies.

Heh, you fool. You think I wouldn't account for that?

Anni slowly shut her eyes before thrusting one hand toward the Heavens.

"The Great Ancestor speaks thus: 'Light rises from the east and illuminates the western sky. The southern skies are clear, and the northern winds are calm.'"

Waving her arm from one cardinal direction to another, she described the weather as if she were telling a fortune. Then, just as her finger was pointing directly overhead, she came to an abrupt stop and snapped her eyes open.

"'Only in the central lands do storm clouds appear.'"

At that very moment, a murder of crows streaked a patch of the sky above the imperial palace. The flock had been lured by bait that Anni had placed in a corner of the palace and a flute she had instructed one of her protégés to blow, but the crowd gulped, startled by the sudden appearance of the birds.

"A whole flock of crows? Now?"

"They showed up right as the shaman made her prediction!"

In reality, it wasn't the crows who had timed themselves to Anni's prediction but Anni who had timed her prediction to their flight. Nevertheless, the audience, agitated by the incense and the ceremony, was quick to believe that it was a spiritual phenomenon.

It enhanced the effect when the sacred bloodstone Anni had scattered on one of the incense altars chose that moment to absorb the heat of the ashes and ignite.

"Eep!"

"The incense offering to the Great Ancestor burst into flames!"

The crowd began to huddle together, distancing themselves from the altar.

Today's performance is quite exceptional, if I may say so myself.

Smirking under her face mask but showing no trace of it in her eyes, Anni once again beseeched the empress, "As you can see, the Great Ancestor has revealed unto us a bad omen amid this rite. We cannot allow any threats to be present in a ceremony dedicated to His Majesty. Please give me the opportunity to confirm that the Maidens harbor no thoughts of rebellion."

"Confirm it how? You are no Eagle Eye. What do you intend to do?"

"I will hold the Trial by Fire," the shaman replied tersely, and soon the air crackled with tension.

Kenshuu kicked over her chair as she stood up, making her displeasure known. "The Trial by Fire? You would set a Maiden ablaze on the mere basis of an ill omen?"

"The fire I wield is granted to me by the Great Ancestor, and so too does he guide my hand as I draw my sacred circles. If the soul of the accused is pure, no flames will erupt from the lines. The Trial by Fire is not equivalent to death by burning."

That was her cover story, but it wasn't entirely a lie. If Anni recognized someone's soul as "pure," she wouldn't mix sacred bloodstone powder into their magic circle. In the unlikely event that a fire broke out regardless, it wasn't the flames themselves that actually killed the victim but rather the ointment

she rubbed into their wounds under the guise of treatment.

"If anyone suffers burns as a result, I will take responsibility for treating her before handing her over to the Eagle Eyes. I do not wish to punish the traitor with my own hands. All I want is to uncover the truth."

"But—"

When Kenshuu attempted to dismiss her claims, Anni went hard on the offensive. "Allow me to be blunt, Your Majesty. The evil omen did not appear over the skies to the east, west, north, or south, but in the center. And of the five incense altars, the fire erupted from the one painted yellow. The one I suspect is Lady Kou Reirin."

The whole crowd gasped in unison. The one she was accusing was the most benevolent and beautiful of the Maidens, the prince's "butterfly." Never in their wildest dreams had they imagined that Kou Reirin would be suspected of treason.

"*Reirin?* I've heard enough of your baseless slander. Reirin is a Maiden of the highest caliber, a girl who has won the favor of the emperor himself. What reason would she have to betray the crown?"

"It is the Eagle Eyes' job to find the answer to that. I am nothing but the Great Ancestor's messenger."

The silence was so heavy, you could hear a pin drop. Kenshuu's and Anni's heated argument held dominion over the arena.

It was then that Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran, who had been watching the exchange from either side of the staircase, chimed in one after the other.

"Your Majesty. I have no doubt in my mind that Lady Reirin is innocent. However, that is all the more reason for us to conduct the Trial by Fire. If those free of wicked thoughts are at no risk of burning, we should clear her of suspicion as soon as possible."

"She's right. I can't imagine that Lady Reirin would ever entertain so dreadful a thought."

Kenshuu dismissed their input without hesitation. “It is not *your* Maidens at risk of burning. Stay out of this.”

Her manner was sharp enough to cleave the very air in two. Both consorts shrank back, intimidated by her intensity.

Surprisingly, it was the remaining consort—Worthy Consort Gen—who interjected next. “What if we put all the Maidens through the Trial by Fire?” Her tone was matter-of-fact. “Maidens should value integrity above anything else. If one has behaved unethically, she should perish in flame. If she is truly innocent, she will be acquitted and nothing more. This is true for every one of the Maidens.”

Perhaps “matter-of-fact” wasn’t the right word. Her gaze might have been even sharper than Kenshuu’s.

Did Gen Gousetsu mean to support or prevent Reirin’s burning at the stake? Unable to discern her true intentions, the other consorts donned looks of confusion.

“Th-that isn’t—”

Just then, a melodious voice rang out from the stage. “No, Worthy Consort Gen.”

It was the girl seated in the middle of the five seats, the Maiden of the Kou clan.

“I have no desire to involve the others. If the shaman suspects me of wrongdoing, then please subject me and only me to the Trial by Fire,” she demanded, clutching a hand to her chest. Whether petrified by this turn of events or whether she had some other unknown reason, there was a slight tremor in her voice.

The Maidens sitting around her stared in wide-eyed horror, then one by one spoke up to stop her.

“No, Lady Reirin! How could you say that?!”

“Don’t be hasty, Miss Reirin! Everyone here knows that you’re innocent. We needn’t resort to something as scary as Trial by Fire!”

“The bad omen we witnessed earlier must have been some sort of coincidence.”

Those lines were attributed to Seika, Houshun, and Kasui respectively. The girls hadn’t so much as exchanged glances in the previous ceremonies, yet now they seemed to be on awfully good terms.

Most dramatic of all was the Shu Maiden, who threw open her arms, shook her head, and pleaded with her whole body, “Oh, Lady Shaman! This must be some sort of mistake! No matter what the Heavens decree, I cannot stand by and allow you to set fire to my kindhearted best friend! For she is my best friend! My *very* best friend!”

It was a rather over-the-top reaction.

Perhaps the girls were touched by the Shu Maiden’s loud speech—Kin Seika pressed her lips together, Ran Houshun covered her face with both sleeves, and Gen Kasui quickly averted her gaze. As for the Kou Maiden at the center of it all, she buried her face in her hands and hung her head, seemingly overcome with emotion.

Had the older women been likewise moved by this display of friendship from the Maidens? For a fleeting moment, the empress and the Worthy Consort covered their mouths or blinked, as if struggling to suppress their honest reactions.

“If you still insist on doubting ‘Lady Reirin,’ then please allow me to undergo this Trial by Fire alongside her! I beg of you!”

Anni shot the Shu Maiden squawking her loud, inappropriate pleas an incredulous glance. This certainly wasn’t the behavior of a well-to-do lady, but then again, Shu Keigetsu was notorious for being an emotional girl who was quick to start shrieking. Judging from her behavior when she had criticized Anni in the second trial, there was little doubt that she was both short-tempered and emotionally unstable.

Ignoring the distraction, Anni resolved to go in for the kill. The people around the Kou Maiden seemed to think they were protecting her by volunteering themselves, but they failed to realize that they were actually pushing her to the point of no return. Their utter lack of foresight filled the shaman with

amusement.

“I am already certain of your guilt, Lady Kou Reirin. If you confess to your crimes here and now, I can hand you over to the Eagle Eyes and be done with it. If you refuse, however, I will have no choice but to subject both you and your fellow Maidens to the Trial by Fire.”

She first leveled false accusations against the Maiden, then presented her choice not as whether to undergo the trial but whether to face judgment alone or involve her friends. Surely a sheltered Maiden who had never faced a real crisis would be rattled enough to fall right into Anni’s trap.

“P-please don’t drag the other Maidens into this…” the Maiden renowned for her kindness predictably insisted, her shoulders trembling. “I harbor none of the evil intentions you allege, Lady Shaman. If you still have doubts, please put me through the Trial by Fire on my own!”

Anni almost had to cackle at how closely the Kou Maiden had followed her script and how easily she had consented to the Trial by Fire.

Oh, but she is a virtuous girl indeed.

For Anni, that was synonymous with being stupid.

“So says the girl herself,” the shaman politely maintained, turning to face the top step of the broad staircase.

Scowling hard and pressing a fist to her mouth, the empress replied, “Then so be it.”

No doubt her lips were twisted in humiliation in the shadow of her hand.

Perhaps to mask her irritation, the head of the consorts cleared her throat and plopped roughly back into her chair. “But once Reirin has been cleared of suspicion, you should give some thought to your next move, Lady Shaman. There isn’t much time left until His Majesty arrives. Make this quick.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Though Anni nodded somberly, she wore a victorious smile beneath the cloth that covered her face. She could bend even that fearless empress, the highest authority in the inner court, to her will.

The elderly shaman descended the stairs with a sprightly gait and stepped onto the stage where the Maidens were waiting. Taking a handkerchief from her breast, she made her way to the incense altar placed in the center of the stage and reverently scooped up the ashes.

“These are the ashes of the incense offered to the Great Ancestor. In other words, embers lit by his breath, in which a sacred power dwells. A circle drawn with these ashes will warm the innocent and burn the wicked.”

She walked over to the quivering Kou Maiden rooted to the spot and scattered the ashes around her in a circular motion. The key here was to simultaneously sprinkle the sacred bloodstone powder she had mixed into her handkerchief ahead of time.

“Kou Reirin. Kneel in the center of the circle with your hands clasped in front of your chest. Do not utter a word as I converse with the Great Ancestor through my prayer.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When the beautiful Maiden dropped to her knees, the hem of her long skirt caught on the ashes of the magic circle. While still keeping their distance from the ring, the Maidens of the other clans craned forward with concern.

“O Great Ancestor on high, I humbly ask that you cast your warm gaze upon your descendants on the earth…” After holding the small mirror she wore around her neck aloft, allowing it to catch the sunlight she spoke of as the Great Ancestor’s gaze, Anni began to pray. “The breath of the Great Ancestor is our own. The winds of life sweep across the five skies and the earth. O wind that traverses the blue spring, the vermillion summer, the white autumn, the dark winter, and the golden earth, deliver my words unto the Great Ancestor and reveal to us the truth!”

In her croak of a voice, she chanted the incantation slowly and rhythmically. The content of the prayer could be anything, as long as it sounded good. The longer she could stretch it out, the better.

The important part was to move the mirror back and forth, left and right, in time with her mentions of the cardinal directions—to catch the sunlight with the mirror and reflect the heat onto the sacred bloodstone without fail.

Seven, eight, nine…

When the light hit a spot with a generous helping of bloodstone right next to where the Maiden was kneeling, the shaman held the mirror in place. She let the incantation drag on longer and longer as she waited for the sacred bloodstone mixed into the ashes to heat up. It would look suspicious if she paused in one place for too long, so she needed it to ignite fast.

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen…

Whoosh!

Anni's prayers were answered when a small flame burst from a section of the circle.

There we go!

Stifling the laughter that bubbled up inside her, she opened her mouth to declare the Kou Maiden a wicked soul.

"Wha…?!"

But when she was confronted with an unprecedented spectacle, Anni's eyes bulged.

I'm going to smack her around when this is all over! I'm going to give her the tongue-lashing of her life. Or maybe I'll shove her back down that well.

A few moments earlier, "Kou Reirin"—that is, Shu Keigetsu with her face—was kneeling in the magic circle with her head bowed, cursing the name of a certain someone.

What kind of ham act was that?! Why did she keep saying "best friend" over and over?! It was so humiliating!

Of course, that "someone" was not the shaman but Kou Reirin disguised as Shu Keigetsu. Though it had been necessary to create a situation where Kou Reirin volunteered to undergo the Trial by Fire to avoid getting the others involved, Keigetsu was pretty sure it hadn't required such an exaggerated appeal.

Her acting is way too over-the-top!

Or if it wasn't her acting that was over-the-top, then it was her love.

The result was that the Maidens and the consorts had struggled to stifle their laughter, and Keigetsu's face had frozen in horror. The Shu Maiden was pretty sure she deserved a pat on the back for steering the plot back on course after that.

Well, whatever.

After taking a moment to hurl a few insults, Keigetsu exhaled a short breath and focused on the task at hand. It would be no exaggeration to say that Kou Reirin's revenge plan, as well as their success in the final trial, all hinged on the next moment.

O flame…

She closed her eyes and secretly channeled her qi. Even without chanting overblown incantations like that bogus shaman, she could feel the fire qi in her soul intensify as soon as she called out in her mind.

"O Great Ancestor, our creator and guide, we ask that you warm the souls of the virtuous and cleanse the wicked in fire. Burn away their sins with your divine flame."

The shaman was still carrying on with her phony chant. But as the mirror she held aloft shone down on one fixed spot, Keigetsu could feel it on her skin as the circle of reddish-black ash slowly heated up.

A flame was about to be born.

Don't do it, Keigetsu admonished the fire that was about to be artificially ignited. *Heed my words.*

Then she clasped the hands folded in front of her chest tighter than ever, and her eyes snapped open.

Burn her, not me!

Whoosh!

The small spark that had leapt from the ring quickly swelled into a gigantic

whirlwind of flame.

“Wha…?!”

Then the flames that should have licked their way up “Kou Reirin’s” robes parted around her in the center of the circle, bypassing her and descending on the shaman from both sides.

“Aghhhh!”

Her entire body engulfed in flames, Anni writhed in pain. Though Keigetsu wouldn’t have minded letting her burn to death, she went out of her way to snuff out the fire. This evildoer—the shaman known as Anni—still had a role to play.

“Oh no! Are you all right?! Stay strong, Lady Shaman!”

As opposed to the Maidens and masses, who all leapt from their seats at once to distance themselves from the shaman, one girl ran straight to her side. It was “Shu Keigetsu,” with her striking freckles—also known as Reirin.

“This is terrible. Why would the flames meant to burn the wicked take aim at you?!” she exclaimed. The question was loaded with implication, but she swiftly began to tend to Anni nonetheless. “Are you hurt? Oh, my deepest sympathies! It looks like your right arm is burned.”

“Eek… Ggh!”

Anni was still speechless from the shock of being consumed by fire. After the woman abruptly pitched forward, Reirin cast her badly burned arm a grim look before offering, “I am the Maiden of the Shu, the clan of fire. I know how to treat burns. If you’d like, I can take you to the nearest pavilion and have a look at your wounds.”

“Oh… Oh, please do!”

The Eagle Eyes stood frozen, unsure who to apprehend in this scenario, just as the doctors were unsure whether to treat a burn wrought by flames meant to “burn the wicked.” The crowd’s suspicions were no longer directed at the defendant “Kou Reirin” but at the shaman herself.

Given the circumstances, Anni jumped at the offer of help without a second

thought. “Please! I need medical attention!”

“Very well.” With a dignified nod, “Shu Keigetsu” bowed to the empress on the top step. “Respectfully, Your Majesty, while I realize that we are in the middle of a ceremony, this is a matter of life and death for our revered shaman. I ask that I may entrust the final trial to the other Maidens and take my leave,” she said firmly, gesturing with her sleeves to the four girls standing on the stage. “We Maidens are as close as sisters. I trust them to present the gift I arranged for His Majesty in my stead. Please permit me to excuse myself.”

“I’ll allow it.” The empress nodded graciously. “When Reirin collapsed during the Ghost Festival, your goodwill and devotion were unimpeachable. Therefore, I will grant you leave without testing you this time. The other Maidens may present their gifts for evaluation.”

“Thank you for your generous words.” The freckled girl smiled, then made another flawless bow.

Keigetsu, for her part, worried that such a florid gesture might give away her true identity. Fortunately, the shaman was in no state of mind to notice, and she let “Shu Keigetsu”—that is, Reirin—usher her away from the scene.

What she left in her wake was mass confusion. Doubts and speculation swirled around the arena, and evaluating gifts was the last thing on anyone’s minds. At this rate, the proceedings of the final trial would be compromised.

Just as the whispers and chaos reached a fever pitch, Empress Kenshuu rose from her seat on the top step of the stairs.

Lifting the hem of her skirt in a motion so graceful one would never expect it from someone with her down-to-earth personality, she bowed. “You’re early.”

Standing in the direction she dipped her head were none other than Emperor Genyou and Prince Gyoumei. They weren’t due for some time yet, but things seemed to be running ahead of schedule.

Oh, thank goodness. They made it!

No—to be more precise, the Maidens had forced them to move up their plans. The key players in this effort had been the dove currently fluttering away from Gyoumei; Keikou, who was standing behind the prince as his bodyguard;

and Keishou, who was hanging next to the stage where the Maidens were.

Having been urged to show up early via messenger dove, Gyoumei shot Keigetsu a furtive glance from behind the emperor. Reirin had prevented him from interfering for fear of being scolded, but from his perspective, she had worried him to his breaking point and then cut him out of the picture. The poor man had dark circles under his eyes, and his virile features were looking gaunt and haggard.

There was a silent but eloquent look of concern and reproach in his eyes. Picking up on the fury he was no doubt suppressing, Keigetsu broke into a cold sweat and averted her gaze.

It's all her *fault, Your Highness!*

She yearned to beg him not to take his anger out on her. Once the Rite of Reverence was over, he was free to punish the real Kou Reirin however he saw fit.

In contrast to Keigetsu's emotional distress, Empress Kenshuu seemed unfazed by this turn of events. She waited until the emperor and his son were close enough, then added with a nonchalant air, "Please accept my heartfelt congratulations on the occasion of your birthday, Your Majesty."

"Hmm." His wife's indecorous birthday wishes earned only a relaxed tilt of the head from the emperor known for his mild manner. "Was it a problem for us to arrive early? For a festive occasion, everyone seems rather flustered and restless."

"Nerves are simply running high. We know that we cannot allow even the slightest of mishaps on your birthday."

"I wonder." Though there wasn't a crack in Genyou's smile, he also refused to discard his doubts. "I see suspicion and fear in the eyes of the audience. There is a mysterious circle drawn over the stage, the Kou Maiden's robes are singed, and neither the shaman nor the Shu Maiden are anywhere to be seen. May I have an explanation?"

"Nothing escapes your keen eye, Your Majesty," the empress remarked. A quick glance was all it had taken for him to determine that several things were

amiss. Leave it to Kou Kenshuu, however, to deliver the praise with more annoyance than heartfelt admiration. “The truth is, the shaman received an oracle that the Maiden Kou Reirin harbored malicious designs. As we couldn’t take any chances on your birthday, and as Reirin herself requested it be done, we carried out the Trial by Fire.”

The emperor narrowed his eyes a fraction. “You would perform a ritual that involves setting a Maiden ablaze? Oho—”

“Yet for *some* reason, the flames descended upon the shaman instead. She was badly burned, so the Maiden under the divine patronage of fire, Shu Keigetsu, took her outside to tend to her wounds.” Kenshuu spoke over her husband with a smile. “In short, we have proven that Kou Reirin is no villainess and that none present possess evil intentions. On this auspicious occasion of Your Majesty’s birth, no manner of misfortune can be tolerated. If there is any turbulent qi in the air, we must dispel it at once.”

With that, Kenshuu cast a slow glance over her shoulder at the Maidens. Amazingly, her presence was such that simply raising a hand was all it took to settle the air in the arena.

As the four girls straightened their postures, the head of the consorts flashed them a mischievous smile. “So, Maidens, what say you present your sumptuous gifts to His Majesty and restore the proper joy to this celebration?”

The idea was to enliven the occasion, which had been spoiled by the Trial by Fire, with the splendor of their gifts.

Kin Seika, Ran Houshun, Gen Kasui, and “Kou Reirin”—the empress took her time looking at each of them in turn.

Under any other circumstances, Keigetsu would be shriveling up and shaking like a leaf by now. In fact, she *had* trembled a bit when she was sitting within the magic circle. But that hadn’t been out of fear—if anything, it had been out of excitement.

She was shivering in anticipation.

Her fists balled up tight, Keigetsu stepped forward on behalf of the Maidens. “Certainly. With your permission, we Maidens would like to take this

opportunity to unveil our gift," she replied in the clear, serene voice of "Kou Reirin."

Let's do this, Keigetsu told herself as she trampled the ashes left behind on the stage.

Earlier, she had struck back at the shaman with her Daoist magic. And now, she was about to decimate the enemies of all five Maidens.

She was. Her. Shu Keigetsu.

Why, I'm almost like the hero of the story.

Be it during the trip to Unso or in this very moment, Keigetsu still couldn't believe how Kou Reirin thought of her as a trump card, placing her right at the center of all her plans. The girl worked her too hard and thought far too much of her.

It was annoying to think that she was being used, but on the other hand, Keigetsu didn't hate the idea of Kou Reirin relying on her with every fiber of her being.

Honestly, it made her bashful. Kou Reirin was the only person in the world who expected so much from her.

I can do this.

Before she knew it, Keigetsu was standing in the center of the stage with her back straight. Kou Reirin had drilled good posture into her over and over again.

I'm the only one who can do it.

Chest out, deep breaths, gaze forward.

Lift your head high—and do things with a bang.

"If I may, Your Majesty, we have brought an unprecedented gift to celebrate this auspicious day." She was relieved to hear herself imitate the gorgeous, dignified tones that defined Kou Reirin. When she exchanged glances with Kasui, who sat in the chair farthest to the right, the Gen Maiden retrieved an object wrapped in cloth. "This was prepared with the cooperation of all five Maidens."

“Oho. All five Maidens worked together?” The empress should have known what to expect ahead of time, but she made a show of surprise nonetheless. For all she seemed down-to-earth, she was one wily raccoon dog at heart. It was easy to believe she was that boar’s aunt. “The consorts of the Kin and Ran had mentioned preparing the finest of jewels or brushes. And quite proudly, at that,” she said with a teasing tilt of her head.

When Keigetsu froze up, Seika came forth and flawlessly answered, “The Pure Consort thought that would be for the best. However, His Majesty’s glory is absolute, and if each Maiden were to individually present a gift, not even the greatest treasure of the three realms could do justice to the joyousness of His Majesty’s birthday.”

Next, Houshun stepped forward with her trademark cutesy mannerisms and innocent smile. “The Rite of Reverence is meant to measure our growth as Maidens. We are still inexperienced fledglings, but it would be disgraceful to remain under the patronage of our consorts indefinitely. Therefore, we decided to prepare a different gift on our own.”

On the surface, it sounded like a commendable declaration of their desire for independence. In reality, it was a confession that they had been deceiving their consorts. The moment Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran heard Houshun’s speech, their smugness gave way to horror.

The emperor didn’t seem to notice that the women were poised to jump out of their chairs. Genyou nodded, impressed, then asked with a placid smile, “And? What item required the cooperation of all five Maidens to prepare?”

“It is this,” said Kasui, taking her turn to step forward gracefully at the emperor’s prompting.

With a reverent touch, she held up the object swathed in black cloth, then slowly unraveled it.

“A jeweled mirror with some of the world’s finest goldwork.”

The unveiled mirror was round and gorgeous. It was too big to fit in a lady’s hands, and so thick that its weight could be felt just by looking at it. The gold plate on the back was embossed with five dragons in a heroic pose. That alone would have been enough to qualify it as a work of art, but most impressive of

all was the beautiful silver of the mirror's surface. Unlike your typical bronze mirror, this one was the color of hard moonlight, and it shone dazzlingly in the winter sunlight.

Genyou nodded in satisfaction. Even from a distance, it was clear how exquisite it was. "That's a magnificent article. How did you girls come upon it?"

His question probably meant, *Which artisan did you ask to make it?*

The girls exchanged delighted glances, then answered in perfect unison, "We made it."

"You what?"

Now *this* took even the emperor by surprise. As he blinked, the Maidens bowed one after another.

"This was made by covering the surface of a bronze mirror with mercury alloy, polishing it, and combining it with the gold-cast back. None can hold a candle to the western territory's skill in the art of goldsmithing. Thus, I, Kin Seika, had the honor of designing the five dragons you see."

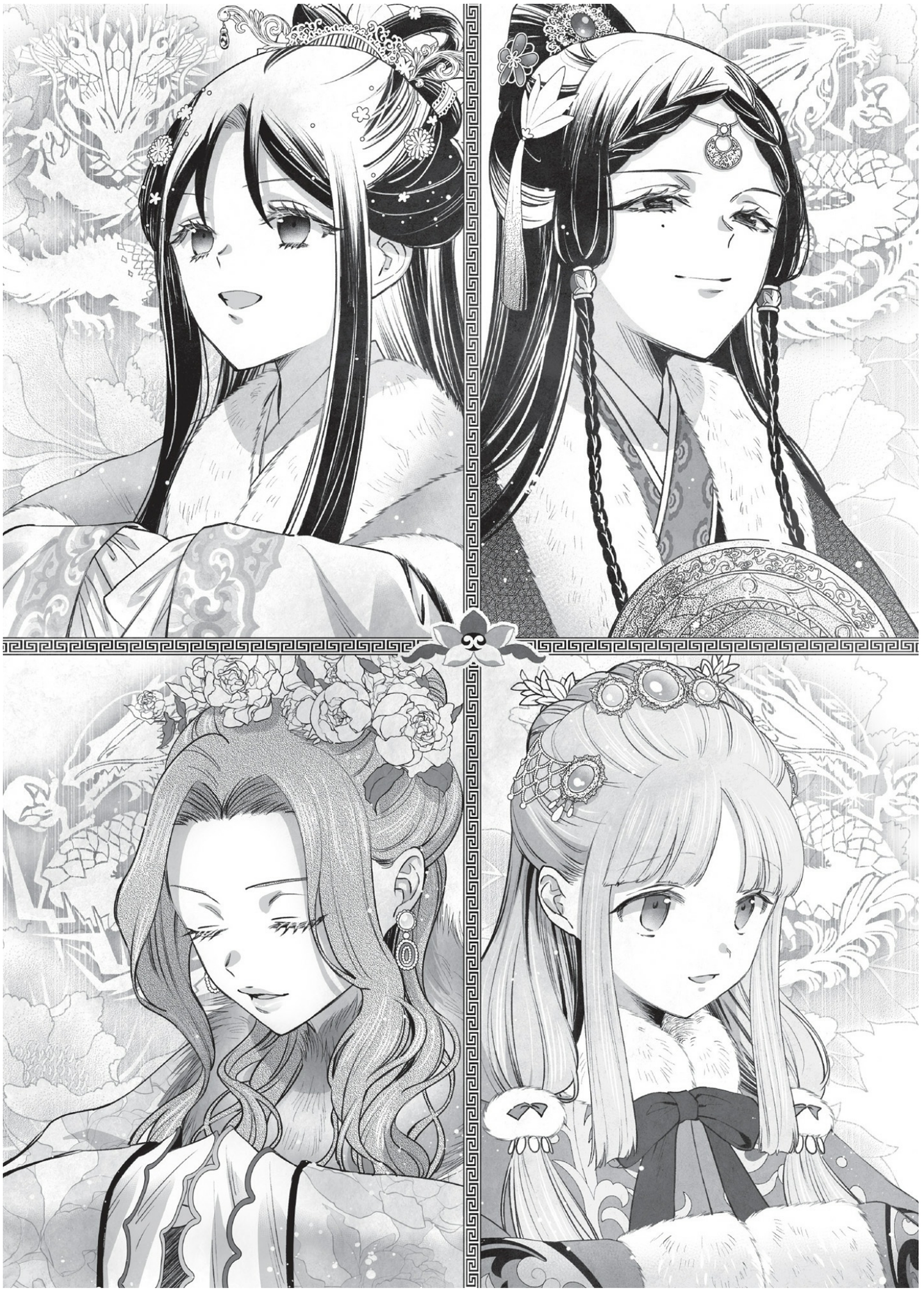
Kin Seika, Maiden of the clan of the arts, announced that she had rendered the beautiful dragon motif on the back.

"A large amount of timber was needed for the molds and the fuel to melt the metals. I, Ran Houshun, the Maiden under the divine patronage of wood, was tasked with providing high-quality firewood and charcoal."

Next up was Ran Houshun, Maiden of the clan of wood, who spoke confidently despite her small stature.

"Gold dust is sifted from the rivers. Water is an integral part of blacksmithing, both in securing the raw materials and in the cooling process of casting. I, Gen Kasui, Maiden of the clan of water and warfare, was in charge of securing the necessary gold dust and water."

Gen Kasui, Maiden of the clan of water, said her piece matter-of-factly.



Keigetsu picked up where they had left off, bowing like “Kou Reirin” would. “It needn’t be said that flames play a vital role in casting. In addition, many minerals come from the earth, and clay is used in both the furnace itself and the molds. Shu Keigetsu, Maiden of fire, and Kou Reirin, Maiden of earth, worked hand in hand and toiled to procure these resources.”

As she gave her explanation, she flashed back to those days of “toiling,” a glazed look nearly coming to her eyes.

“Say, Lady Keigetsu. Don’t you think it would be fun for all five Maidens to work together to make a mirror?”

When she first heard the proposal, Keigetsu had doubted her friend’s sanity. Making a mirror was in no way comparable to a basic handicraft. What sort of highborn lady would even consider forging metal with her own two hands?

Yet Kou Reirin had insisted that it could be done. Apparently, Gen Kasui’s older sister had been good enough at casting and goldsmithing to become an artisan, and the younger sister was said to have comparable skills.

The Ran clan would arrange for the timber and charcoal. The Kou clan would provide the bricks to make the furnace. The design could be left to Seika, who had an excellent sense of aesthetic. The Gen clan, which had several mines to its name, could supply the gold dust. Keigetsu, with her mastery over fire, could help melt the metal to their liking.

“Oh, that reminds me. It seems that mercury, which we need to make the alloy, is the one metal the Gen territory doesn’t produce much of, so it would be difficult for Lady Kasui to get a hold of it.” Reirin, who had been counting off the necessary supplies on her fingers, paused to flash her friend an innocent smile. *“Wasn’t there an unscrupulous merchant who sold you mercury-based rouge? Let’s confiscate his stock and use it for our plan.”*

The way she tilted her head was adorable, but upon further inspection, the smile didn’t reach her eyes. It seemed Kou Reirin had been itching to get back at the peddler who had once taken Keigetsu for a fool.

In fact, it turned out that “itching to” was an understatement.

“Actually, in the interests of saving time, I have the seized mercury right here,”

she had said with a bashful smile.

She had already tracked down that corrupt merchant and confiscated his shoddy goods as soon as she learned that he had duped Keigetsu.

She's terrifying!

Though she would never attack anyone unprovoked, the moment someone hurt one of her loved ones, she would be sure to exact revenge long after the loved one in question had forgotten their anger. It was a reassuring trait to have in an ally, but Keigetsu was reminded once again that she would never want to make an enemy of her.

I could tell the other Maidens were scared of her too.

For the past four days, the five Maidens had conspired to sneak out of their respective palaces night after night to advance the preparations. The plan itself had been unconventional enough, but the sight of "Shu Keigetsu" actually constructing a furnace and melting gold had clearly thrown the Maidens for a loop.

At the very least, Kin Seika's face had gone stiff when Reirin kindly invited her to join in, saying, *"As a member of the Kin clan, you must have a passion for casting, right?"* Keigetsu could practically hear her image of "Kou Reirin" as a beautiful butterfly shattering, the pieces reassembling into some sort of boar or a wrathful god.

Since Ran Houshun never dropped her small animal act in the presence of others, and Gen Kasui was never anything but deadpan, the sight of Seika's bewilderment was Keigetsu's only form of entertainment as of late.

"I see. So this is what five Maidens working together can manage," the emperor said, looking impressed.

As Keigetsu snapped back to reality, she steeled her expression and nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Incredible work. Let me have a closer look."

"Certainly."

The Maidens gracefully ascended the steps at the emperor's command.

“Once again, we would like to congratulate Your Majesty on the occasion of your birthday. Please accept this gift we have prepared with all our heart and soul.”

On behalf of the Maidens, “Kou Reirin”—Keigetsu—knelt on the top step and held out the mirror. The emperor accepted the gift and examined it carefully.

“What exquisite craftsmanship. It’s just as beautiful up close. We should recruit you Maidens as artisans in the pottery unit from this day forth.”

Though it sounded like effusive praise at first listen, Keigetsu was so attuned to malice that her ears picked up the faintest hint of mockery in his words.

It was the job of the artisans to craft beautiful mirrors. Was a simple mirror truly a fitting birthday gift to receive from a Maiden, let alone as a joint present from all five?

I figured he’d say that.

A shiver ran down Keigetsu’s spine. This emperor was an impenetrable man indeed. If her own gift had received such an assessment, she probably would have burst into tears.

But this was Kou Reirin’s idea. Her plans were far more ambitious than this.

With a deep breath, Keigetsu lifted her head. “That is kind of you to say. However, the true value of this mirror does not lie in its beauty.”

“Explain.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It lies in its function.”

This was the main act.

“And what is that?” the emperor murmured with interest.

Keigetsu slowly rose to her feet. Taking care to make her movements as elegant as possible, she took turns gesturing to each of the Maidens behind her with her sleeves. “Fire, water, wood, metal, and earth. All worldly creations are composed of the five elements. Put another way, an existence is only complete when all five elements are in harmony. This mirror, created by the collective efforts of the five clans, has a mystical power that no other mirror possesses.”

“Oh? What sort of power?”

“The divine patronage of the Great Ancestor.”

She had to drive home that the “function” she was about to demonstrate was a product of the Great Ancestor’s power, not the Daoist arts. That was the point Kou Reirin had repeatedly emphasized when explaining her plan.

“Please hold the mirror up to the light and shine it down on the ground.”

With a slight quirk of an eyebrow, the emperor followed Keigetsu’s instruction and held the mirror high overhead. His expression could be read as either amused or unimpressed with the situation.

As soon as he saw what the sunlight’s reflection had painted over the spot where he pointed the mirror, the look on his face changed. And it wasn’t just him. Everyone in the audience, who had been watching this exchange with bated breath, gasped in unison.

“Look at that pattern!”

“Incredible!”

A snowflake pattern rose faintly to the surface of the ring of light. Composed of uniform shapes and curves, it had all the mystical beauty of a magic circle.

“Fascinating…”

“We thought a snowflake motif would be most fitting for Your Majesty, a descendant of the Gen clan. The mirror was born of our strong desire to praise your glorious name.”

There was a certain type of mirror known as a “mystic mirror.” It looked like an ordinary mirror at a glance, but when held up to the sun, a distinct image would emerge within the light.

The crowd, already stimulated by the incense, was transfixed by this most mysterious phenomenon, breaking out into fevered whispers of “It’s beautiful!” or “It’s a miracle.”

“How curious. The back is engraved with five dragons, yet the pattern that forms is a snowflake. I wonder what the trick is.”

The emperor, too, was scrutinizing the mirror. This time, there was genuine awe in his voice, but the implication that he knew how mystic mirrors worked had Keigetsu sweating up a storm on the inside.

He's making this really difficult!

Mystic mirrors gave the illusion of holding some divine power, but the truth was that the pattern engraved on the back of the mirror made bumps in the surface that distorted the light. The explanation for why a snowflake pattern had emerged instead of the dragons engraved on the back was simple: They had taken the back of the mirror Kasui's sister, Bushou, had once made and covered it with the newly melted alloy.

In short, it was a double-layered mirror, and the gorgeous snowflake pattern it projected was Bushou's creation.

I wish he'd be straightforwardly astonished like everyone else.

Surely this would be all it took to floor a farmer like Unran and his fellow villagers. But, of course, it was too much to hope that the supreme ruler of the continent would be affected by this level of "miracle" alone.

That's fine. I still have an ace up my sleeve.

Keigetsu discreetly clenched her fists. She exhaled a long breath and quietly focused her qi.

Now was the moment of truth.

"As the Six Books say, 'The clarity of snow, both pure and bright, lays bare the world with its light.' In other words, snow has the power to elucidate the principles of the universe and blot out evil. This mirror, with its hidden snowflake pattern, has the power to illuminate the truth."

This part of the speech was entirely dictated by Kou Reirin. It was quite a stretch of logic, but the explanation sounded good enough that even Keigetsu herself started to believe that the mirror had some kind of deeper origin.

As far as Reirin was concerned, there was no doubt that education was not something she pursued for the sake of appearances, but for the sake of forcing her enemies to submit.

“The power to illuminate the truth? Do tell.”

“Please hold your tongue, clear your mind, and shine this mirror on the ashes left on the stage—the sacred ashes, as the shaman called them. The Trial by Fire is said to burn the wicked. I believe the truth about why the flames went after the shaman will soon come to light.”

Keigetsu took this moment to point to the ashes that had been scattered across the stage.

In the back of her mind, she recalled the image of her friend speaking in placid tones.

“I’m almost positive that the flames the shaman wields are generated with phosphorite.”

Reirin had offhandedly mentioned that when she had been searching for the raw materials to make more potent medicines, she had gathered resources from all over the continent and conducted repeated experiments.

“There is an ancient medicine that can be extracted by boiling down human urine, but it is both difficult to make and ignites at the first sign of heat. When I heard there was a mineral that ignites just as easily, I wondered if it might have the same medicinal properties, but after collecting some to test it for myself, I discovered that it burns at an even lower temperature.”

Apparently, Mt. Kou—the mountain owned by Reirin’s clan—was a harvesting ground not only for medicinal herbs but for anything that could be used to make medicine, from dubious ores to animals.

In the end, Reirin had decided that the distinctive smell of phosphorus didn’t agree with her, and she had decided not to use it in her medicine.

However, the peculiar odor that had wafted from the rice paper in the second trial, as well as Kasui’s observation that the shaman had “rubbed her robes against the paper,” had led her to the trick behind Anni’s gimmick.

Keigetsu had looked astonished at the mention of a flammable mineral, but Reirin had just put a hand to her cheek and smiled. Not only that, but she had rubbed the phosphorite she had actually procured from Mt. Kou together and started a fire right before Keigetsu’s eyes. It looked almost like she was casting

magic, and the Shu Maiden's stare had widened even more at the sight.

"In short, the shaman's divine gift is indeed a sham. Even we could easily imitate her tricks. That said, I don't like the idea of scrubbing furiously at an emblem while we're in the midst of vanquishing our enemies. It makes us look like wimps. If we're going to light a fire, let's do it in a flashier way. With a bang!"

The girl had then reached out and gripped Keigetsu by the shoulder. With an adorable tilt of her head, she had said just one more word: *"Please?"*

She always, always, always *sticks me with the most important part!* Keigetsu snarled in the privacy of her mind, scowling with frustration. Perhaps most frustrating of all was that each and every time she was asked, she wasn't altogether too put out.

I hope things are going well on your end, Kou Reirin.

"Like this?" the emperor mused aloud, tilting the mirror toward the stage.

Beside him, Keigetsu gathered up fire qi. The light from the mirror warmed the ash mixed with phosphorus, and another small spark leapt from the depths of the snowflake pattern that emerged on the stage.

Keigetsu gritted her teeth hard and molded her fire qi at once. She glared down the newborn flame and commanded it, *Heed my words!*

As she unleashed all her magic power at once, she felt as if her entire body was being burned from the inside-out in a flash of light, and beads of sweat dotted her forehead.

Expand!

When she intensified her gaze, the fire leapt up with a roar, painting the snowflake red in the blink of an eye.

As the flames flared with a rush of hot air, the audience screamed.

"Eeeek!"

"It's a fire!"

The flames that shot straight up from the snowflake fanned out to the sides,

even though there was no fuel to feed them.

“Eep! Run awa—”

“Wait, look!”

The fire, which had been spreading uncontrollably only moments ago, suddenly stopped in its tracks, leaving the people to gasp and gawk as it flickered in midair. It looked like a blazing curtain had been unfurled across the stage.

And they could see something in the flames.

“Watch closely and please do not speak,” Keigetsu said softly to the emperor—who, like the crowd, was staring transfixed at the phenomenon.

Oh, what an involved performance this was, and for such an enormous audience. No actor could possibly run from such a fiery stage with so many people watching.

“I do believe you will see the truth within the flames this mirror has conjured.”

All her crimes would be exposed to the light of day.

I did my part, Kou Reirin.

As she watched the contours of a woman steadily take shape within the flame, Keigetsu’s lips curved into a furtive grin.

It’s your turn to finish the job.

At this point, the game was as good as won. Entrusting the finishing touches to her friend, Keigetsu concentrated on keeping her flame spell connected.

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The pair came to a spot in the courtyard far removed from the arena. Upon arriving at the pavilion designated as the Shu Maiden’s waiting area, “Shu Keigetsu”—or Kou Reirin with her face—lit a candle in a corner of the stone floor to illuminate the dim space.

The pavilion had no walls, so the winter breeze blew freely through the gaps between the pillars. Reirin adjusted the angle of the candlestick so that the

flame wasn't in danger of being snuffed out, then turned back to the table.

"You're going to be all right now. Did you drink all of the pain medicine I gave you?"

"Yes. It tasted dreadful."

Anni the shaman, whom Reirin had lent a shoulder the whole way and helped into a chair, didn't bother to hide her exhaustion and displeasure as she stared down at the empty bowl. At first, she had been careful to act grateful for the assistance, but by the time they had made it from the arena to the pavilion, she had apparently run out of energy to keep up appearances. When Reirin had offered her a bowl of the medicinal wine she had on hand, she had gulped it down without so much as a word of thanks.

"This better not be the extent of your so-called 'treatment.' I have a burn, you know. Hurry up and slather some ointment on it, you dimwit."

Even worse, she berated the person who was offering her help.

As far as Anni was concerned, that was the proper way of things. She could bend the Pure and Virtuous Consorts to her will and now even bring the empress to heel; she had no reason to pander to a fledgling Maiden. Particularly not "Shu Keigetsu," who, judging by her behavior throughout the rite so far, was a cocky little brat. It was best to establish a clear pecking order here and now.

"Blast it. My arm hurts, and my head is in a fog. You better have some mugwort to offer me, or there will be consequences."

The herbs infused into the wine must have had an immediate effect, as the shaman felt the pain in her body begin to subside, but her head was still spinning. Anni slammed the medicine bowl on the table in frustration and glared at the Maiden before her.

"Now, now, there's no need to be in such a huff. As you can see, I have an abundance of herbs in stock."

Reirin, meanwhile, glanced at the bowl and remained as calm as ever. She gracefully pulled the medicine box she had carried to the pavilion toward her, then showed off its contents to the shaman. When Anni saw the herbs crowded

together inside the box, she let out a sigh that was a mixture of relief and admiration.

“Oho. Is that miracle hemp I see? So you do know a thing or two.”

“My. If anything, I’m surprised *you* have heard of miracle hemp. It’s not often seen around the imperial capital.” Reirin took her own seat at the table, grabbed the miracle hemp from the box, and tossed it into the bowl before giving the old woman a conversational nudge. “Though to me, it’s a more commonplace herb than kudzu root, since I know a place where it grows in abundance.”

Anni immediately took the bait from across the table. “You what?”

It was an understandable reaction. The herb was scarce enough to have limited availability in the market, yet this girl was insinuating that she had a vast supply.

“Miracle hemp is excellent for draining pus. For that reason, I assume, someone bought up the imperial capital’s entire supply about three years ago, making it impossible to obtain for a time. Fortunately, I knew where to find it in the wild, so it never posed much of a problem for me,” Reirin went on with the utmost nonchalance, grinding the miracle hemp all the while. When she casually glanced up again, she saw a hint of calculation in Anni’s eyes.

Softening her raspy voice, the old woman leaned forward. “Interesting. It’s comforting to know that such a superior medicinal herb is so prolific. Would you mind telling me where this cluster of miracle hemp is?”

“Hm…? Certainly. But if you only want it for your burns, this bundle should last you a good ten days,” Reirin replied unenthusiastically. She snatched up a bundle of miracle hemp and remarked, “Hmm, the color of this batch is a bit worrisome. Let’s not use this.” Then she made a show of tossing it to the floor.

The leaves had a healthy shape, and their color and luster were both superb. Anni gathered up the bundle on what appeared to be pure instinct.

After quickly ascertaining its quality, the shaman was unable to contain her excitement. “But I would prefer to keep a surplus, just in case. How does this sound, Shu Keigetsu? Aid me and I shall reward your generosity. Of course, I

mean during the Rite of Reverence."

"Oh dear. Even if you were to give me a perfect evaluation, I couldn't possibly give you more miracle hemp than you require. This herb has excellent antibacterial properties, but it can induce hallucinations when smoked in large quantities."

"That's why I need it!" Anni blurted out. Seeing "Shu Keigetsu" stubbornly refuse to take the bait must have made her impatient. Snapping back to her senses as soon as the words left her mouth, she cleared her throat. "That is…I need it for my meditation sessions. My soul must leave my body to receive my oracles."

"I see…" Reirin said coolly, still grinding the herbs with her pestle. "Then I will send you off with five days' worth of ointment. That should be plenty for one person."

"Shu Keigetsu," growled the shaman, finally succumbing to her frustration. She slammed her hands on the table as she rose to her feet, glaring at "Shu Keigetsu" with all the sharpness of a blade. "This is an order from His Majesty's trusted shaman. Stop dithering and give me that miracle hemp."

"I cannot give away large quantities of something I know could be dangerous. As one who deals in medicinal herbs, even as an amateur, that is a rule I cannot __"

When Reirin continued to dodge the issue, Anni raised her voice. "Don't you dare talk back to me, you sewer rat!"

Her logic was probably that if the carrot wasn't working, it was time to bring out the stick.

"I beg your pardon? 'Sewer rat'?"

"I've heard the rumors, Shu Keigetsu. Kou Reirin is hailed as the prince's butterfly, while you are reviled by all as the talentless court sewer rat!" Reirin's voice had come out lower and darker than she intended, but Anni was too caught up in her anger to notice. The shaman jabbed a finger toward Reirin, her sneer so pointed that it was visible through the cloth. "You are the wretched daughter of a fool who sought to be a Daoist cultivator and the fool he

impregnated. You curl your hulking body into a miserable ball, fill the court with your grating shrieks, and make yourself the butt of everyone's jokes. Nothing escapes my ears."

"Well, goodness." As she listened to the scathing critique, Reirin glanced down at the pestle she had set beside the bowl. For some odd reason, the hefty stick looked so very enticing to her in that moment. "That's a far cry from the truth. I can't imagine that many would fall for such baseless rumors."

"Baseless? Please. My sources are reputable. This is reliable intel I received from the Virtuous Consort."

"What? The Virtuous Consort?"

"Yes. That woman is always feeding me information on the inner court in lieu of donations. Her ears are mine. There's nothing I don't know, be it the reputation of the Maidens, each palace's total assets, or even His Majesty's quirks in the bedchamber."

If Anni were thinking clearly, she would have realized how risky an admission that was. Alas, she was in no state of mind to consider it.

With a quick side-eye at the empty medicine bowl, Reirin staggered to her feet as if in shock. "This can't be… The Virtuous Consort has been leaking the inner court's most confidential secrets?!"

The Maiden covered her mouth, paced back and forth, and then—as though that still wasn't enough to calm her nerves—fiddled restlessly with the base of the candlestick.

What that actually did was shift it to a position where the flame would better reflect Anni's face.

"Don't tell me…you've been using these methods to gather information on the imperial palace for years? That you never possessed a divine gift that allows you to see the truth? That your power to control fire, to decipher the meanings of dreams, and to perform various miracles was all a fake?"

"Hah! That was all the work of my tools. My power was bought with money."

The shaman was starting to slur her words. Her body had probably warmed

up quite a bit by this point. The pain was ebbing, and her mood relaxed with it.

"I'm parched," Anni griped, shifting the cloth over her mouth and slurping the medicinal wine directly from the bottle. Then she turned to Reirin, who stood stock-still, and her wet lips twisted into a malicious smile. It was the look of someone mocking the reproachful Maiden as a fool. "Hah! Don't play innocent. I'm sure you've paid off an Eagle Eye or two in your time, no?"

"…I imagine it would take quite a sum of money to buy a 'miracle.'"

"Hmph. All the money I could possibly need comes rolling in from those greedy consorts. For instance, all I have to do is give that lustful Pure Consort an aphrodisiac or a hallucinogen, and she will hand me a donation big enough to live on for the next few years. She sees it as an investment in the emperor's favor."

The shaman buried her face in the herbs she was holding, admiring their quality with half-lidded eyes. With a contented sigh, she said, "Wonderful. Now I won't have to bother with stockpiling miracle hemp every few years."

"Are you to tell me that you've been hoarding miracle hemp, turning it into medicine…and using the consorts as a means to an end?"

"Not at all. I was merely 'threatened' into doing their bidding. Loyal as I am to my kingdom, I was forced to acquiesce to those ambitious consorts in hopes of easing His Majesty's heartache," Anni blithely replied, despite the fact that she held far more power than either consort.

A moment later, she abruptly dropped her smug look and laid her irritation bare. "But their grace period expires today. The moment I came under suspicion, they averted their eyes and left me to fend for myself. Oh, they shall pay dearly for this. I think I'll tip off an official to the storehouses where they stockpile their miracle hemp and gold," the wily shaman muttered hatefully, slamming her miracle hemp on the table.

Then she gave "Shu Keigetsu" another fawning smile and slowly walked toward her. "In that respect, Shu Keigetsu, you show some promise. Your reputation may be terrible for the moment, but at least you know your way around medicinal herbs. How would you like to work with me?" As her foul-smelling breath filled the Maiden's nostrils, she presented two extreme options.

“If you say yes, I will catapult you to the top of the ranks through this Rite of Reverence. If you say no, you will end your miserable life as the court ‘sewer rat.’ It would be a simple task for me to pin the Trial by Fire’s failure on you. You are, after all, the lowly daughter of a cultivator from the fiery Shu clan.”

“You would repay my offer to treat you with threats?” Reirin turned her face away to avoid Anni’s gaze. Frankly, she didn’t want to breathe the same air as someone so despicable. “I don’t believe that such wicked deeds can go unpunished. If you continue to wield your sham of a divine gift, someone is sure to see through it eventually.”

“I only need kill the perceptive ones. I have the authority to put even Kou Reirin through the Trial by Fire, lest you forget.”

“And you failed,” Reirin muttered under her breath, forgetting even to ask a leading question.

“Yes, I have no explanation for that,” Anni conceded with a click of her tongue. “Still, the true goal of the Trial by Fire is not for the nuisance to perish in flame but to burn them, smear impurities into their wounds, and leave them to die of sickness. In that sense, the trial wasn’t a true failure. With how sickly that Maiden is, I could easily infect her under the guise of treatment. I still have plenty of chances.”

“Infecting her wounds? Under the guise of treatment?” At last, Anni was laying out her tricks in her own words. Stifling a gasp, Reirin did her best to keep her cool as she added, “I don’t believe it. Could someone truly die from that?”

“Oh, yes. With one-hundred-percent certainty. Pus crawls all over the victim’s skin, and their whole body puffs and swells. Even *her* good looks will turn hideous after that, I assure you.” Her shoulders shook as if she were telling the most hilarious joke. “Three years ago, I used this trick to get rid of a court lady-in-training, and not a single person was ever the wiser.”

“A court lady-in-training, you say?”

“Indeed. The stupid girl wandered her way into the pottery unit and witnessed my ignition mechanism. I took special care to ‘treat’ her so that she would die faster, and the idiot actually thanked me with tears in her eyes! Ha ha ha!”

“Mm…” Reirin squeezed her eyes shut. “Is that right?”

Her head hanging, she gently caressed the bottle of medicinal wine sitting on the table. It was the same potion the Worthy Consort had slipped into the drinks at the banquet, a drug that induced a state of excitement and lowered inhibitions. Reirin had doubled the dose to ensure she drew a confession out of the old woman, but perhaps it would have been better not to make her talk quite so much. Imagining the look on Kasui’s face on the other side of the flame was almost too much to bear.

“I see the whole picture now.”

At this point, no one would feel an ounce of hesitation over convicting the shaman. With a slow exhale, Reirin raised her head.

“What…?”

Meanwhile, back in the arena, a dazed murmur escaped the emperor’s lips as he watched the flames blazing brightly atop the stage.

The fire stretched out like a gigantic curtain. Within the shimmering vermillion was an inflated image of the shaman, who had suffered burns, and “Shu Keigetsu,” who had gone to the pavilion to nurse her back to health. The picture was too vivid to be dismissed as an illusion, and the conversation came through as clearly as if the women were talking right in front of them.

What the spectacle soon revealed was the true nature of the godless shaman and her many heinous crimes. Not only the emperor, but consorts, Maidens, court ladies, and military officers alike all instinctively understood that they were “witnesses” to a key scene, forgetting to breathe as they stared into the curtain of flame. Everyone maintained their silence without needing to be told, and the only sound that filled the square was the roar of the fire.

“Hmph. Finally of the mind to be my partner? Then hurry up and patch me up. Who said you could stop blending the ingredients?” Anni snapped, oblivious to the fact that a massive audience was listening to their conversation. *“If you don’t make this quick, His Majesty will arrive at the arena. Get on with it, Shu Keigetsu!”*

“I refuse,” the Maiden firmly declared when the shaman thrust out her arm. *“I will not tend your wounds.”*

Her freckled face radiated a willfulness strong enough to be daunting.

“I’m sure there are many much more deserving of ‘treating’ you,” she spat. For the briefest of moments, her gaze seemed to flick to the faces beyond the flame.

“Can she see us as well?” the emperor mused, stepping onto the wide staircase to get closer to the stage. “Does this phenomenon link the people in two different places?”

While everyone else was reeling from the “miracle,” the emperor seemed more interested in the trick behind the mirror. As he practically devoured the fire with his gaze, he reached out a hand toward the flames.

This is bad!

The muscles of Keigetsu’s face stiffened. If he got too close to the flame, the women on the other end would be able to see his face and hear his voice.

What’s more, the mirror was supposed to be channeling the power of miracles. In light of the reverence shown to the Violet Dragon’s Spring, which was said to reflect the truth, a mirror with a similar function was bound to be accepted as sacred. But if it was actually creating a two-way conversation, the high level of convenience it offered was more likely to warrant an undue investigation.

Not to mention that this man was the son of the emperor who had persecuted the Daoists.

“Could it be Daoist magic?”

A few moments before Keigetsu could pitch forward, there came a voice from directly behind the emperor. “I’m impressed, Father.”

It was Gyoumei.

“I am amazed at how skillfully you can wield that mirror, which is imbued with the power of all five Maidens. It serves as a reminder that I inherited the dragon’s qi I carry within me from you, and it fills me with gratitude anew,” the

prince proclaimed loud and clear, bowing with his hands clasped in front of him. “You are indeed the ruler of this continent, the one who perceives all the truths of the world.”

His words were ones of praise, truly appropriate for a celebration of the emperor’s birth. At the same time, they impressed upon the crowd that this miracle was born of the emperor’s power and asked the man himself thus:

Are you sure you don’t want to use this “miracle” to boost your reputation?

The handsome father and son exchanged a brief glance. Prior to the birth of Prince Gyoumei, it had been believed that the dragon’s qi was slowly dying out within the imperial family. Thus, the emperors had been forced to accept the shamans’ intrusion upon the political stage, and this arrangement had been passed down through the generations all the way to Genyou’s reign.

However, if the emperor could impress upon his subjects that he, too, had received the blessing of the Great Ancestor—and in greater abundance than the shamans—that could very well change things.

“You have a good eye, Gyoumei.”

From an outsider’s perspective, the exchange was over in seconds. A very sensitive and complicated bargain had been negotiated between the emperor and the crown prince, and the result was that Genyou accepted the script laid out for him.



“Once this is all over, I look forward to having a nice, long talk with my brilliant son.”

“I would be honored.”

The implication was that the emperor planned on hearing the full story later, but Gyoumei’s response was unruffled.

As soon as the emperor looked away, the prince sneaked a scowl in Keigetsu’s direction. The look on his face said, *You owe me.*

Thank you so much, Your Highness! I’ll make sure Kou Reirin repays this debt later!

Her chest swelling with relief, Keigetsu bobbed her head furiously. She never would have dreamed that Gyoumei, of all people, would come to her aid.

She took advantage of the moment the emperor tore his gaze from the stage to cut the flame call. The audience cried out in astonishment when the fire was abruptly snuffed out, but the emperor held up a hand to silence them.

“Now then,” his deep, serene voice rang out, and those few words brought the entire crowd to their hands and knees.

The Maidens also rushed to kneel in their respective positions on the stairs.

As a hush fell over the square once more, the emperor calmly announced, “It seems this mirror has revealed a very significant truth unto us. The Eagle Eyes and military officers are to head to the pavilion where the shaman is and arrest her at once. In addition, take Shu Keigetsu into protective custody so that she does not come to harm at the old woman’s hands.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

No sooner had he given the order in his steady tones than the Eagle Eyes and military officers in attendance took off running in a series of well-synchronized movements. Shin-u, the captain of the Eagle Eyes, had already made his way to the edge of the arena. Gyoumei had shot him a meaningful look before the emperor even said his piece.

The emperor then turned to the kneeling Maidens. “As for you, Maidens…” He motioned for Kenshuu to order the girls to stand, then commended their

efforts with a warm smile. “I see now that this mirror is a one-of-a-kind treasure, made possible only by the cooperation of all five clans. If we set aside our ambitions and join hands, we can shed a light as bright as the sun on the truth. I am truly proud that you five girls were chosen as the new Maidens. Therefore, I give you all the highest possible score for this final trial.”

The Maidens’ cheeks were already flushed with joy, but then he added, “But a good evaluation is not a sufficient thanks for such a magnificent gift. Name any reward you desire, and it shall be yours.”

He would go so far as to grant all five Maidens a wish. Floored by this unprecedented offer, the girls dropped to their knees again.

“Y-you are far too kind, Your Majesty.”

“Enough of that. Out with it,” the emperor gently urged, but none of the Maidens present were quite as bold as Kou Reirin, who had once met the prince’s request to make amends with three wishes of her own.

As the empress watched the girls clam up over their perceived unworthiness, she grew impatient enough to interject from behind. “Your Majesty. If you ask them as a group, they won’t know who should go first. In times like these—here, how about this? Houshun, Maiden of the Ran clan. What is your wish?”

The head of the consorts began calling on each of the Maidens. For whatever reason, the one she asked first was not her own niece, “Kou Reirin,” but Houshun of the Ran clan.

Surprised to hear her name called out of the blue, the girl scrambled to hide her mouth under her sleeves.

“You hail from a line of skilled orators, Ran Houshun. I trust that you know the answer to this question?”

Houshun froze upon detecting the implication in Kenshuu’s words. Just like that, she understood the woman’s true estimation of her and the role she expected her to play.

The empress didn’t see Ran Houshun as a harmless and virtuous pet. She knew that her true nature was that of a cunning girl who manipulated people with her words.

With that in mind, she wanted her to use her sharp mind and silver tongue to set the tone for the other girls' "wishes." She was telling Houshun to use the emperor's offer to rescue the Maidens.

"…Thank you for your kind words."

The women of the Kou were certainly something special.

Slowly, Houshun lowered her sleeves. Then, looking the emperor straight in the eye, she said without stumbling over her words, "Your Majesty's generosity is more boundless than the seas. I surrender myself to your vast and noble heart and humbly ask that you grant my request. Please dispose of only those with wicked souls, and do not bring harm upon their relatives."

In other words, *Please punish only the consorts who were complicit in the shaman's misdeeds, and allow us Maidens to be overlooked despite our blood relation.*

"Houshun!" the Virtuous Consort exclaimed despite herself, the color draining from her face, but Houshun didn't spare her so much as a glance.

Kin Seika, who was kneeling on the step below Houshun, watched this exchange between the Ran women, and it dawned on her that this was her one and only chance to beg for her life.

"Very well, Ran Houshun." The emperor nodded, showing neither approval nor displeasure on his face, then asked Seika, "And what of you, Kin Seika?"

The Maiden of the proud Kin clan hesitated, her eyes darting about, but at length she clenched her fists and raised her head with determination. "If I may, I would ask for the same thing as the Ran Maiden. The mirror's mystical powers are owed to the unclouded loyalty of the five Maidens. I pray that you will understand our true intentions."

She, too, severed ties with her guardian consort.

"Seika!"

The Pure Consort sprang to her feet with enough force to knock over her chair, but the Eagle Eyes already had her surrounded.

"And you, Kou Reirin?"

When the question came around to her, Keigetsu stopped to think for a moment. “Kou Reirin’s” guardian—the empress—had played no part in the atrocities, so the Maiden had no need to beg for mercy. In that case, Keigetsu had only one request to make of the emperor.

“Your Majesty’s glory is what allowed the mirror to shine light on the truth. If you would believe that, I need no further reward. I believe that ‘Shu Keigetsu’ would feel the same way.”

The mirror’s power was a product of the emperor’s dragon’s qi. She was asking him to write off the mysterious phenomenon as a “miracle” and not investigate the trick behind it or the involvement of Daoist magic.

“…Very well. If it’s a wish for two, I must endeavor to grant it.” A thin smile rising to his face, Genyou finally turned to Kasui. “And what is your wish, Gen Kasui?”

The emperor, son of the Gen-born empress dowager, had a tranquil aura akin to his mother’s when he looked at Kasui.

“I have neglected to pay you much attention in the past. However, I believe the mirror’s snowflake motif has stirred the Gen blood within me once more. Tell me, Kasui. What is it you desire?”

He held out a hand to the Maiden, almost like a father might to his daughter. Perhaps the gesture was brought on by guilt for allowing the empress dowager to issue her gag order three years ago and letting Bushou’s death go unresolved.

Upon hearing the emperor call her by name for the first time, Kasui’s lips quivered with a myriad of emotion. She struggled to form words right away. Much in the manner of a Gen woman, she looked back at the emperor in silence.

“If I could have any wish…”

When she finally found her voice, it was shaking.

Kasui could have used this opportunity to demand the shaman’s execution. Instead of leaving matters in the hands of the Eagle Eyes, she could have asked that the Gens be given the right to torture her or that she be made to suffer by

smearing impurities into her wounds, just as she had done to Bushou.

And yet…

“If only I could become an artisan instead.”

She could have sworn she saw Bushou’s happy, smiling face in the sunbeams filtering down from the clear winter sky.

“My dream is to create a masterpiece worthy of becoming a national treasure and present it to His Majesty and His Highness.”

No matter what harsh colds she was exposed to, her older sister had always wished for the happiness of those around her. She had thanked her own murderer, and she had worried about her little sister’s well-being until her last moments.

Though Kasui wanted nothing more than to tear her killer to shreds, that was bound to happen whether she asked for it or not. In which case, there was something else she had to wish for.

“Please…keep that mirror by your side.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. The black mist shrouding her heart lifted, and Kasui recognized her wish as something she had held close all along.

“How proud I shall be to shine the light of beauty upon the hearts of my kingdom and its people.”

“Please grant that snowflake-patterned mirror the status of a national treasure…and bestow upon it a proper name.”

The emperor didn’t question Kasui’s sudden burst of tears but simply stared at her for a few moments.

“Very well,” his quiet but commanding voice eventually rang out.

His lips never betrayed much emotion, as was typical of the Gens.

And in his next breath, they calmly formed the answer: “Then I shall engrave this mirror with a name that reflects its power to illuminate the truth, the Shoushin Mirror, and display it beside my throne as a national treasure.”

At last, Kasui choked out a sob and crumpled to her hands and knees. “Thank

you…very much…”

The Shoushin Mirror. The mirror that illuminates the truth.

The mirror her sister made would become a national treasure and bear one of the characters from her name. It sunk in exactly how much of an honor that was.

The unfair accusations leveled against Bushou had been dispelled at long last.

“Thank you so much… Thank you!”

After Kasui’s forehead had been pressed to the floor for some time, the other Maidens hesitantly flocked to her and put their hands on her back.

The Worthy Consort—who had been sitting in the seat farthest from the staircase and watching this exchange with bated breath—abruptly relaxed her shoulders, closed her eyes, and then looked to the Heavens. The glint in the corners of her eyes might very well have been tears.

Kenshuu quietly watched over them all from her place at the emperor’s side.

“L-Let go of me! We are in the presence of His Majesty!”

“This is all a misunderstanding, Your Majesty! Your Majesty, please!”

On the other side of the broad staircase, Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran were screaming for dear life as the Eagle Eyes took them into custody.

As their shrieks reached Kenshuu’s ears, she huffed before shifting tracks by smiling at her husband. “That was quite an impressive show, Your Majesty. That said, we have a banquet with the other kingdoms coming up soon. We cannot afford to spend too much time on a single program.” With a quirk of an eyebrow, she oh-so-casually suggested, “Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran seem to be feeling under the weather, so I will take charge of escorting them back to their palaces. Settling these affairs can wait until this auspicious day is over. Do I have your permission?”

“Yes.”

With the other kingdoms watching, they couldn’t risk ruining their image by branding the consorts as criminals here and now. The empress had shamelessly

suggested sweeping the matter under the rug for the time being, to which the emperor nodded with his trademark wan smile.

“Now that I have accepted all the gifts from the Maidens, I declare the final trial hereby adjourned,” he said. “Now then, let us have a look at the artisans’ presents.”

His cool eyes no longer held the captive consorts in their sights.

“They have put together a selection of only the finest items. Do look forward to it. Go on, Gyoumei. The Rite of Reverence is over. Call ‘Shu Keigetsu’ back from the pavilion and congratulate your Maidens on a job well done.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Kenshuu mimicked the emperor’s suave attitude, and Gyoumei likewise blocked out the consorts’ hysterical wailing with a smile.

And so, under a sunny winter sky, the curtains closed on the final trial of the Rite of Reverence.

“You never learn your limits.”

Around the same time, under a pavilion far removed from the arena, Captain Shin-u sighed in Reirin’s direction.

After rushing over without so much as a sound, he had arrested the shaman and handed her over to the Eagle Eyes once they caught up with him. Anni, unaware that her crimes had been broadcast, had gone red in the face yelling about the “utter disrespect,” but Shin-u had knocked her unconscious before she could finish her threat of “Know your place, lest the Great Ancestor smite —”

“Can it,” was all he’d said.

With the interrogation part already handled, it seemed that engaging in a dialogue with the culprit was too much of a hassle for him.

While Reirin was still reeling from the anticlimactic speed with which it was all over, Shin-u had dismissed his men and picked up the bottle of medicinal wine. He had then scowled upon taking a whiff of its contents.

“This is pretty strong.”

His reaction was probably because it was a scent known only to those familiar with the Gens’ underground operations.

The next moment, he had slammed the bottle against the table without so much as a twitch in his expression.

“You never learn your limits,” was what he had told her after casually destroying the evidence.

“O-oh, please. No need to fly off the handle, my dear captain.”

Reirin attempted to start the conversation off with her best Keigetsu impression, at which Shin-u’s azure eyes turned several degrees colder.

“Here’s a tip,” he said. “Shu Keigetsu would never call me ‘my dear captain.’”

“Hrk…”

Shamed, Reirin buried her face in her hands. Now that Gyoumei was aware of the switch, she should have assumed that Shin-u would know as well.

As Shin-u watched the Maiden curl up in embarrassment, he heaved another sigh. “A woman has no business trying to catch someone who has even the consorts twisted around her finger. And what’s this I heard about you purposely removing me and His Highness from the equation?”

His irritation was palpable. Reirin mumbled a string of excuses. “My apologies. Erm, the Rite of Reverence is a women’s battleground, and you men can be such worrywarts. I didn’t want to give you cause for alarm. Still, I was very careful to ensure that victory would be—”

“Oh? So your idea of ‘careful’ is spiking a drink with a large dose of a truth serum? One that could result in serious criminal charges if discovered in your possession?”

“I do feel very bad about that.” Shin-u’s sarcastic comment made Reirin wilt, but her remorse had little to do with the dangerous act itself. “I should have stuck to the prescribed dosage. I didn’t mean for her to go quite that far in exposing the cruel truth.”

As she closed her eyes, she recalled the sight of Anni gleefully recounting how

she had framed Bushou. She wondered what kind of faces Kasui and the Worthy Consort must have made when they heard that repulsive confession.

“Did Lady Kasui cry?” Reirin asked, her voice small.

“Difficult to say. I was focused on apprehending the culprit, so I wasn’t watching,” Shin-u replied impassively. “But I’d assume she probably did.”

“Oh no!”

When Reirin gasped in guilt, he added, “Tears of joy, I mean.”

She blinked. “Why joy?”

“Because she got her revenge.” On his face, which boasted that cool beauty typical of the Gens, the faintest of smiles rose to his thin lips. “Decency, hesitation… She can finally unleash her rage, free of all those useless shackles. How could she not rejoice, knowing that it’s become publicly acceptable to tear her sister’s murderer to shreds?”

His chilling gaze betrayed a wild surge of emotion. The element of his soul was water—those who were normally calm, but who couldn’t help but break the dam of their emotions for that one special person.

“As a fellow Gen, I thank you for removing her shackles. If Gen Kasui had kept her hatred bottled up any longer, I’m certain it would have broken her.” Shin-u stared unblinkingly at Reirin. “No Gen can retain their grip on sanity after losing the one they love.”

“Captain…” A shudder ran down the Maiden’s spine, which unwittingly morphed into words and escaped her lips. “That is a great deal to bear… Whoever you come to love is in for a difficult time.”

Shin-u’s eyebrows shot up. Then, unsure why he had reacted that way, he tilted his head to one side.

Reirin nodded gently. “No need to fret. The Kingdom of Ei is a vast place. I am sure you will find that rare individual who can bear all the love you have to give.”

“Was that supposed to be an insult?”

“I beg your pardon?!”

Reirin spent the next long while struggling to think up words of encouragement, only to fail miserably at each attempt.

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Later on, the results of the Rite of Reverence were announced as follows.

As all five Maidens were given the highest possible score for the final trial, the rankings were determined by their performance in the first and second trials.

Kou Reirin was ranked first for her good manners and artistic skills, Kin Seika was ranked second according to the same standards, and Ran Houshun was ranked third for her excellent calligraphy. Since it was difficult to place one above the other, Shu Keigetsu, who had articulated her resolve as a mother of the nation, and Gen Kasui, who had shown a talent for painting, tied for fourth place.

Alas, the Maidens of the Kin and Ran clans showed shameful incompetence in failing to curb the treachery of their guardians. In lieu of a punishment, their respective rankings would be lowered by two, and that would be considered their official result in the Rite of Reverence.

Thus, the rankings were revised as follows.

In first place, Kou Reirin.

In second place, both Shu Keigetsu and Gen Kasui.

In fourth place, Kin Seika.

In fifth place, Ran Houshun.

Until the next Rite of Reverence, the upper tier was not to grow complacent, nor was the lower tier to abandon hope. Both were to persevere in their studies to become the best future consorts they could be.

Epilogue

THE PALACE OF THE METALLIC SHADE was the most extravagant of the five clans' complexes, and even its annex for quarantining the sick or condemned was nothing short of luxurious. The white walls were inlaid with gold, and the entirety of the roof was finished with a glossy glaze. The decorative caps on the roof tiles were all engraved with magnificent peonies, and the beams and crosspieces were crammed full of colorful paintings.

While Pure Consort Kin Reiga's retainers hauled in sumptuous furnishings to fill the lavish space, she sat at the writing desk in the center of the room, leisurely adjusting the tip of her brush with the inkstone. However, as she watched the court ladies bring the requested items and then leave without so much as a bow, she slammed the brush roughly into a jar.

"This must be a joke. *Me?* Writing sentences?"

What sat upon her rosewood desk were various textbooks and scriptures—including *Important Principles for Girls*—a large stack of paper, and a brush and inkstone. In all her insolence, Seika had dropped them off the other day, saying, "While you're under house arrest, why don't you transcribe these and think about what you've done?"

Yes. House arrest. The favored Pure Consort, who prided herself on her good looks and sex appeal, and who graced the emperor's bedchamber more often than any of the other consorts, had been confined to this annex.

Stricken with humiliation, Reiga gritted her teeth for the umpteenth time.

Curse that wretched shaman! And that little brat who's forgotten her place!

Just thinking back on the events of the final trial three days ago made her stomach churn with rage.

A mirror that illuminates the truth? I don't buy that for a second! What sort of trick did she use?

As one who carried the pragmatic Kin blood, not to mention the particularly business-minded blood of the branch line, Reiga didn't believe in miracles. She

had no doubt in her mind that the fire that had swept across the stage, projecting the images and voices of those far away, was a hoax.

After all, Anni had performed a great many “miracles” over the years with her foreign knowledge and exotic drugs. Surely that series of mysterious phenomena must have employed a similar technique.

That aside, she still couldn’t believe that after the exorbitant sums she’d paid Anni, that greedy shaman had spoken of her like some sort of sex-crazed money tree.

No, my reputation shouldn’t be my main concern right now. The bigger problem is that she revealed I’ve been sneaking aphrodisiacs into the incense in His Majesty’s bedchamber.

Reiga paced restlessly around the room, mussing up her hair.

In a desperate bid to keep the mild-mannered but guarded emperor in her clutches, she had spent years slipping miracle hemp into his incense burner. That herb was the entire reason she held the record for the most visits to his bedchamber.

Needless to say, planting drugs in the emperor’s sleeping quarters was a punishable offense. Damaging his health was tantamount to treason, and the maximum penalty involved sentencing her entire family to death. Furthermore, she had racked up the additional charges of bribing officials during a ceremony, blackmailing a Maiden, attempting to assassinate Kou Reirin, and aiding and abetting the murder of Gen Bushou, a former candidate for the position of Gen Maiden.

How was I supposed to know that court lady-in-training was poised to become the next Gen Maiden?!

As she looked out through the iron bars fastened to the window, Reiga clicked her tongue.

Finding it odd that Gen Kasui had gotten so emotional, she had conducted her own investigation into the matter, only to discover that the court lady-in-training she had helped to get rid of three years ago was none other than the girl’s older sister. Despite the Gen clan leveraging the empress dowager’s power

to impose a gag order, it seemed Kasui and the Worthy Consort—the sisters' guardian—had been obsessively searching for the masterminds behind the Trial by Fire.

The Worthy Consort always seemed so aloof, so I assumed she didn't care. I never would have guessed that she was only leaving me loose until she had concrete evidence.

In hindsight, that incident three years ago had been her undoing. She should never have gotten on the Worthy Consort's bad side by holding the Trial by Fire, nor should she have teamed up with such a shortsighted imbecile. She was willing to admit that much.

Still, think about it. Unlike that idiot of a Virtuous Consort, I have wealth at my disposal. That's why I'm getting off with mere house arrest. I've already escaped the death penalty. I still have a chance to crawl my way out of here.

Reiga grabbed a sheet of paper from the desk and dug her nails into it, leaving it a crumpled mess. Indeed, what a disgraced consort needed to work her way back up wasn't a letter of apology.

It was money.

With a *fwump*, she knocked the various calligraphy tools off her desk. Instead of writing, she walked around the room, stroking each and every one of the expensive furnishings. When she came to the incense burner, she settled for inhaling the fragrance that wafted from it, since direct contact could result in burns.

"Oh, I do so adore this burner. Look at how intricate the design is. The agarwood inside is also of the finest quality. What a calming fragrance."

Calming was good. She had to calm down.

Reiga had already sent an assassin to the shaman's prison cell. Since the old crone would be dead before the full-scale hearing began, there was still plenty of room to weasel her way out of this. Testimonies could be falsified, and she could pin the blame for her crimes on her Maiden, Seika—that wretched villainess who had shamelessly deceived and undermined her own guardian.

"I have my ways," Reiga muttered darkly.

The luxurious room around her, as well as the court ladies who would bring her whatever she asked for as soon as she gave the order, were proof of that. When it came down to it, the ones who held power over the Kin clan were Reiga and the branch line. And when the Kin clan was willing to cough up the funds, there was no one they couldn't get on their side.

She would buy off the court ladies and Eagle Eyes, get out of this godforsaken annex, and when that day came, she would slash that snooty Kin Seika's face to shreds and toss her out naked before some vile man.

"Just you watch, Kin Seika. I'll turn you into pig feed yet, you little—"

Just then, an elegant voice rang out from behind. "My, how frightening."

When Reiga spun around, startled, she found someone standing in the doorway with perfect posture. The girl who stepped inside, her stance as beautiful as if she were middance, was the very one the consort had just been bad-mouthing: Kin Seika.

"Goodness. For someone sentenced to house arrest, you're certainly living it up, aren't you?" the Maiden spat as she glanced around the room, making no effort to hide her contempt. After one look at the desk littered with crumpled papers and the calligraphy tools smashed over the floor, she added, "Not the slightest shred of remorse, I see," before plugging her nose in Reiga's direction. "As a relative, I thought I'd do you the courtesy of a visit, but the smell in here makes me sick to my stomach. No matter how much incense one burns, I suppose it will never be enough to mask the putrid stench of your soul."

"D-did you just call me 'putrid'?!"

That was the ultimate insult against a consort who prided herself on her popularity in the bedchamber, let alone one who hailed from the clan of beauty and the arts.

With spittle flying and her face contorted in rage, Reiga screamed, "How *dare* you use such vile language in my presence! Just you watch, you pompous brat—once I get out of here, I'm going to tie you up and shove you into a night-soil bucket!"

She made the threat knowing that a neat freak like Kin Seika was bound to

find that brand of torture most excruciating of all.

“Or maybe I’ll strip you naked and throw you into a crowd of manservants high on miracle hemp. Don’t even think I’m going to let you go to auction now. I’ll see to it that you suffer something far worse than marrying a nouveau riche —”

“Purely for my edification,” Seika cut in, not a twitch in her shapely brow, “how do you believe that someone confined to obscurity and stripped of all standing and authority is going to accomplish that?”

The girl’s pale eyes held a chilling look of disdain.

“Oh, please!” The Pure Consort guffawed at the Maiden, who seethed with a quiet rage. “I can’t believe how naive you are! Listen here, girl. I haven’t lost one bit of my status. This room is proof of that. I may be trapped in this annex, but people will still bring me furnishings, gems, and money as I command.” She pressed a hand to her ample bosom, then swung that same hand down against the bars of the window. “I will be out of here in no time at all! If you promise them money or sex, there’s nothing other people won’t do for you!”

Her tone was confident.

Seika watched the iron bars silently vibrate from the impact of the slap. Eventually, she said, “Aunt Reiga. The aesthetic I have always envisioned entailed a purity of soul.”

“Excuse me?”

“Integrity. Nobility. But I have learned from this experience that there is one more thing necessary to embody ‘aesthetic.’ That is the resolve to dirty one’s hands in the defense of one’s ideals.”

Seika brushed past the Pure Consort, who wore her confusion plain on her face. When Seika’s eyes landed on the high-end incense burner, she picked it up while it was still burning, undeterred by the heat.

“So, in a sense, the way you single-mindedly pursue money and sex, never hesitating to dabble in criminal acts, could be considered true aesthetic. There was a time when I was nearly overtaken by your resolve.”

Her porcelain fingers began to swell and turn red, unable to withstand the glow of the incense burner. Yet Seika didn't so much as flinch in pain, instead slamming the censer to the ground with a *crash!*

"I will not lose to you again. I will pursue my own aesthetic vision. This round, my version trumped yours, which is how we ended up here."

Just as Reiga had done to her own shawl in the past, she ground the shattered pieces of the gorgeous incense burner under her shoe.

Seika lifted one eyebrow. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Heh…" For a while, the Pure Consort was stunned into silence, but she eventually let out a laugh like an exhale. "Heh heh… Ha ha ha! Oh, Kin Seika. You would speak to me of the naive 'aesthetic' a little girl envisions?" Her voice grew progressively shriller until it morphed into a raucous guffaw. "You're telling me that pride can trump money? What utter nonsense!"

Shaking her head as her mirth ebbed, Reiga jabbed a vibrantly painted fingertip at her niece. "What is pride worth? Play the noble poor all you want, but you'll only look pitiful in the eyes of those around you. For all their pretty platitudes, your mother and grandmother spent their whole lives miserable!"

Seika's eyebrows twitched as soon as she heard the word *mother*.

Taking that to mean that the girl was shaken, Reiga shouted louder still. "Do you know the bedtime stories my mother used to tell me every night? They were all about how she made a fool of your mother! About how the woman wore hand-me-downs like a servant girl, never ate three meals a day, and sometimes even collapsed from hunger! And all this when she could easily turn things around by indulging her husband in the bedroom! She was a pathetic pauper who mistook obstinacy for integrity!"

"…"

"How stupid is that? Pride doesn't put food on the table. All that matters is money. This room is proof of that." The Pure Consort pointed to the opulent furnishings and boxes bursting with gold and goods. "I bought off the court ladies and Eagle Eyes. Even under house arrest on His Majesty's orders, I still managed to bribe them with ease! A small sum of money was all it took to lure

them to this annex without a second thought! Wherever I may be, I can continue to amass treasure after treasure with the power of money. Everything is at my fingertips!”

She thought she had confronted Seika with the harsh reality—that she had shown the wet-behind-the-ears little girl just how laughable and powerless her aesthetics really were. It was clear self-interest and wealth that brought people to their knees, not lofty ideals, and even now she was still the true mistress of the Palace of the Metallic Shade.

“Well, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

Yet no matter how much Reiga yelled, the Maiden before her never flinched. She crouched down languidly, then swept the fragments of the burner she had crushed into one place.

“You only think of people as pawns to be bought, so I doubt you ever realized what those delivering your money and goods had actually been ordered to do.”

As the tide of the conversation took a sudden turn, Reiga dubiously furrowed her brow. “I beg your pardon?”

Without meeting her gaze, Seika continued to scoop up the colorful shards and scattered ashes, gathering them in the middle of the floor.

“His Majesty gave me two instructions on how to deal with you. The first was to place you under house arrest indefinitely. The other was to allow the staff to bring you whatever you desire for a period of five days.”

“What…?”

The Pure Consort’s eyes widened, and Seika abruptly looked up from where she was kneeling.

“I told him that three days would be plenty.” A spine-chillingly beautiful smile rose to the girl’s lovely lips. “Now that those three days are up, the door to this annex will be sealed shut, and no one will come in or out. When the door opens next will depend on His Majesty’s mood…and whether the Maiden asks for leniency.”

Seika rose to her feet without a sound and looked the Pure Consort straight in

the eye.

“On that note, Aunt Reiga, did you happen to ask for nonperishable food or a bucket in which to do your business?”

As soon as she registered the meaning of the question, Reiga’s entire body went cold. Food had no place in such lavish quarters, let alone a fetid night-soil bucket. It was the job of the court ladies who came by each day to deliver those things.

Or so she had assumed.

“W-wait…”

“If you had at least submitted a handwritten copy of the scriptures, it might have improved His Majesty’s perception of you. Now there’s no telling when the door might open next.”

“Wait, Seika!”

When Seika turned on her heel, Reiga scrambled to grab her arm from behind. In her desperation, she clutched a tight handful of Seika’s favorite shawl, but the Maiden sidestepped and let the sheer cloth fall away.

It was a pure-white shawl that evoked images of a celestial maiden. Yet Seika’s gaze no longer lingered as she watched it go.

“You can have that as a parting gift. I no longer need it,” she said, smiling thinly, then left the room without so much as a backward glance.

The moment she passed through the door of the annex, the Eagle Eyes who had been standing by descended all at once.

“Have you finished saying your goodbyes, Lady Kin Seika?”

“Yes.”

“Then we will seal the door.”

Just as the men were beginning to secure the door in a well-orchestrated fashion, wooden planks and nails in hand, there came a violent banging on the sliding door from within.

“Seika! Please, Seika! Open up! Open this door! Let me out of here!”

The woman's cries were bloodcurdling.

"I said open up! Come on! I'll pay any price you name! I'll apologize as many times as you want!"

Upon hearing that, Seika quietly added, "Do the window too, please."

"Yes, ma'am."

After nodding once in return, Seika left the annex behind with a graceful stride.

"Hey, Seika! *Seika!* Seikaaaaa!"

She could still hear Reiga's howling from the other side of the door.

Once the shrill shrieks had finally faded into the distance, Seika murmured, "Pride may not put food on the table…but money cannot buy happiness."

When she looked down, she saw that the hands with which she had gathered the ashes were covered in soot. Seika held her grimy fingers up to the sky and studied them long and hard.

"Isn't that right, Mother, Grandmother?"

Even as they heard the earsplitting squeals from the far-off annex, her foremothers had held their heads high with dignity and refused to stoop down to their rivals' level.

Maybe that had been obstinate. Maybe it had been a poor move, and maybe it had been cowardly.

All the same, they had stood with their backs straight, never once raising their voices or breaking down in tears. Seika had spent her whole life watching them clench their trembling fists—watching them clutch at a small fragment of beauty and refuse to let go.

Her whole life.

"I love all things beautiful," Seika said as she looked at her soiled hands.

The mainline descendants of the Kin would continue to hold their heads high. To keep their backs straight, and to be pure and beautiful.

"I've decided to fight to protect them."

Seika would never curl up into a ball. The one and only way in which she differed from her mother and grandmother was that she didn't care if her hands were stained with evil.

The ugly didn't deserve to live. Still, there was no beauty to be found in simply enduring.

Seika clenched her dirty fists, lifted her fair face with determination, and took off down the cloister leading to the Palace of the Metallic Shade.

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The annex in the Palace of the Indigo Fox was a good deal more modest than the one in the Kin Palace. Only after pushing through a towering bamboo grove and walking down a deserted cloister did the building with its gray walls and dull, blue-tiled roof finally peer into view.

That overgrown section of the palace was where Virtuous Consort Ran Hourin was currently imprisoned.

"Damn it all…"

She was sitting at a high-end writing desk without a single source of light. What was written on the paper before her was neither an apology nor a sermon, but simply a string of hateful curses directed at Ran Houshun.

"Die, Ran Houshun, die…" she muttered, but no one was around to hear it. There wasn't a single court lady in the room.

Still, the Eagle Eyes standing watch on the other side of the iron bars would see it as the Virtuous Consort copying the scriptures without even seeking warmth. They would see a benevolent lady being worn down by the punishment she had received due to a "misunderstanding." A woman who, despite the heartache she felt, was doing her best to sort out her emotions by furiously transcribing the texts in front of her.

Hourin knew all too well the importance of making such an impression. Hence why she had spent the past three days doing the transcribing work she so loathed, despite thinking it a waste of time.

That said, her calligraphy wasn't particularly skilled for a woman of the Ran

clan. Coupled with the fact that the content wasn't exactly presentable, she wasn't planning to submit it. Once she had filled the pages with a respectable amount of bitter ranting, all she had to do was burn them, weeping and lamenting that her work wasn't worth presenting to His Majesty. That way, other people would view her as being hard on herself.

Or maybe I should have Houshun write it for me when she comes by. Her handwriting is gorgeous.

The Virtuous Consort's lips twisted as she smacked the tip of her brush against the page.

Ran Houshun… That despicable little brat.

Though resourceful and devious, she had initially disguised herself as a harmless pet and attempted to outwit Hourin. And now, after showing her true colors and receiving a bit of light discipline, she had colluded with the other clans to bring down her own guardian.

The consort hadn't the faintest idea how that truth-illuminating mirror or whatever it was had been constructed. But if nothing else, she knew that the little brat had turned on her. That tiny dose of discipline clearly hadn't done the trick.

Next time, I'll rip off every last one of her toenails. I'll slash every bit of her body that's hidden under a robe to pieces. I wonder where I could brand her so that it won't show, she thought as she irritably stirred the ink in her inkstone.

Hourin was well aware of how easily and effectively violence could bring others to heel.

By their very nature, the Rans were of the wood attribute—mild mannered and intelligent. But the way Hourin saw it, that meant the same thing as being underhanded and bigheaded. Every last one of them took pride in their wealth of knowledge, favored circuitous turns of phrase, and avoided head-on confrontations, preferring instead to play politics from behind the scenes.

Of course, Hourin was a woman of the Ran herself. She loved to scheme, and she took the utmost pride in being seen as smart. Alas, her brain was not as suited to critical thinking as the other mainline descendants. She had spent her

childhood years being mocked and undermined by those around her.

Despite this—no, *because* of it—when she finally lost her temper and raised a hand against a court lady, she quickly realized how efficient a method brute force was.

Those of the Ran clan preferred verbal intimidation to armed conflict. Conversely, this meant they were unaccustomed to violence. Drawing the slightest bit of blood would turn them ashen with fear, and leaving a handful of marks would prompt them to use their superior powers of imagination to envision the worst-case scenario and fall into a despair of their own making. Because they so rarely thought of resorting to violence, Hourin had an easy time gaining the upper hand.

If "intelligence" implied an appreciation for rationality, then Hourin was the most intelligent woman in the entire clan.

It wasn't long before she went from delivering barehanded slaps to wearing nail guards on her fingers and clenching paperweights in her fists. That was her way of exerting control over the court ladies who were either full of themselves or smarter than she was.

Thus, when she discovered how terribly insolent her own Maiden was, it was to be expected that Hourin would rip off her fingernails. Just as it was to be expected that she would force her court ladies to swallow needles or pick at their wounds whenever she was having a bad day.

"I'm losing my patience," Hourin muttered, finally tossing the brush aside.

No matter how much her frustration mounted, she had no one left to hurl her inkstone at. The Eagle Eyes were right outside, but Hourin couldn't lay a hand on them. Hurting them would have disastrous consequences for her future, and they dwarfed her in stature besides. She had to limit the targets of her violence to small, helpless women.

"I *told* Meimei to bring her here as soon as possible. What's taking her so long? Why, I ought to skin that useless court lady."

Meimei was the Maiden's head court lady. She was incredibly self-effacing and far from a brilliant mind, but that was exactly why Hourin liked her enough

to appoint her as Houshun's chief attendant. It had been years since she first started beating the girl, and Hourin delighted in how she still cowered and turned deathly pale each and every time. Evidently, she had been abused by her parents and had nowhere to go after her term of service was up, so she had no choice but to stick it out—which was very convenient for the consort. Girls like that made for Hourin's favorite pawns.

She had ordered Meimei to bring Houshun to the annex by any means necessary. She could break the girl's fingers or scald her with a hot iron if she had to. If she failed, Hourin had threatened to inflict a torture ten times worse on the court lady herself.

A common characteristic of those constantly subjected to violence was that they lost the capacity for rational thought. They quivered and quaked, thinking only of ways to minimize their own suffering. It never occurred to them to run away.

Hourin had not a doubt in her mind that Meimei was going to bring her Houshun.

Just then, there came a soft knock on the door, and a court lady stepped inside with a skittish air. Meimei had arrived, and she did indeed have Houshun in tow. "Pardon me, ma'am. The Maiden, Lady Houshun, is here to see you."

"I came to see how you were doing," Houshun squeaked, burying her face in her sleeves.

As soon as she heard the pitiful quiver in the girl's voice, a rush of merriment swept the Virtuous Consort's heart. *Yes, that's the good stuff.* This *is how things are supposed to be.*

"Took you long enough," the consort drawled in a saccharine voice, getting up from her desk. "Did you forget that your own guardian was being detained over a 'misunderstanding'? A more considerate Maiden would have paid me a visit straight away. You really are a heartless girl."

The Virtuous Consort didn't take the charges brought against her too seriously. After all, the worst crime of hers the shaman had exposed was the unauthorized sale of inner court secrets. A certain amount of information would make the rounds by virtue of small talk alone; add to that the fact that her

client was the shaman, and Hourin hadn't done anything wrong. Even the bribes had been little more than donations to demonstrate her piety, and Hourin had sent an assassin to Anni's prison cell to kill her before she could spill any more of her misdeeds.

Fortunately, the blame for the attempted assassination of Kou Reirin had been pinned on the Kin clan—she thought Houshun had done a good job there—so at the very least, Hourin's crimes were much less severe than Reiga's. The time she served in the annex would probably be commuted for good behavior or consideration of the circumstances.

In that case, how many appeals could she encourage Houshun and the court ladies to make to the emperor? That was Hourin's biggest concern at the moment.

"You know, my little Houshun, I've had a hard time adjusting to life here. It's so lonely with no one around, I'm afraid I might go mad. I can't go on like this any longer. You understand, right?"

She took a slow step toward Houshun, and that alone was enough to deepen the angle at which the petite Maiden hung her head. It seemed that removing her fingernail had left a rather lasting scar on the girl's heart.

The Virtuous Consort smiled, gently bringing her face toward Houshun's huddled frame. "Say, did you think you'd outsmarted me? I bet you thought you'd brought me down after colluding with the other Maidens. Too bad. At the end of the day, you're still the Maiden of the Ran clan. You spend your days here with the court ladies in the Palace of the Indigo Fox."

This was the important part, Hourin knew. She had to impress upon Houshun that the girl couldn't work together with the other clans. It was impossible to form an alliance with her rivals, and even if they did manage to become friends, it was the Ran Palace—not the Maiden Court—where she had to make her livelihood. She had to drill those facts into Houshun's head.

"And whether they serve the consort or the Maiden, all the court ladies of the Ran Palace are under my control. Do you catch my drift?"

"…"

“Now run along and plead my case to His Majesty. Here, I have an idea: I’ll break one of your fingers for every day it takes me to get out of here. And don’t even think about snitching. It will be a piece of cake to get the court ladies to corroborate my story.”

Hourin turned up the pressure, but Houshun didn’t respond. She just stood there motionless, her face still buried in her sleeves. Though it felt good to see such a cocky girl scared out of her wits, Hourin found it troublesome that the conversation wasn’t progressing at all.

Ever the impatient one, Hourin huffed a sigh of frustration and barked an order to Meimei. “We’re not getting anywhere. Go and summon all the court ladies who serve under me. Oh, and have them come in groups of two or three at a time so as not to arouse the Eagle Eyes’ suspicions.”

When Meimei snapped her head to attention, the consort giggled and added, “Our little lady seems a bit slow on the uptake. She’ll get her act together if we rip off two or three of her fingernails, don’t you think? I need to have enough women around to hold her down.”

It would be hard to get the job done with the Eagle Eyes standing watch twenty-four seven, but the situation just called for a touch of creative thinking. If she muffled the Maiden’s screams with a gag, no one would hear her, and the Eagle Eyes would never suspect the “self-effacing” Ran court ladies of engaging in mob justice.

“With all due respect, Virtuous Consort Ran—”

“I asked you to call for a higher-ranking court lady, Meimei. Get to it,” the consort snapped at the hint of insubordination.

Considering how badly she had hurt this woman in the past, it was irksome that she still insisted on defending her Maiden out of loyalty. Hourin had heard that she had a little brother or sister back at home, so perhaps that explained her behavior.

Once I’m done disciplining Houshun, I should take my time reeducating this one.

The Virtuous Consort turned over thoughts in her head—until Meimei’s next

words made her blink.

“The court ladies already have this place surrounded,” she said.

“What?”

Surprised, the consort looked toward the door, where she could, in fact, see a procession of women in court lady uniforms approaching from the other side of the lattice bars.

The ladies entered the room gracefully, their movements perfectly coordinated. One of them took a small sum of money from the breast of her garment, at which the Eagle Eyes took their cue and left the scene.

“Well, well.”

The speed of the arrangements made the Virtuous Consort more incredulous than pleased. She had subjugated the women of the Ran clan through countless instances of abuse and mutual surveillance. Though they were undoubtedly loyal, they usually looked more somber when it came time to torment someone. Why were they suddenly so eager to get to work?

Are the girls looking forward to torturing Houshun?

Just as the consort’s eyes began to dart around, Houshun abruptly lifted her head.

“*I* gathered the court ladies together, Virtuous Consort Ran. I sat each of them down for a one-on-one talk before the final trial.”

There was a lovely smile on the face she had hidden behind her sleeves.

“What…?”

“Curiously enough, they had all suffered some sort of injury. I felt guilty, just terrible, that I had gone so long without noticing the pain my precious retainers were in.” Tears swam in her large, childlike eyes. “So I treated all of them, be they the consort’s or the Maiden’s attendants, and listened carefully to what they had to say.”

Looking over her shoulder at the court ladies who had come up right behind her, the Maiden reached out to touch one of their arms in a friendly gesture. The moment she did so, every court lady in the room knelt on the spot—not

before the Virtuous Consort but before Houshun.

“The wounds hidden from view, the threats they had received, the scars on their hearts—after hearing it all, I offered them money and told them thus.”

In the past, the court ladies had always been the ones looking down at Ran Houshun with affection in their eyes. Now she stood with her tiny back straight, confidently meeting the gazes of the women staring up at her with respect.

“‘Take this money and flee the inner court. I promise I won’t punish you for deserting. However, if you do choose to remain here and serve me, I swear to protect you no matter the cost.’”

If sent back to their old homes before the end of their term, most of the court ladies would have nowhere to stay. Rather, the Virtuous Consort had purposely assembled women with such backgrounds. With nowhere to run, they had fallen into despair and become paralyzed with fear.

And Houshun had been empathetic enough to counsel each and every one of them.

“No one would take my word for it right away, so I made a bet with them. If a ‘miracle’ were to occur during the final trial and the Virtuous Consort were to be punished, it would mean the Heavens favored me. I told them to join my side if and when they felt truly convinced.” Houshun cocked her head to one side in an innocent gesture. “Then a miracle happened.”

“Wha…”

The Virtuous Consort gulped and instinctively backed away. Though Ran Houshun was enunciating her words quite clearly, Hourin didn’t have a clue what she was saying.

“What was it you said? It’s so lonely with no one around, you’re afraid you might go mad?”

Houshun took a step closer, an adorable smile on her face. The way the court ladies stalked forward in perfect step with her sent goosebumps flaring down the Virtuous Consort’s back.

“Eep!”

The court ladies smiled thinly, a gleam in their eyes. It was the look of beasts who had sighted their prey.

“Are you ready, Consort Ran? Though I am an inept villainess, I’ve brought our retainers together to repay you for all you’ve done.”

“D-don’t come any closer!”

“It’s technically against the rules to leave any court ladies stationed here during your house arrest, but we couldn’t bear to leave our beloved consort all by her lonesome. We wouldn’t ask for your sentence to be commuted, but in exchange, we wanted to leave some of your closest attendants by your side. Oh, and don’t worry—we’ve already made sure to ask for permission from His Majesty.”

“No!”

The consort’s pulse quickened, and she broke into a cold sweat. Did that mean that she was going to spend the entirety of her indefinite house arrest stuck in an isolated room with these court ladies? These court ladies whose eyes burned with a thirst for revenge?

“Stop—”

“Ladies,” Houshun gently commanded with a flap of her sleeves, heedless of how the Virtuous Consort had retreated to a corner of the room, “please take very special care of the Virtuous Consort.”

The court ladies responded in eerie harmony, “Yes, ma’am.”

Virtuous Consort Ran tried to scream, but her voice was soon drowned out.

Houshun slipped past the court ladies as they immobilized the consort with their deft, coordinated movements. Having their mistress around to nag would only be a distraction. She was better off letting the ladies do as they pleased. When all was said and done, she would take full responsibility for everything. That was what the ideal mistress would do.

“Hee hee. It’s actually kind of fun to lead an organization.”

Listening to the rustle of the bamboo leaves, Houshun sauntered down the cloister. Never once had she doubted that settling for life as a house pet was

the smartest way to get by, but perhaps she was cut out for leadership after all. Those steadfast looks of respect had been far more gratifying than the sweet, affectionate ones she was used to.

"All right. First, I've got to take extra care to threaten the Eagle Eyes we bribed, and then I need to reward the ladies for a job well done. Maybe I should prepare some snacks. Or would medicinal herbs and gold suit the occasion better?" she mused aloud, strolling along in good spirits.

The wind felt so pleasant as it weaved through the bamboo leaves that it would have been a waste to hide her face. She had no plans to give up her small animal disguise this late in the game, but it was still nice to lower her sleeves every now and then. For instance, when she was in a safe space with a comfortable breeze—or when she was peering into the face of someone she wanted to subjugate.

It's amazing how much your perspective expands when you stop hiding your face.

Overcome with emotion, Houshun stopped in her tracks. With a sudden thought, she looked back in the direction of the annex. From a distance, it looked quiet and tranquil. At this point, however, a gruesome spectacle was sure to be unfolding on the other side of the door.

Houshun tilted her head with a slow smile. Then she lazily lifted a hand and pressed it to her cheek.

"'Finish her.'"

That was the line of a villainess inciting a counterattack.

One who could win the hearts and minds of others with just a few words and drive them to evil deeds, all without ever getting her own hands dirty.

One who even Houshun, who had hatched more than a few plots in her time, knew she was no match for.

"Is that how the line goes?"

Her heart leapt. Her pulse quickened. The world was still riddled with enigmas and insurmountable foes, all luring Houshun with the promise of a challenge.

How should I go after her next?

She would chase down her rival, and one day she would checkmate her. It was so exciting to think that there were more days like this to come.

With an ear-to-ear grin that wasn't fake in the least, Houshun resumed her walk down the cloister.

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The sound of a piece tapping against a chessboard filled the room.

"Checkmate at last," Empress Kenshuu murmured, then slumped back against her chair with a long exhale. "Now that was a tough match."

"Congratulations, Your Majesty," came a neutral reply. The voice belonged to the Worthy Consort, Gousetsu, who was sipping tea from a lidded bowl a short distance from the chessboard.

It had been three days since the Rite of Reverence. Normally, Gousetsu didn't interact much with the other consorts, but for once, she had made her way to the Maiden Court recreation room to spend some time alone with Kenshuu.

"Granted, winning a game of solo chess isn't a terribly impressive feat."

"It's not *my* fault you refused my invitation to play with me."

The conversation between Gousetsu, whose lips quirked ever so slightly, and Kenshuu, whose brow furrowed in a sulk, was rather casual for an interaction between the Worthy Consort and the empress.

As it happened, Gen Gousetsu was the only Maiden Kenshuu had socialized with since her days in the Maiden Court, with the sole exception of Noble Consort Shu. Despite the adversarial relationship of earth and water, Kenshuu's bravado and Gousetsu's lack of concern for propriety or appearances had made them an oddly good match. One possible explanation was that Gousetsu's attention was so focused elsewhere that she was never put off by the empress's attempts to overpower her.

"I'm afraid I am no match for you in terms of skill," Gousetsu said nonchalantly. "I'm sure there are plenty of others who would be eager to serve as your opponent."

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. The kind Noble Consort is no longer with us.” Kenshuu shoved her chin into her palm as she observed her friend. “And I doubt that either the Pure or Virtuous Consort will set foot here ever again.”

The comment carried heavy implications. Gousetsu quietly set her teacup down. “Perhaps so.”

That was all the Worthy Consort said in response, but there was an ominous intensity to the thin smile etched onto her face.

A long silence hung over the room.

Staring down at her finished game of chess, Kenshuu eventually said, “Gousetsu. I’m sorry about what happened three years ago.”

“Lady Kenshuu—”

The Worthy Consort leaned forward to cut off the empress’s apology, but Kenshuu pressed on without making eye contact. “If only I hadn’t invited you outside to prepare for His Majesty’s birthday, none of that would have happened. If only I had the power to override the empress dowager’s gag order, we could have settled things much sooner. I can’t tell you how much I have rued my own powerlessness.”

Indeed. Three years ago, Gousetsu had left the inner court at Kenshuu’s invitation.

During the preparations for the birthday rite, Kenshuu had to run things not only by the emperor but also by his mother, the empress dowager. When she went to visit the imperial villa where the empress dowager resided, Kenshuu had asked Gousetsu to come along as an intermediary, thinking it would be courteous to bring a fellow member of the Gen clan to the meeting.

“Don’t, Your Majesty. That was a basic obligation of mine, and I left the inner court of my own volition. The gag order was also imposed at the empress dowager’s discretion, and you played no part in it. None of it was your fault,” Gousetsu declared with finality.

Kenshuu cracked a tiny smile. It was a rare look of self-deprecation. “I knew you would say that, and since there was nothing I could do to change things, I could never bring myself to apologize. But at long last, I feel like I’ve finally

earned the right to do so.” She lifted her head, then slowly turned to look at the other consort. “Gousetsu. I’m truly sorry that I couldn’t save your godchild three years ago.”

“You shouldn’t be,” said Gousetsu, looking Kenshuu straight in the eye. “You gave me as much leeway as you could with the gag order in place. And you gave me access to the shaman by deliberately planning events that would require her participation, didn’t you?”

In lieu of an answer, Kenshuu’s gaze dropped back to the game board. She flicked at the soldier that had so brilliantly defeated the general.

“Scenarios don’t tend to play out the way one envisions them. This time, several powerless soldiers worked together to turn the game around, that’s all.”

Those words alone were enough to appease Gousetsu. In a rare sight, the corners of her mouth creased firmly into a smile, and she bowed to the empress from a sitting position.

“I am most grateful for your generosity and intelligence. Also…I thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving us Gens custody of the shaman before the Kins and Rans could send their assassins.”

“Careful not to tell Pure Consort Kin or Virtuous Consort Ran. Anyway, it’s His Majesty the Emperor you ought to be thanking. At the very least, the custody bit was his idea.”

“His Majesty is a hard man to read. He never lets on to what he’s truly thinking.”

“You said it.”

Gousetsu wore a solemn look, while Kenshuu shrugged her shoulders with a snort. The two women shared a quiet laugh, the atmosphere between them more like fellow military officers serving the same superior than a pair of consorts.

“All else aside, I’m glad to see you’ve gotten your smile back,” Kenshuu eventually remarked, pleased, as she put away the chess pieces.

Only then did Gousetsu notice the smile on her own face. She massaged her

cheeks, perplexed, until she ultimately clasped her hands. “Yes.”

She wasn’t pressing them together to withstand her anger and grief. It was a gentle squeeze, as if she were cradling something in her palms.

At long last, Gousetsu held a love like a beacon of light in her hands.

“From here on out, I can finally nurture Kasui without hesitation.”

As a would-be avenger, the consort had always kept her distance from Kasui, lest she drag her beloved Maiden down with her. Now that her quest was complete, she could show the girl all the love she had hidden in her heart without holding back.

Gousetsu closed her eyes, savoring the sunbeams that fell on her cheeks through the window. “I’ve been blessed with the loveliest of Maidens, and now I can cherish her without restraint. I must be the happiest woman alive,” she murmured, a joyous smile on her lips.

Once she had finished packing the pieces into a jar, Kenshuu observed her friend calmly—but the moment she closed the lid, she muttered in a terribly even voice, “I’m jealous.”

“What?” The Worthy Consort, who had been relaxing in the sunlight, blinked and turned around. She had no idea what that comment was supposed to mean. “Lady Kenshuu—”

“Now then.” Before Gousetsu could ask, Kenshuu put away the jar and swiftly changed the subject. “In the end, physical exercise suits us better than quietly sipping tea in a recreation room. What do you say? Shall we spar in the courtyard for the first time in years? I’d be up to compete at the archery range as well.”

The empress rose to her feet, clearly uninterested in entertaining questions. Gousetsu debated how to respond, but when she saw her friend chuckle and hold out a hand, she decided to put her concerns aside for the time being.

“Join me, Gousetsu. I’ve been waiting three years for this.”

She knew this was Kenshuu’s way of showing her consideration—getting her back into her daily routine after her long period of depression since the loss of

Bushou.

“A spar it is,” the Worthy Consort said. “Don’t expect me to go easy on you.”

“Just the way I want it. Let’s make the gardener cry, for old times’ sake.”

The pair exchanged a few brief words, then left the recreation room without further ado.

Well, not quite. Just as she was about to pass through the door, Gousetsu could have sworn someone called out to her from behind, and she turned around.

The room was filled with a winter chill, and silent as the grave. In the stillness, the light shining through the windows softly illuminated the empty teacups, the chessboard—all the vestiges of human activity.

“Are you there?” Gousetsu murmured in question.

There was no response. Of course not.

But that was okay. In her heart, she already knew the answer.

“It’s all right now.”

Gousetsu gently held up a hand to the faint stream of light. The ray shimmered on the palm of her hand. It was a flicker of warmth within the cold. Bushou was right there by her side, flitting about in the sunlight. She always had been, and she always would be.

“Rest in peace.”

The consort drew back her hand, nearly caressing the light. For a few moments, she clenched her hands into fists. Though the air was still cold, she could feel a palpable heat within her palms.

The warblers sing and the swallows dance. The season that all the Gens secretly loved would soon be upon them.

Until Kenshuu came back to hurry her along, Gousetsu stood there cradling the sun in her hands.

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A frigid winter breeze swept through the pavilion.

“Here, Lady Keigetsu, have some hot tea.”

“Thanks.” Kou Reirin, the girl as beautiful as a celestial maiden—or rather, Keigetsu, still trapped in her form—frowned as she accepted the teacup. “I can’t believe you’d propose drinking tea under a pavilion when it’s this cold out. You really are an odd one, Kou Reirin.”

“Now, now. There aren’t many other places where we can be together out in the open. Besides, Tousetsu’s tea will keep us nice and warm.”

Sitting across from her was the Maiden of the Shu clan, a serene smile on her face. Needless to say, the soul inside belonged to Reirin.

Reirin prompted Tousetsu with her gaze, then accepted a cup of hot tea for herself. To an onlooker, it might seem odd that Tousetsu, a gold-clad court lady, was taking care of the vermillion-robed “Shu Keigetsu,” whereas Leelee, a scarlet-clad court lady, was attending to the ocher-wearing “Kou Reirin.” It was such a strange sight, in fact, that they were forced to hold their tea party in a deserted area.

After a few moments of silently savoring the tea’s aroma under the lonely pavilion, Reirin murmured, “It’s finally over…”

Three days had passed since the final trial of the Rite of Reverence. Once the various props assembled for the ceremony were cleared away, the emissaries invited from across the continent had returned home one by one, and a post-celebration calm had settled over the Maiden Court.

Feeling a surge of emotion, Reirin exhaled a white cloud of breath. “Looking back, it was an almost dizzyingly action-packed event.”

“Forget ‘almost.’ I really did get dizzy enough to pass out at the end,” Keigetsu shot back resentfully.

Indeed. Keigetsu had fainted as soon as she heard the news of Anni’s capture.

The reason was simple: exhaustion. “Kou Reirin’s” body had been plunged into the Violet Dragon’s Spring ten days earlier, then dropped down a well a few days after that, only to end up working day and night to craft a mirror. Who would have expected a body said to be “as fragile as a dusting of snow” to take on the challenge of casting?

Then, as if the physical fatigue wasn't enough, Keigetsu had used the Daoist arts to help control the heat for the molding, cast a large-scale flame spell, and drained herself of her qi as well. As a consequence, her stamina reserves had been completely depleted, thus bringing them to the present, with the switch yet to be reversed.

"I'm truly sorry that the frailty of my body led you to faint, Lady Keigetsu," Reirin said.

Keigetsu cut her somber apology down with all the razor-sharpness of a blade. "Your frailty isn't the reason you should be apologizing. The problem is that you never consider your limitations."

"You're absolutely right. Still, if we wanted to make the final trial a success, we had little choice but to push ourselves."

"That's a fair point…"

After listening to that string of apologies and excuses, Keigetsu nodded reluctantly, leaning back in her chair. It was true that, in order to prepare a mirror on par with a national treasure in only four days, they had been forced to hustle to the point of putting all their other problems on the back burner.

And not just Reirin and Keigetsu—the same went for Kin Seika, Ran Houshun, and Gen Kasui as well. Their dignity, safety, and revenge, respectively, had been riding on the success of the final trial.

The plan was to reflect the light off the mirror, start a fire, and expose the crimes of the shaman and consorts. It would have been perfectly reasonable for the other Maidens to dismiss the scenario as absurd. They could have grilled Reirin and Keigetsu, demanding to know how such a feat could be possible. They could have suspected the involvement of Daoist magic.

Yet not one of them had wasted their time on that. The girls had seen a glimmer of hope in Reirin's plan and staked their entire lives on it. They had averted their eyes from all their misgivings and looked only to the future they wanted to create.

Exactly. We turned a blind eye to various problems "for a time."

Keigetsu traced the rim of her teacup anxiously. Three days had passed since

the final trial, and it was about time to get their proper bodies back. Still, there was something she had to confess to Reirin before she could undo the swap. The prospect of telling her *that* was daunting indeed.

"The truth is, uh…" she began, her voice hitching.

At the time, she had believed *that* was her best move—or, well, it was more like she'd lost her temper and found herself in that position before she knew it—but now that the time had come to admit what she'd done, her face twisted in shame.

"I mean, maybe you already noticed when we were making the mirror together…"

"Hm?"

Keigetsu averted her gaze, unable to bear the sight of Reirin tilting her own head in question.

"Kin Seika found out about the swap."

She could tell she was puckering her face like someone who had swallowed about five hundred lemons.

"What…?"

"It was when I was talking her into joining our side. She was acting so pathetic that I couldn't help but scold her. And then, well…the way the rest of the conversation went tipped her off."

She gulped down the rest of her tea to moisten her dry mouth.

Promptly pouring her a refill, Tousetsu added, "To be more precise, it was her despicable notion to settle things with money and the lack of culture evident in her erroneous use of 'the warblers sing and the swallows dance' that did it. Of course, the part that left the deepest impression on me personally was when she shouted, 'Your aesthetic has no backbone!'"

"Don't just *tell* her that!" Keigetsu's voice cracked as the court lady mercilessly rubbed salt in the wound. "I was admitting I messed up! Do you really need to kick me while I'm down?!"

"I meant that as a compliment."

“Huh?”

“I was not disparaging you. I was praising you,” Tousetsu matter-of-factly replied. “I believe that comeback ought to be adopted as a maxim, and though it is hardly my place as a mere court lady, I was pleased to see that you have finally begun to understand the beauty of backbone.”

Keigetsu was stunned. “Oh… All right, then…”

She really wished Tousetsu would stop picking on her all the time, only to turn around and compliment her out of the blue. It made it hard to tell if she was a friend or foe, and she was never sure of the appropriate distance to keep between them.

Clearing her throat, Keigetsu steered the conversation back on track. “A-anyway, there you have it. Kin Seika knows about the switch…and that I have Daoist powers.”

When Keigetsu finally shifted her gaze back to the Maiden sitting across the table from her, she found her hanging her head, her face buried in both hands.

“…”

“Kou Reirin?”

Had her friend finally lost her patience with her? After all the times she had mocked Kou Reirin’s poor mimicries in the past, this was certainly a lot of egg on her face.

“Mm.” Reirin removed a hand from her face and raised it meekly in the air, her face still downcast. “Actually…me too.”

“Huh?”

“Lady Houshun found out about the swap,” she confessed in a vanishingly small voice.

Keigetsu’s eyes practically popped out of her skull. “Whaaaaat?!”

“I-I think my acting was flawless!” Reirin’s response was to shrink “Shu Keigetsu’s” tall body as far in on itself as it could go. The once-exuberant girl’s eyes were damp with mortification. “Lady Houshun was trying every trick in the book to strike back at me, so I just responded accordingly! I made a point of

insulting her, and I even glared at her, so frankly, I have no idea how she figured me out!”

“What’s there to wonder? Of course she’s going to catch on if you overpower her with the air of a conqueror.” Leelee, who was hanging back in the corner, chuckled with a faraway look in her eyes. “In all fairness, it was arguably Lady Houshun’s fault for responding to an invitation to work together by trying to sabotage us. She left us no choice but total domination.”

“Leelee… I do wish you would have left out the ‘arguably.’” The court lady’s blunt testimony caused Reirin to bury her face in her hands again. “Lady Keigetsu… I’m so sorry.”

The sincere apology nearly had Keigetsu screaming, “How could you let this happen?!” but she quickly swallowed the words. Any fault she found in Kou Reirin would simply rebound to her.

An awkward silence fell.

Unable to bear it any longer, Reirin lifted her freckled face with a forced smile. “B-but it’s not a problem! As long as we reverse the swap today, they won’t have any proof to back their claims! We’ll be in the clear!”

“Maybe so.” What choice did Keigetsu have but to accept the attempt at consolation? “You’re right. I don’t think Kin Seika would rat me out for practicing Daoism, at least. She’s the type to eradicate those she doesn’t like with her own two hands.”

“Precisely! Nor would Lady Houshun ever snitch. Why, if anything, her eyes were alight with curiosity about the body swap and Daoist magic!”

“Besides, the moment they turned to my fire spell to retaliate against their consorts, they were also guilty of dabbling in the mystic arts! They would go down with us!”

“Exactly! And even if they *did* tell the authorities, His Highness, Her Majesty, and the captain of the Eagle Eyes are already in the know. We have all the powers that be in our camp. We could easily cover it up!”

Raucous laughs of desperation filled the pavilion. But as soon as the last lingering echoes had faded, both girls propped their elbows on the table and

buried their faces in their hands in perfect sync.

“Let’s at least be on our guard to make sure Lady Kasui doesn’t find out.”

“Good idea.” Keigetsu nodded listlessly, then screwed her face into a sour frown. “But hold on a second. Does that mean I have to spend the rest of my life playing ‘Shu Keigetsu the role model’ around Gen Kasui?”

She said this because Gen Kasui had latched on to “Shu Keigetsu” like a faithful watchdog ever since their clash in the storehouse. Though the Gen Maiden remained as stone-faced as ever, she followed “Keigetsu” everywhere, promptly obeying her instructions and breaking into a smile each time she was praised. She was the spitting image of a little sister who idolized her elder sibling, or perhaps a baby chick that had imprinted on its mother.

Reirin found it a heartwarming sight, but from Keigetsu’s point of view, it was a little creepy to have the older Maiden pop up every time she turned around.

“Gen Kasui’s attitude changed after your skirmish in the storehouse, right? What in the world did you do? Was it your usual routine of rescuing her from the depths of despair?”

“No, I only offered to help with her revenge after nearly crushing her to death… She was already racked with guilt, and I more or less told her to suffer more. I’d say I pushed her over the edge more than I rescued her…”

“Then how did she get so attached to you?”

“I haven’t the slightest. Perhaps it was because I pulled her out of a pile of rubble?”

Keigetsu asked the same question over and over again, but all she ever got were similarly unhelpful answers.

With a troubled look on her face and a hand pressed to her cheek, Reirin eventually came to a very half-cocked conclusion. “Perhaps she’s the sort who enjoys being cornered, and she sensed the qualities of a demanding mentor in me.”

“I want to believe that no one outside the Kou clan has those predilections, and a disciple wouldn’t scrutinize her mentor’s every move or try to help her

eat.”

“Ah, yes… Lady Kasui is surprisingly diligent, isn’t she? It was so thoughtful of her to bring me eighty different snacks while I was working, since she wasn’t sure what my taste in sweets was.”

“That’s overkill!”

Hearing just a snippet of the loyalty Kasui had shown “Shu Keigetsu” was enough to give the real one heartburn. Just as Tousetsu had long proven, it seemed that nothing good came of being favored by a Gen.

This girl really does seduce anything that moves…

And the thought that *she* was going to suffer the consequences of Reirin’s conquests gave Keigetsu the urge to glance heavenward.

It was strange to think that she had once burned with the desire to be loved. Nowadays, she felt more than covered on that front.

“Before I reverse the switch, you should give me the details of the conversations you had with Gen Kasui. Otherwise, I might create inconsistencies with the version of ‘Shu Keigetsu’ you played.”

“Of course. In fact, I figured you would say that, so I already compiled it into book format. Read this, and you should have no problem—oh?”

As Reirin fumbled around in the breast of her garment, she made a rare face of *Oh, shoot*. When Keigetsu asked what was wrong, she said that she had left the book in question at the Shu Palace storehouse.

“My apologies. I was so thrilled at the prospect of having tea with you that I rushed right over and forgot all about the book.”

“Your priorities are always so screwed up,” Keigetsu growled.

When Reirin offered to go back and get the tome, since she had left it in a hard-to-find spot in the field, the Shu Maiden sniffed and allowed her to leave the table—a sign that she wasn’t entirely displeased to be the recipient of her friend’s affections.

Not that she would ever admit it.

Well, whatever. Once we've gotten the transition process over with, I suppose I'll adopt myself a new watchdog.

Keigetsu leaned back in her chair, leisurely sipping her tea. Though she had an attendant of her own, circumstances being what they were, Leelee tended to give her a lot of lip. Thinking about it, she had never been blessed with someone who looked up to her or idolized her, so the coming days spent in Gen Kasui's company might be more tolerable than she had first imagined. She could tease the older girl all she liked, or pamper her on a whim.

Hold on, this actually sounds fun!

A grin spread across her lips as she raised the teacup to meet them. In all her time in the Maiden Court—no, in all her life—she had never established dominance over someone and doted on them.

No, wait a second. I came out of the Rite of Reverence in second place. Doesn't that mean I'll have a lot more opportunities for this sort of thing in the future?

The phrase warmed her heart as it echoed over and over in her head. *Second place.* No one could have predicted that she, who had been derided as the court "sewer rat" and the lowest-ranking of the Maidens, would one day be second only to the prince's "butterfly."

Of course, she realized that her ranking was a result of Kin Seika and Ran Houshun's negligence and that her own performance had been rated fourth—but since she was the one who had exposed the consorts' crimes and dragged the Kins and Rans through the mud, it still counted as a testament to her own skills.

Besides, even if you don't count the other Maidens' mistakes, I still finished in fourth!

Not fifth place—fourth. It was still last place, but Keigetsu was just happy that she had worked hard enough to move up a rank. It made her feel like her efforts to overcome her nervousness and stand on the stage had paid off.

Chest out, gaze forward.

Lift your head high—and do things with a bang.

If she kept that advice in mind, she could succeed. Even someone like her could succeed.

Keigetsu's gaze softened as she cupped her hands around the warm teacup. Though being around Kou Reirin meant getting mixed up in trouble all the time, she had to admit that it had its perks.

"This is no place to be drinking tea," came a voice from outside the pavilion.

The new arrival was a tall, fair-skinned woman dressed in a modest, charcoal-colored robe. It was that inexpressive Maiden who looked more like a snow fairy than a human: Gen Kasui.

"Oh, hello, Lady Kasui."

"It's still bitterly cold outside," Kasui muttered, frowning.

Her low voice and deadpan tone were often mistaken for anger in the early stages of acquaintance, but this was actually what she sounded like when she was worried. She must have deduced that "Shu Keigetsu" had been sitting in the empty seat based on the lineup of court ladies left at the scene.

After taking a look around the frigid space, she shot "Kou Reirin," currently portrayed by Keigetsu, an accusatory glance. "Where is she?"

By "she," one had to assume she meant "Shu Keigetsu," currently portrayed by Reirin.

"Hm? Erm, she went back to the Shu Palace to get something."

"Since when is that the job of the mistress? What are her court ladies doing? And what were you thinking in the first place, letting her drink tea out in the elements? What if she gets sick? Aren't southerners' bodies sensitive to the cold?"

It was a lecture, of all things.

Leelee shrank back, ashamed of her conduct, while Tousetsu wore a conflicted look at the sight of "Kou Reirin" being scolded. Keigetsu, for her part, almost burst out giggling with delight. Though she had seen the reverse plenty of times before, she couldn't believe there was someone out there who would lecture "Kou Reirin" out of concern for "Shu Keigetsu"!

Oh, I am loving this!

The way things were going, she could very well hear an endless stream of praise for “Shu Keigetsu”—and some gossip about “Kou Reirin” on the side—coming from Kasui’s mouth.

The prospect was so enticing that Keigetsu couldn’t resist offering Kasui a seat. “You make an excellent point. Say, Lady Kasui, would you care to join me for a cup of tea?” After prompting Tousetsu to brew a fresh pot, she grinned at the Gen Maiden. “I can see that you truly adore Lady Keigetsu. Tell me: What is your favorite thing about her?”

Tell me, tell me! she positively radiated. *Tell me how much you care about “Shu Keigetsu.” List all of “her” good points and praise “her” to your heart’s content.*

No doubt it would be gratifying to hear.

“Or you can tell me your candid opinion of ‘me,’ if you’d prefer. Frankly, don’t you think that Kou—that *I* can take things a little too far sometimes?”

Bad-mouthing Kou Reirin was also fine by her.

Keigetsu considered Reirin a friend, and she would get upset if someone were to unfairly malign her, but that wouldn’t stop her from enjoying gossip. In fact, the prince’s “butterfly” was held in such high esteem by so many people that she had always been of the opinion that someone should cut her down to size.

Yet Kasui only blinked her almond-shaped eyes a few times and gave a slight tilt of her head. The next moment, she quietly set her teacup back on the table and said, mystified, “What are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“I have no particular feelings for ‘Lady Keigetsu.’”

It took Keigetsu three full beats to process the meaning of those words.

“What? But, er…you’ve been so avidly following her—”

“The one I’ve been following around is Lady Reirin.”

“Huh?”

Paying no heed to Keigetsu's open-mouthed stare, Kasui promptly left her seat. The trio watched in shock as she walked away without so much as a backward glance, as if to say that she had no more business with them.

No way. It couldn't be.

Along with the beads of sweat pouring down her face, all sorts of questions bubbled up and swirled around her head.

I mean… Just a few moments ago, she was so mad that "Shu Keigetsu" might catch a cold!

But then Keigetsu remembered the exact phrasing Gen Kasui had used to express her concerns.

"Aren't southerners' bodies sensitive to the cold?"

She didn't say that *southerners* were sensitive to the cold. She said that their *bodies* were.

Their bodies.

"Uh-oh. Does Lady Kasui…?" Leelee began, her face frozen in horror.

"Most likely." Tousetsu nodded gravely. "She doesn't pry into the circumstances and is only concerned with having the object of her affections in her sights. Now that's the attitude I would expect of a mainline descendant."

As another who shared the blood of the Gen clan, she seemed to feel some admiration for Kasui's stance.

Keigetsu, meanwhile, ignored the court ladies, her fists shaking in silence.

"Let's at least be on our guard to make sure Lady Kasui doesn't find out."

She remembered Kou Reirin saying that oh-so-solemnly. The girl had clearly thought that Gen Kasui hadn't caught on to the swap at all.

Oh! Oh! Ohhh!

Keigetsu smacked her hands against the table, and the poor, fragile teacups gave a violent shudder.

"Kou Reirin! You big moroooooon!"

Her unreserved insult carried on the cold breeze that whipped through the pavilion.

"Hm?"

Reirin was hurrying back to the storehouse when she turned around at what she could have sworn was one of her best friend's shrieks. However, all that greeted her was a gust of cold air caressing her cheeks, and no further shouts drifted in her direction. Dismissing it as a figment of her imagination, she continued to make her way down the path.

Goodness. I can't believe I forgot my transition manual.

A dry laugh escaped her lips as she realized just how excited she had been over having tea with Keigetsu. Nevertheless, so as not to inconvenience her precious friend, she reminded herself that she had important things to do.

If Kasui found out about the swap, it would mean that all the Maidens knew about Keigetsu's Daoist magic. If someone ever tried to blackmail her friend with that knowledge, Reirin would employ all the Kou clan's resources to stamp out the threat, but it was still important to take every possible precaution to prevent things from coming to that.

I've recorded every last detail of my conversations with Lady Kasui in my transition manual, and though it was a rather hectic time, I took every opportunity I saw to embody "Shu Keigetsu."

Though she had blown it with Houshun, Reirin patted herself on the back and told herself that she had put on quite a good performance for Kasui.

In particular, it had been ingenious of her to fill the frequent stretches of comfortable silences—since Kasui tended to be more of a listener than a speaker—with routine insults. She would say things like, "My, Lady Kasui, don't you even know how to build a furnace?" Or maybe, "Hmph. You're supposed to do these things on the down-low." Each time, Kasui's docile eyes would go wide, after which she would nod her head with the slightest of smiles.

"Mm. I think I'm beginning to understand the kind of person you are," she would then say.

Insults and shrieks were both “Shu Keigetsu’s” forte and her defining feature. As long as Reirin made a solid impression in that regard, it was highly unlikely that anyone would suspect her of being someone else.

Plus, it made Reirin happy to think that Kasui idolized “Shu Keigetsu,” even knowing what her real personality was like. It would be nice if she had contributed at all to Keigetsu making more friends.

Oh, but I’d be a little sad if Lady Keigetsu got too *close to Lady Kasui.*

Okay, not a little. A lot.

She wanted more people to discover her dearest best friend’s charms, but she also wanted to keep the knowledge to herself. Those conflicting desires, as enchanting as a gem that changed color depending on the angle from which it was viewed, were unlike anything Reirin had ever known before. It was sobering to think that she could harbor such emotions in her own heart.

A fear of conflict, a desire to be liked, a petty preoccupation with appearances, and stubbornness. Reirin had learned through her fight with Keigetsu that all those negative emotions were buried deep inside her.

As a Maiden who was expected to be perfect, it wasn’t a desirable state of affairs. She had become more vulnerable than she used to be.

Still…it’s curious. I like myself more this way.

Keigetsu had given her a thorough tongue-lashing. She had called her a good-for-nothing, or a sorry sight, or said she couldn’t do anything on her own. Strangely enough, it never hurt to hear those words at all.

Quite the opposite, in fact. It was always superimposed onto the image of Keigetsu with tears in her eyes, screaming at her to ask for help. Each time Reirin recalled the sight, she felt a glimmer of light shine on the depths of her heart. It was like the warm glow of a flickering flame.

She was vulnerable now. And that was a good thing.

Hee hee. Am I glad I got yelled at? How very strange!

It was such a bizarre thing to think that Reirin burst out giggling despite herself. Normally, she found even the lectures from her beloved brothers to be

a nuisance.

Hold on…

Just then, something about the word “lecture” stuck in her mind, and she put a hand to her cheek.

I feel like I’m forgetting something.

As she hurried toward the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion, her brow furrowed in thought. Was she missing something? Kasui’s revenge was complete, and Seika and Houshun had dealt with the Pure and Virtuous Consorts, respectively. Once the swap was reversed, what would be left?

“Aha. There you are.”

Then, as Reirin was walking along, her eyes fixed on the ground, someone grabbed her arm from the side.

“Here I had hoped you would come see me right away. Awfully cold of you.”

The hand was tough and muscular, the voice crisp and firm. When Reirin looked up, she broke into a cold sweat as she identified the person standing before her.

Oh. I just remembered.

It was the man who had seen through the switch. The same one whom Reirin had prevented from interfering under the pretext of tradition, all because she didn’t want to be lectured. The very man who had nevertheless lent a hand with various matters, mildly warning her that they would revisit the matter after the Rite of Reverence was over.

It was the crown prince, Gyoumei.

“Y-Y-Yo-Yo—”

“‘Yo’ indeed.”

Gyoumei was smiling serenely, but Reirin panicked as she discovered that his grip was too tight to brush off.

Oh no! He’s furious!

Of course he was. She should have gone to apologize to him immediately

after the Rite of Reverence, but instead she'd dawdled for three whole days.

"How do I stop you from being so reckless? How do I make you understand what it feels like to be sick with worry yet unable to do a thing? Perhaps my only choice is to etch the concept into your very being."

"Y-Your Highness, please calm down!"

As Gyoumei slowly brought a hand to her cheek, Reirin sensed the same menace from the prince that she felt whenever her two brothers were livid with her. Come to think of it, she had resolved to commit herself to him if he ever saw through the switch—or, put another way, she had made a bet that gave her no right to complain if he took her on the spot.

The look on Gyoumei's face was so intense, and his grip on her arm so strong, that she couldn't push him away.

"W-wait a moment. Erm—"

"I will brook no argument."

The moment she tried to object, he covered her mouth with his thumb. His assertiveness took Reirin's breath away.

And yet…

"Listen well, *Shu Keigetsu*."

The prince had figured out who she really was days ago. When it occurred to her that he was calling her "Shu Keigetsu" despite this, Reirin automatically froze.

Gyoumei brought his face to her ear, like a man whispering sweet nothings to his beloved. "Hear me out and don't say anything, Reirin," he said, keeping his voice low enough that only she could hear him. "My father endorses the persecution of Daoist cultivators, and he now suspects the Maidens of dealing in magic. Although he chose to overlook the mirror incident, he ordered his secret service to begin surveillance as of today. Henceforth, you should expect to be watched at all times while in the Maiden Court."

He had covered her lips to keep her from mentioning "the switch."

He had brought his face to hers to hide her expression.

Holding the cowering Maiden in a tender embrace, Gyoumei issued a command in a taut voice that belied his actions.

“You must not reverse the switch here in the Maiden Court.”



Afterword

HELLO! Satsuki Nakamura here. I managed to secure two pages for the afterword of this sixth volume.

I hope you enjoyed the third story arc, the Machiavellian Rite of Reverence Arc. If I may spoil the story (apologies to those who prefer to start with the afterword), Reirin and Keigetsu made up from their fight, the other Maidens got drawn into the mix, and by the climax, there was a sense of teamwork straight out of a sentai show.

With each character's individual issues resolved, it comes time for the grand finale! Or so you'd think…but get this! I've been given the green light to continue the *Inept Villainess* series! It's all thanks to your support.

Now that all the Maidens are in our protagonists' corner, I'm in a position to write even deeper and more emotional character interactions than ever before. Thank you so much.

Uh…but how are we all feeling? This third arc got pretty dark, didn't it? I imagine you're starting to think, *I've had enough conspiracies. Sometimes I'd like to get away from all the big scandals and see that sweetie and that cutie having a blast together.* Well, I am, at least.

Thus, before the series heads into its climax, I'm thinking of making the upcoming seventh volume a breather episode where you can enjoy Reirin and the crew goofing off together. The plan is to finish the arc in a single volume so I can finally spare you all the pain of waiting for a cliffhanger to be resolved. Hooray!

The plot I have in mind involves the main players splitting up into multiple teams and heading out into the outer city, where they get wrapped up in a scandal. Oops, I guess there *will* be a scandal after all.

I came up with some incredibly fun team combinations, so I'll go ahead and announce those now. First, Team Reirin + Leelee + Gyoumei. Second, Team Keigetsu + Keishou. Third, Team Tousetsu + Keikou. And lastly, Team Shin-u +

Unran. It's a nice combination of some established pairs, some combinations I've always wanted to write, and some surprising matchups. I'm already itching to get started! Oh, I especially can't wait to write the conversations between *him* and *her*!

The story will also introduce some elements that continue into the next chapter, so I hope you stick around for it.

Now that I've given such an extensive preview, there's no turning back. I have to buckle down and write it.

Once again, I would like to thank you all for letting me keep this series going for so long. Same goes for my editor, who is always cheering me on with, "You can do it! You can keep writing! I believe in you!" like some kind of tennis player. There's also Kana Yuki-sensei, whose gorgeous illustrations never fail to wreak havoc on the readers' emotions every volume. (Did you *see* the last insert illustration of this one?!) Thanks also go out to my designer, for whom God is in the details, and Ei Ohitsuji-sensei, who always brings my story to life with a dynamism that far exceeds my expectations.

Finally, my dear readers, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for enjoying *Inept Villainess* so much. Let's meet again in Volume 7.

—Satsuki Nakamura, April 2023



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