
9
NOVEL
Written by
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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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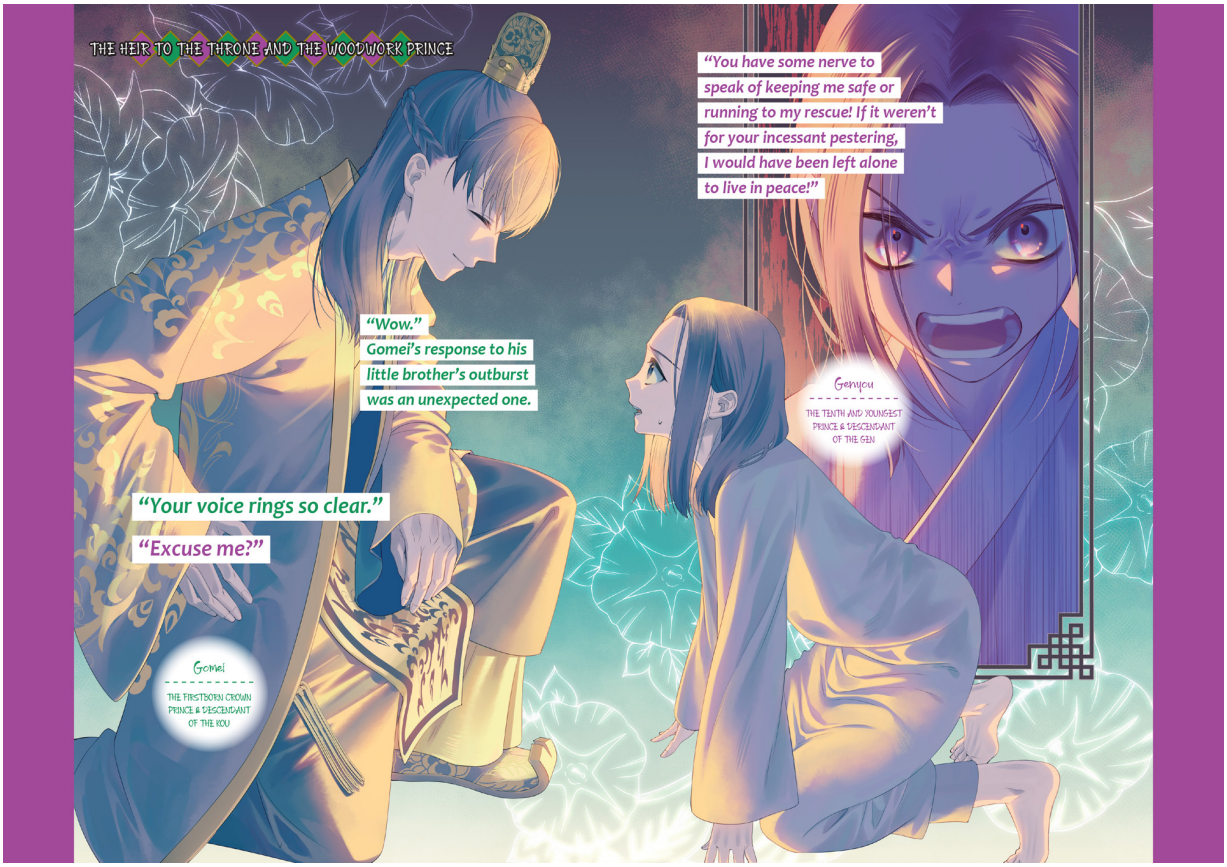
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"Lately, I've been getting greedier and greedier. I have come to forget my station, long for first place...and even fear the death I once accepted."
Her emotions were in turmoil. Her words were as disjointed as the scattered pearls of a broken necklace, and she found it impossible to control her voice. She couldn't remember it ever being so difficult to speak slowly.
"I am degenerating into a weak, unsightly person. E-even so..."
Hugging her arms tighter, Reirin went on thus.
"For all my faults, would you allow me to remain your dearest friend of all?"
"There's nothing to 'allow.' You already are."
PRAYING WITH ALL HER HEART. LIKE MAKING A WISH UPON A STAR...


THE HEIR TO THE THRONE AND THE WOODWORK PRINCE
"You have some nerve to speak of keeping me safe or running to my rescue! If it weren't for your incessant pestering, I would have been left alone to live in peace!"
"Wow."
Gomei's response to his little brother's outburst was an unexpected one.
Genyou
THE TENTH AND YOUNGEST PRINCE & DESCENDANT OF THE GEN
"Your voice rings so clear."
"Excuse me?"
Gomei
THE FIRSTBORN CROWN PRINCE & DESCENDANT OF THE KOU

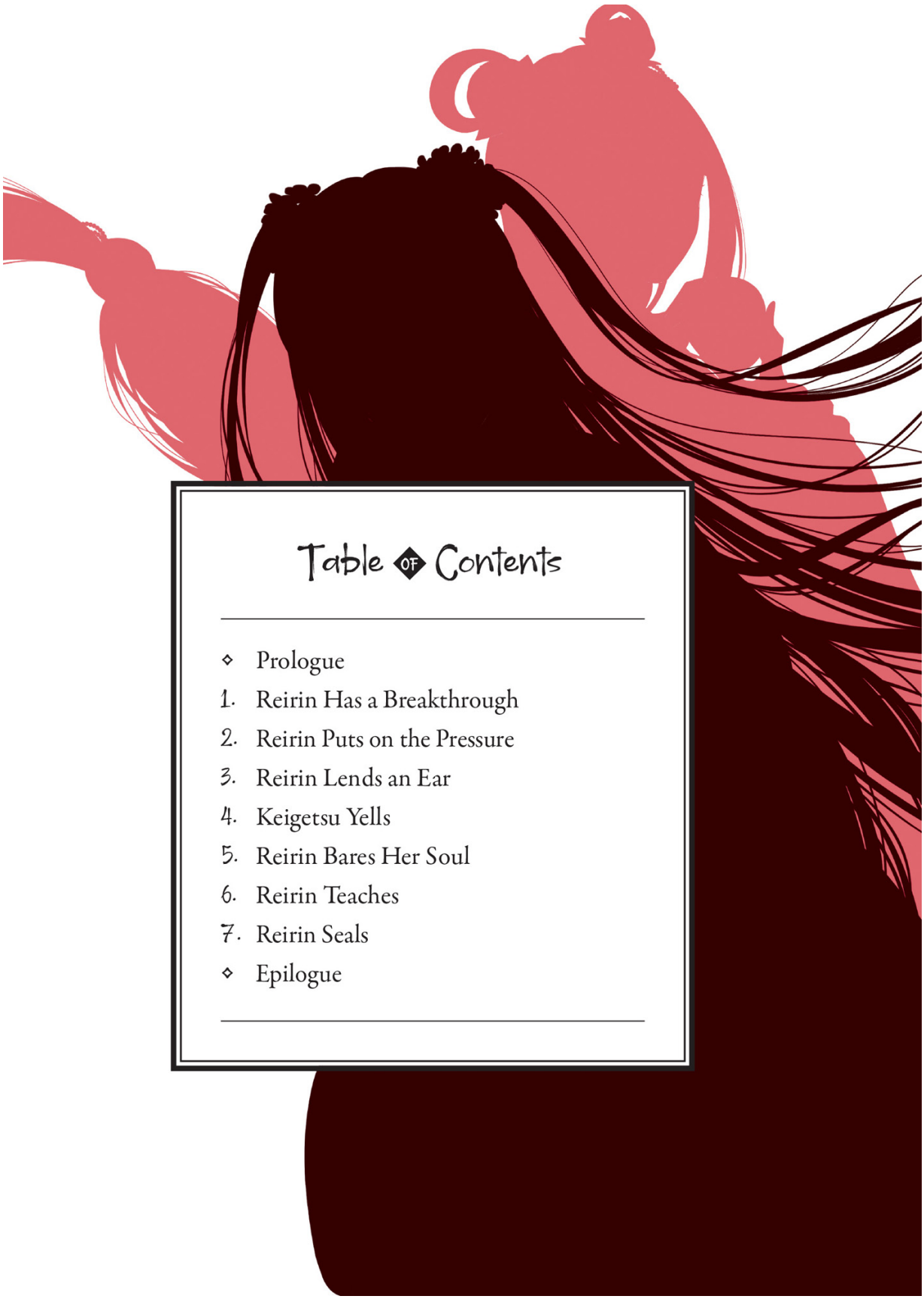


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Though I Am an Inept Villainess

Tale of the Butterfly-Rat Body Swap in the Maiden Court

9

NOVEL

WRITTEN BY

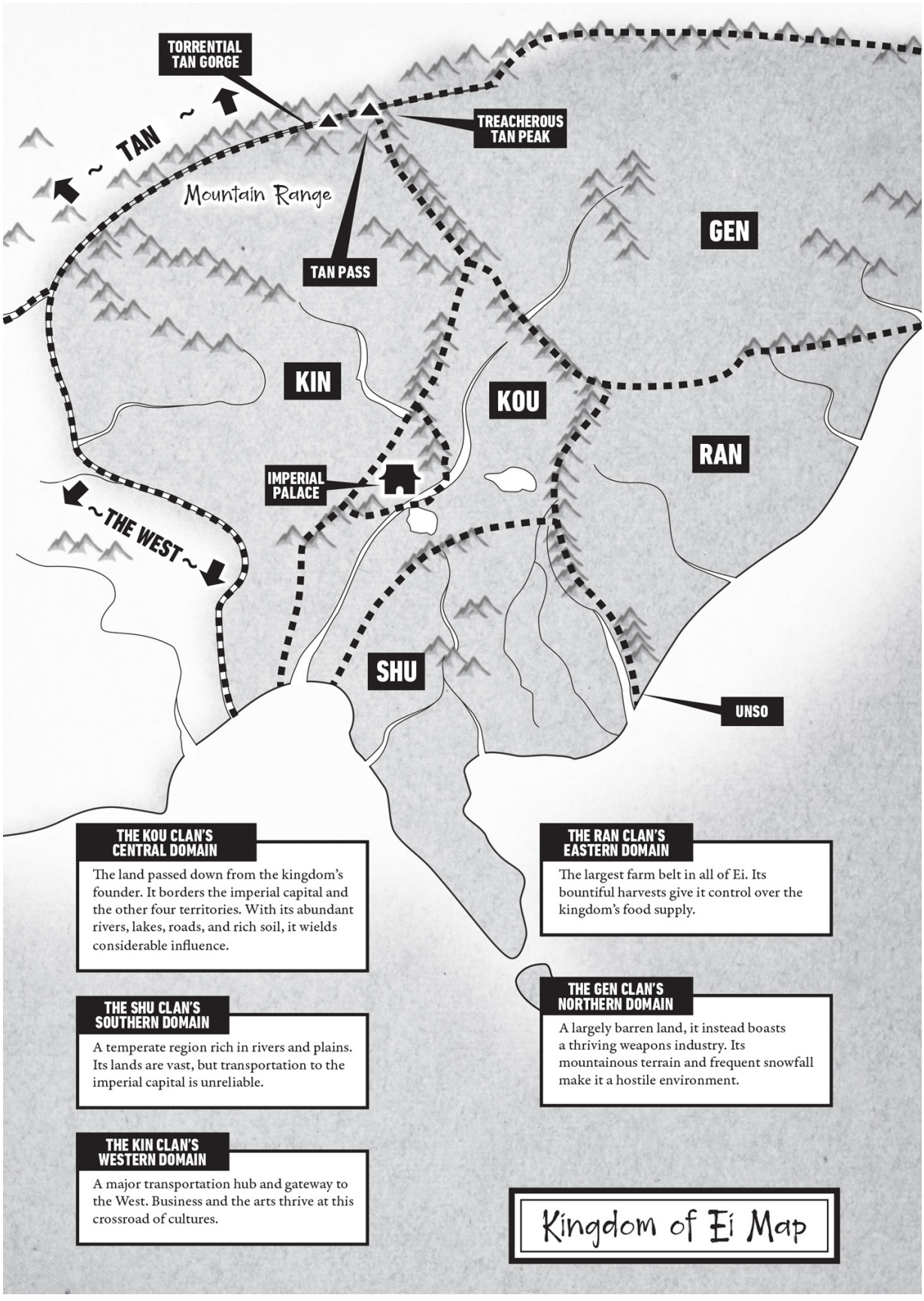
Satsuki Nakamura

ILLUSTRATED BY

Kana Yuki

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment


TORRENTIAL TAN GORGE
~ TAN ~
Mountain Range
TREACHEROUS TAN PEAK
TAN PASS
GEN
KIN
KOU
RAN
IMPERIAL PALACE
~THE WEST~
SHU
UNSO
THE KOU CLAN'S CENTRAL DOMAIN
The land passed down from the kingdom's founder. It borders the imperial capital and the other four territories. With its abundant rivers, lakes, roads, and rich soil, it wields considerable influence.
THE RAN CLAN'S EASTERN DOMAIN
The largest farm belt in all of Ei. Its bountiful harvests give it control over the kingdom's food supply.
THE GEN CLAN'S NORTHERN DOMAIN
A largely barren land, it instead boasts a thriving weapons industry. Its mountainous terrain and frequent snowfall make it a hostile environment.
THE SHU CLAN'S SOUTHERN DOMAIN
A temperate region rich in rivers and plains. Its lands are vast, but transportation to the imperial capital is unreliable.
THE KIN CLAN'S WESTERN DOMAIN
A major transportation hub and gateway to the West. Business and the arts thrive at this crossroad of cultures.
Kingdom of Ei Map

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)

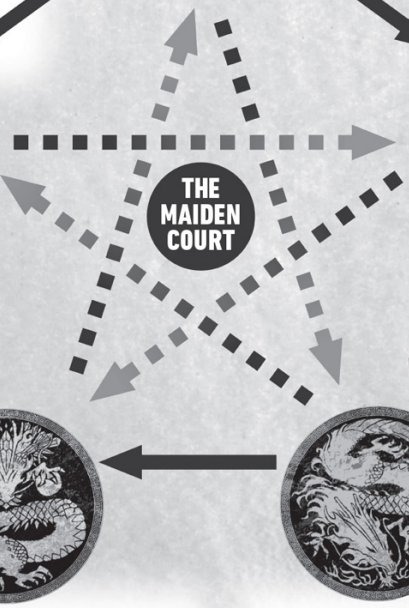
The clan that governs the lands to the west and rules over metal. Their signature season is autumn, signature direction is west, and signature color is white. Chops wood and collects water. Divided into two factions of pragmatic merchants and artists. Mainline descendants tend to be artsy types who prize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

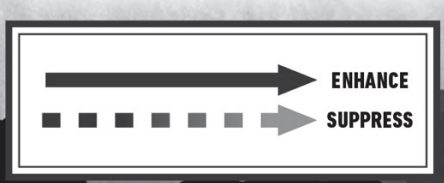
(EARTH / CENTER / CUSPS)

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)

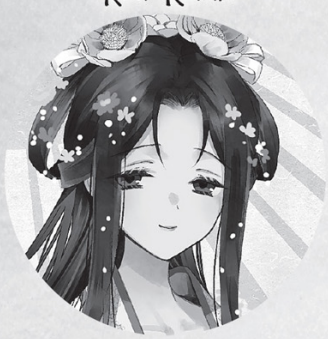
The clan that governs the lands to the south and rules over fire. Their signature season is summer, signature direction is south, and signature color is red. Melts metal and produces earth. Full of intense personalities and show-offs. Prone to wild mood swings and value emotion over reason. People who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



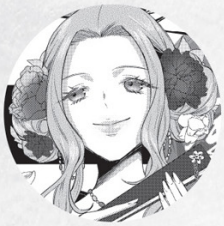
Reirin's head court lady.

Kou Kenshuu



The empress. Reirin's aunt.

Kin Seika



The Kin Maiden.

Gen Kasui



The Gen Maiden.

Ran Houshun



The Ran Maiden.

Kou Keikou



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

Kou Keishou



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

Tan / Akim



One of the Emperor's personal spies.

Ei Genyou



The emperor. Gyoumei's father.

Futsutsukana Akujodewa Gozaimasuga Vol. 9
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Prologue

"THIS IS NO PLACE to be dozing off, Lady Kenshuu!"

At the call of her trusted gamboge gold, the empress of Ei—Kenshuu—forced her drooping eyelids open. "Keep it down, would you? This is a mausoleum. Have some respect, Wagyoku," she said, scowling from her spot on the floor.

"The one who brought in a fur pelt, pillow, brazier, and perfumed sachet for a nap has some gall to be lecturing *me*!" the elderly gamboge gold—Wagyoku—shot back without missing a beat. Having served Kenshuu since her Maiden era, she had no qualms about taking the empress to task. "I know it's difficult for the bureaucrats to set foot in the inner court, but that's no excuse to run off to this deserted mausoleum for some sleep. Even the poor ministers are braving the winter cold to look everywhere for you."

"It's not me they're looking for, it's the Imperial Seal in my possession. And instead of sympathizing with them, you ought to sympathize with *me* for having all these obligations dumped in my lap. Hey, hands off the fur!"

Heedless of Kenshuu's complaints, Wagyoku swiftly stripped her mistress of her fur pelt and folded it up. Left to shiver in the freezing cold of the mausoleum, Kenshuu sat up with a grimace and pulled herself into a cross-legged position.

"Good grief, what a miserable hand I've been dealt. Do I really have to spend three more days getting chased around by the ministers?"

"I'm afraid so. Your work should settle down once the Repose of Souls is over, and His Majesty will be sure to return soon after. Just hold out until then."

"We're mere days away from the Repose of Souls Service. *Service!* A sacred national ceremony. Tell me, why is the crown prince no longer around to run the event? Why has our sovereign emperor stuck me with the Imperial Seal and fled the capital? Mark my words, those two will regret this." Kenshuu's grumbling turned murderous, emboldened by the fact that no one else was around to hear her.

It was Ei tradition to hold a ceremony called the Repose of Souls Service once every year, on the day the yin reached its highest concentration. Souls were known to depart the body when yin and yang were out of balance, so the original purpose of the ceremony had been to coax those back into their vessels. Over time, it had taken on the role of a memorial service to pacify the wandering souls of disaster victims. These days, it was a major national event counted among the Five Grand Festivals.

Despite this, Kenshuu's son and husband alike had absconded from the imperial capital right before the main event, and now she was being called upon to step up as empress and take over their duties. She had hardly gotten a wink of sleep since the emperor's disappearance came to light three days ago. After reaching the limits of her patience, she had escaped to the mausoleum on the inner court's outskirts to sleep off her bad mood.

"A visit to a disaster site? At a time like this? Spare me."

Her son was one thing. At least *he* had planned out his departure, making arrangements with all the relevant departments to ensure the ceremony would go off without a hitch. The real problem was her husband. Emperor Genyou—that impassive, apathetic, dead-eyed drifter through life—had simply left the Imperial Seal in the empress's bedroom and vanished into thin air. This jade seal engraved with a five-clawed dragon was the source of ultimate authority in Ei, an heirloom that could grant the power to command the entire army at will.

"Do you have any idea how I felt waking up with the Imperial Seal next to my pillow, left with nothing but the single sentence

‘Consider this an order’ as an explanation? Can you imagine what it’s like for the empress to be handed all the world’s power and responsibility with those scant words? Hm? This has to be a historical first.”

“That His Majesty would leave you in charge of the government is a sign of how deeply he trusts you,” Wagyoku replied mildly. However, she knew full well that if he had pulled that stunt with any of the consorts or vassals, the kingdom would have collapsed in an instant.

Kenshuu’s original goal had been to become a civil servant. She had the political acumen to occasionally participate in state affairs regardless of gender. Her handling of her routine duties as empress—such as hosting tea parties or embroidering the emperor’s clothes—was controversial, but she could put the bureaucrats to shame when it came to diplomacy, performance evaluations, and policymaking. Brazen attitude aside, her political judgments were swift and principled. She could handle running the government for a few days even without a proper transition process. The emperor must have entrusted Kenshuu with the Imperial Seal because he had faith in her character and abilities.

And yet, when Wagyoku suggested as much, Kenshuu dusted off the hem of her robes and rose to her feet, muttering, “Hardly. He just couldn’t care less what happens to this kingdom.”

“Pardon?”

“He only has one person on his mind.”

Her eyes narrowed, focused on a pillar near the altar.

Upon following her mistress’s gaze, Wagyoku caught sight of the clumsy characters carved into the wood. “My, what is this? Graffiti? ‘O traveler slumbering at journey’s end, what visions dance in shuttered sight? Do they blossom in the domain of life?’ Oh, it’s a long poem. Goodness, they even wrote down the melody to sing it to. How very thorough.” She strained her eyes in the dim light of the mausoleum, sounding a touch impressed as she scanned the lines of

the poem. “Hee hee, but the handwriting is rather sloppy, and one phrase sticks out as peculiar. I suppose one of the princes must have carved this in his younger years. It’s quite a heartwarming sight.”



Wagyoku hadn't meant any offense by it, but she caught her mistress's face twisting into a slight grimace. She blinked and tilted her head to one side. "Is something the matter, Lady Kenshuu?"

"Not at all." Kenshuu quickly rearranged her face into a playful grin and pinched her attendant's nose. "I was merely astounded that you have the audacity to call a defacement of the sacred mausoleum 'heartwarming.'"

"Oh, please. Remind me which of us was sleeping like a log in here?" Relieved to see her mistress back to her usual roguish self, Wagyoku hefted the brazier. "Come now, we mustn't keep the ministers waiting. Let us be off to the main palace at once. I will carry the brazier, so kindly gather up the fur pelt, pillow, and sachet yourself."

"Ugh. How did I get stuck cleaning up a couple of men's messes? I ought to take all the classified documents I've gained access to and shove them under these floorboards."

"Nowadays, fewer and fewer girls are ambitious enough to devote themselves to covert studies, I'm afraid. I doubt anyone would notice."

After shutting down her mistress's complaints, Wagyoku briskly headed outside. Kenshuu, meanwhile, stayed put in the mausoleum. She clung to the pillow, fur pelt, and sachet as if to soak up a few last drops of warmth. The intricate embroidery on the sachet wasn't to her usual tastes, yet she always kept it close at hand.

"'He only has one person on his mind,' I said? I guess I don't have much room to talk." As Kenshuu hugged the pillow and sachet close, a whisper of sound escaped from within the bundle of cloth. She closed her eyes and buried her face in the pillow, stifling her voice. "It's not fair for you to reach your goal without me, Your Majesty."

Her murmurings were too quiet for anyone else to hear—as was the rustle coming from inside the sachet.

“Hurry along now, Lady Kenshuu!” came Wagyoku’s harried voice from the other side of the mausoleum door. “This is no time to dawdle!”

Not a second later, Kenshuu looked back up with a dismissive shrug. “Don’t rush me. Can’t a woman take a moment to stick her face into a pillow?”

“At the moment, I would rather you stuck your nose into politics!”

“Ooh, nice one.”

Kenshuu left the mausoleum behind, cracking wise with her long-serving court lady all the while. Her breath forming white clouds in the air, she strode ahead without a single backward glance.

Chapter 1:
Reirin Has a Breakthrough

SOMEWHERE DEEP IN THE MOUNTAINS amid the darkness of night, a bonfire crackled and popped. Vermillion flames swelled and shrunk, their flicker akin to a dance, and for a while, the circle of people seated around the fire simply watched in fascination.

"It's so delightfully warm."

"Sure is. Gets me in the mood to roast a potato."

"Starting a fire in an instant is certainly a convenient trick."

The first voice belonged to the freckled Shu Maiden—or the girl wearing her face, Kou Reirin—who nodded sagely as she warmed her hands over the flames. Her two brothers, Kou Keikou and Kou Keishou, signaled their agreement.

"And it doesn't stop at building fires. There aren't many other means of drying clothes in a flash. Not even my dragon's qi has that particular perk."

"Something tells me the Great Ancestor might be a little taken aback if you used the ultimate power as a laundry dryer."

"Here, Your Highness. This fish is cooked to perfection. You there, court ladies—do we have any salt?"

The crown prince, Gyoumei, stroked his chin and admired the scale of the fire. Akim shrugged in disbelief, his chiseled features bared for all to see, while Captain Shin-u of the Eagle Eyes dispassionately grilled a fish and put the two court ladies on the spot.

And last but not least…

"Excuse me." Likewise seated around the bonfire, the Kou Maiden with the gorgeous looks of a celestial maiden—or the girl in

her body, Shu Keigetsu—listened to the group's banter with growing impatience. "I have no objections to warming up, but time is of the essence. Shouldn't we be encouraging that spy to spill His Majesty's secrets?" Keigetsu pointed a finger at Akim, who was sitting across from her and blending seamlessly into the group.

"Who, me?"

After agreeing to turn a blind eye to their magic for a day, Akim had made himself right at home in Reirin and Keigetsu's party of eight, as though the preceding clash had never even happened. Lip twitching at the sight of him lounging cross-legged on the ground, Keigetsu reflected on the events that had led up to this point.

Five days had passed since Akim disguised himself as a porter named Anki and left for Treacherous Tan Peak alongside the body-swapped Kou Reirin. There, he had used every trick in the book to put pressure on "Shu Keigetsu": first dropping the food supply down a cliff, then inciting a court lady uprising, and finally inviting brigands to the scene. When she still refused to use magic, he had caused her palanquin to crash and subjected her to water torture. Upon hearing news of Reirin's plight, Keigetsu and friends had rushed to her rescue and saved her from drowning just in the nick of time.

It hadn't even been an hour since all of that had transpired. Reirin's countermeasure of blowing up the ice dam appeared to have piqued Akim's interest, and he had offered to tell them the emperor's backstory. Still, Keigetsu couldn't find it in her to trust a man who had been her enemy a mere hour ago. Her plan had been to stick around the rocky riverbank where they'd fought, get the necessary information out of him, and move on.

But then, the torture victim herself had proposed, *"Say, why don't we build a fire before getting into the story?"*

Keigetsu was about to protest that this wasn't some laid-back tea party, but Reirin had left the river without further ado, her mind already made up. According to her, the palanquin was sitting

abandoned in the forest a short ways back; she had suggested that the group settle down there, as tree branches and straw would be abundant.

"We don't exactly have time to kick back and relax!"

"I'm aware, but seeing as we're all drenched and exhausted from the fight, we really ought to warm ourselves up. I would particularly appreciate it if you were to dry His Highness's robes straight away," Reirin had said, pressing a hand to her cheek.

That was when it finally dawned on Keigetsu that she had dried the spy's robes and left the almighty crown prince to fend for himself. Reirin's drowning scare had taken up all her attention, but in hindsight, Gyoumei had jumped into the river to save her and proceeded to fight while soaking wet.

"Oh no! Um, I beg your forgiveness, Your Highness! It was not my intention to leave you for last! I had to dry Kou Reirin off first to save her, and I dried the spy off next to imprint him with the 'curse,' so, erm…"

"It's fine. Neither Shin-u nor I am particularly bothered by frigid waters. Our Gen blood at work, perhaps," the distinguished man had replied, wringing out his sleeves. With the quirk of an eyebrow, he had added, *"Though, admittedly, it's a relief to see you both remember my official status."*

"A-allow me to dry you off at once! And as soon as that's done, I shall get a fire started!"

After that exchange, Keigetsu had obediently dried Gyoumei's robes with her magical flames and promptly started a fire at their new location. She had assumed they would get down to business as soon as the fire was lit, but that prediction proved incorrect. Akim was lazing about, the Kou siblings were contemplating roasted potatoes, and Shin-u was even grilling fish he had caught back at the river. The whole scene looked almost harmonious.

Granted, Keishou and Gyoumei weren't seated on either side of Akim out of a newfound rapport; they were poised to strike him

down if the need arose. Neither man had given him a pass for torturing their dearly beloved Kou Reirin. Still, if they were actually on their guard, there shouldn't have been any need to smile or make small talk. Keigetsu always got anxious when the lines between friend and enemy were blurred, so it was hard not to feel irritated at how effortlessly an outsider had wormed his way into their ranks.

"How long are we going to keep sitting around in a happy little circle?!" she demanded through gritted teeth.

Reirin nodded serenely. "Fair point. We've had plenty of time to warm up by now." With the same easygoing air as ever, she turned a smile on the spy across from her. "We should be able to stay focused no matter how long a conversation this turns out to be. Will you tell us the whole story from start to finish, Akim?"

"Not one to get swept up in the mood, are you?" he teased. "We could be making nice around the fire one moment, and you'd still go for the kill the next."

"Well, of course." Reirin only tilted her head to one side, confused why this was even a question.

With a cynical shrug, Akim adjusted his sitting position. "All right, then. Where to begin? I'm not exactly used to spilling my guts."

"Why don't we ask you a question?" Reirin replied without missing a beat. "You claimed that His Majesty is persecuting sorcerers as revenge for the eldest prince of the previous generation, Prince Gomei. Does that imply that Prince Gomei fell prey to a sorcerer?"

"Cutting straight to the heart of the matter, eh?" Akim's lips quirked up, and he bluntly answered, "You got it. He was ambushed by an assassin twenty-five years ago, and that assassin was a practitioner of the Daoist arts. After that, His Majesty developed a hatred for magic and vowed to take revenge on the sorcerer."

"And who exactly was this sorc—"

"Hold on," Keigetsu cut in, struggling to keep all this information straight. "Am I right in saying Prince Gomei was the one disinherited all those years ago? And if I remember correctly, he hailed from the Kou clan?"

She reached into the depths of her memory for the imperial family tree, which she had drilled into her head when she first came to the court. The current generation was an unusual case, with Gyoumei and Shin-u being the emperor's only male descendants. There had been ten princes during the previous emperor's reign, including Genyou. The firstborn and eventual crown prince was Gomei, the son of Pure Consort Kou. Although he was not born to the empress, the emperor had held high hopes for his eldest.

Meanwhile, the youngest, Genyou, had been nonverbal during his childhood years and accordingly deemed a dunce. Nowadays, no one would dare dredge up the emperor's old stigma—it was a guaranteed death sentence—and his reserved, scholarly demeanor had gone a long way toward rehabilitating his image into that of an intellectual.

Per the records, the former emperor had chosen his successor quite early on. He had held the crown prince's investiture ceremony on Gomei's tenth birthday, without even waiting for the other princes to mature.

But the graffiti he left around the mausoleum had terrible handwriting, thought Keigetsu. *The truth is that he was probably a talentless mediocrity.*

In the history books of Ei, it was unfortunately common to fabricate facts to glorify those in the imperial line of succession.

Well, regardless of his gifts or lack thereof, a Kou prince should have presented a threat to a Gen like Emperor Genyou. I struggle to imagine why the latter would seek revenge on the former's behalf.

It was especially odd in light of the Ten-Star Succession Struggle. The competition had been particularly fierce during Genyou's generation.

Keigetsu voiced her thoughts freely. “From Emperor Genyou’s perspective, shouldn’t his half brother Prince Gomei have constituted a political adversary? Someone to tear down? Why avenge him?”

For some reason, Akim stole a glance at Keikou and Keishou. “You’ve got the wrong idea,” he said with a shake of his head. “As a matter of fact, His Majesty—the entire Gen clan, actually—owes Prince Gomei and the Kou a great debt.”

“It gets a bit complicated here, so allow me to explain this part,” Keikou offered after Akim shot him a meaningful look. As the eldest of the group aside from Akim, he was the most knowledgeable about past events. “A lot of the details of Prince Gomei’s past are under a gag order. I’m the heir to the clan, and even I’ve been kept in the dark about parts of it… But, eh, it shouldn’t be a problem to share what I know as long as it stays between us.”

With that cautious preface, he began his explanation in hushed tones. “I’ll start with their ages. Emperor Genyou is forty-four years old. Prince Gomei was the firstborn son and five years older than the youngest, so that would put him at forty-nine if he were still alive today.”

“A five-year difference, hm?” said Keigetsu. “I wonder if they were close.”

“I couldn’t say. All we know for a fact is that thirty years ago—meaning when Prince Gomei was nineteen and Emperor Genyou was fourteen—the pair was ambushed by an assassin. This turned out to be the work of the ninth prince, and the case has long been closed. The important part is that Prince Gomei supposedly lost his eyesight after shielding Emperor Genyou from an attack.”

The entire crowd gasped. It was the first time any of them had heard this.

“He got hit with an attack…that blinded him?”

“Exactly. Though the official explanation was that it was an accident. After that, Prince Gomei lost his ability to engage in politics

and shut himself away in the Kou Palace with his mother. He was deemed unfit to serve as crown prince, and it wasn't long before talks of disinheritance came about."

At long last, Keigetsu understood why Prince Gomei's public perception was so inconsistent and why there were so few rumors and records about him. He hadn't been talentless; he was probably a very capable individual who cared deeply for his little brother. His disinheritance could be wholly ascribed to a disability that prevented him from carrying out his official duties.

An injury sustained while protecting family might constitute a badge of honor for a commoner, but it would be a blow to the kingdom's reputation for its ostensibly farsighted emperor to be blind. It would look even worse when another relative's treachery was the cause.

And so the imperial court chose to obfuscate Prince Gomei's entire existence. Letting it come to light that their up-and-coming crown prince had been wounded amid infighting would be like broadcasting their weak leadership to the world. Instead, they strove to create a narrative where Gomei was relieved of his position due to his own ineptitude, hoping he would take the fall for the lot of them.

Why did the rest of the Kou allow him to be treated that way? They should have protested that Prince Gomei wasn't a dunce to anyone who would listen!

At first, Keigetsu was outraged by the Kou clan's apparent spinelessness, but she reevaluated that stance in light of the way Reirin, her brothers, and Kenshuu behaved. The family truly didn't care about power or reputation. While they had no doubt lamented the misfortune that had befallen one of their own, they wouldn't resent him being removed from his seat of power. No matter how he was maligned, Gomei knew his own capabilities better than anyone, and he would never begrudge the consequences of his choice to save someone.

Struck with a sudden realization, Keigetsu murmured, "Wait, then the poem etched into the mausoleum…"

A bitter smile rose to Keikou's face. "Right. Prince Gomei did that to relieve his boredom after going blind. At first he wrote with ink, but as his eyesight deteriorated, he switched to carving so he could feel out the characters with his fingers."

"I can't believe it. All this time, I just assumed…"

"That it was a child's scribble? That Prince Gomei was a washout with terrible handwriting? I used to think the same. But seeing as I'm the oldest son of the Kou, my aunt took me aside for a scolding and explained the situation."

Keikou's attempts at reassurance didn't stop Keigetsu's face from morphing into an awkward grimace. She remembered mocking that lousy graffiti in the privacy of her mind. Never had she imagined that what she'd assumed to be a child's writings were actually the painstaking work of a blind man.

Beside her, Keishou had likewise cast his eyes down and pressed his lips into a thin line. No doubt he had conflicted feelings about criticizing Gomei's calligraphy in the past. As a fellow member of the Kou clan, he was probably feeling even more ashamed and down on himself than Keigetsu was.

On the one hand, Keigetsu sympathized with him, but a sulkier part of her thought, *Look, see what happens?* The Kou were independent spirits who valued results above all else, but their unflappability could occasionally hurt the people around them. She could only hope that someone like Keishou, who was a bit more adept at understanding the human heart, might one day take charge and bring change to the clan.

"Anyway," Keikou went on, hoping to dispel the gloom hanging over the group, "Prince Gomei's vision loss left the Gen clan deep in his debt. When the other clans begged the emperor to disinherit Prince Gomei, Empress Gen wouldn't even hear of it. Things carried on like that for about five years, until twenty-five years ago—when

Prince Gomei was twenty-four—he was targeted by another assassin."

"I assume this one was the sorcerer Akim mentioned."

"You got it. After that, the trail of documentation ends, and it's not even clear when exactly Prince Gomei was disinherited. His death was officially ruled an accident, leaving the truth shrouded in mystery. The prince was very firm about wanting to keep the peace while he was alive, so the Kou clan has respected his wishes by leaving it all in the past."

"Allow me to summarize," said Gyoumei, who had been listening from the sidelines. "The Ten-Star Succession Struggle notwithstanding, my father and his brother Gomei were on good terms. And yet, Father caused him to go blind, failed to prevent the sorcerer's ambush, and ultimately deposed Prince Gomei and ascended the throne himself." His gaze dropped as he tried to imagine what his father must have felt. "I assume guilt must be the driving factor of his revenge."

"Wait, Your Highness. Before we move on to the motive, we need to know who gave the order to kill Prince Gomei," Shin-u matter-of-factly pointed out, not a twitch in his expression. He had inherited even more of the ruthless Gen blood than Gyoumei.

Reirin nodded, then asked Akim, "Who sent the assassin after Prince Gomei?"

"The former emperor. Prince Gomei's own father. Though, obviously, he was Emperor Genyou's father too. No one does messy drama like the imperial family, huh?"

The group was flabbergasted by this.

"Why would His Majesty want to kill his own son?"

"At the time, the princes were embroiled in vicious mudslinging, and a few of them took the approach of feeding their father lies. They claimed that Prince Gomei was out to kill him as

payback for getting disinherited. The emperor fell for it hook, line, and sinker."

Despite this, he could never bring himself to order a formal execution. One night, in a drunken frenzy, he finally broke down and ordered a sorcerer getting tortured in the dungeons to kill the wicked, treasonous prince. He promised the man his freedom if he were to succeed.

Akim sneered. "The former emperor probably saw it as a long shot at best. Despite cracking down on the Daoist arts, the ideology was the only part of it he feared. He took it for granted that no one could actually use magic. But as it turned out, that sorcerer knew a spell to swap souls between bodies."

"He cast a body-swapping spell…"

"Right. He stole Prince Gomei's body with magic. His leg was severely injured during the scuffle, but he managed to get away. He's been on the run in his new vessel ever since. As a consequence, Prince Gomei's corpse could never be shown to the public, and his death was treated as an accident. They even concealed the truth from the prince's family of the Kou."

Everyone listening was dumbstruck. Prince Gomei hadn't simply come under attack by an assassin; he'd had his body stolen.

"That's awful!"

"Apparently, it takes a huge amount of qi to keep a body-swapping spell in place. As unbelievable as it sounds, the sorcerer has been draining other people's life force to keep himself alive. Ever since he escaped all those years ago, shriveled corpses have shown up around war zones and disaster areas from time to time. We figure he hangs around areas where no one will think twice about coming across a disfigured corpse."

Gyoumei thought back to what his father had said to him over breakfast. *"The afflicted regions are often riddled with desiccated corpses. I cannot turn a blind eye to those deaths."*

At the time, he'd assumed that was the emperor's indirect way of expressing concern for their starving subjects, but he was wrong. Genyou had been gathering information on shriveled bodies in hopes of tracking down the sorcerer.

"Is that the true reason for my father's unusually high number of imperial visits?" Gyoumei asked. "Is that the story behind how he fell ill in a flood-stricken region and thrust my mother into the position of empress?"

"Sure is. He's spent years frantically scouring every war zone and disaster area for a blind sorcerer, and that's somehow earned him the reputation of a wise, benevolent ruler. As someone who knows his true colors, I almost have to laugh," said Akim, sounding not the least bit amused.

"In that case…" As Reirin did her best to keep the facts straight, something occurred to her, and her face turned a shade paler. "What became of the body-swapped Prince Gomei?"

Akim caught on immediately and gave a small shake of his head. "He passed away in the sorcerer's body soon after his own was stolen."

"Oh no!"

"That's why His Majesty is so hell-bent on revenge. He managed to keep his cool while telling me most of the story, but his face screwed up with guilt as soon as he touched on Prince Gomei's death. 'I made an irreparable mistake' is how he put it."

When Akim added that the man had clenched his fists tight enough to draw blood, everyone looked conflicted. Genyou was never seen without that artificial smile on his face; none of them could picture it contorted with guilt. It spoke volumes about how much he must have cherished Prince Gomei.

Reminded of the time Genyou had opened up about his past, the spy gazed wistfully at the fire. "The targets of his vengeance were the sorcerer, the former emperor who sent the assassin, and

the princes who put the idea in his head. Everyone except the sorcerer is already dead."

Gyoumei gulped at the implication. "Did Father kill them all? Both the former emperor and the Ten Stars?"

"Hard to say. I did witness him stand by and watch the former emperor die of poison, at least." After oh-so-casually dropping that shocking reveal, Akim returned to the previous topic. "The important part is that he hates the assassin the most out of everyone involved, and that's the one person he hasn't caught: the blind, body-swapping sorcerer who has yet to return Prince Gomei's body."

"Excuse me," Keigetsu spoke up in a quivering voice. "Do you think His Majesty suspects that *I'm* the sorcerer he's looking for?"

"Not a chance. His Majesty has captured and questioned a good number of cultivators, so he's pretty knowledgeable about the Daoist arts. According to what he's learned, it's not possible to stack body-swapping spells. The sorcerer should still be stuck in Prince Gomei's form." Akim's voice darkened as he went on, "But it's easier for the soul to depart the body on the Day of Ultimate Yin, so he might take that opportunity to jump ship."

And if he did, it would become that much harder to track down the sorcerer. Akim muttered under his breath that there wasn't much time left.

"Oh, that makes sense," said Keigetsu, looking relieved.

"How so, Lady Keigetsu?" asked Reirin, who was significantly less familiar with the workings of magic. "If he were truly desperate to escape, why wait twenty-five years? What's stopping him from moving from one living body to the next?"

"A body-swapping spell takes a huge amount of qi, so unless some very specific requirements are met, it can only be used in the caster's original vessel. Returning to your own body is simple enough, but the spell will run out of control if you switch from one stranger's body to another. The one exception is if you do it on the

Day of Ultimate Yin, when the soul is known to separate from the body. It becomes much easier to project the spirit."

Reirin nodded and counted off the points on her fingers, processing the information piece by piece. "I see. And the sorcerer doesn't have the option of temporarily returning to his own vessel, as it expired with Prince Gomei's soul still inside. This leaves him no choice but to live on in the prince's body. All his hopes are riding on the Day of Ultimate Yin, when the balance of yin and yang will be disrupted." She tilted her head to one side, incredulous. "If His Majesty knows for a fact that Lady Keigetsu isn't the sorcerer in question, why would he go after her?"

"Because it's pretty rare to find a sorcerer who can use a body-swapping spell." Akim narrowed his eyes at Keigetsu from across the bonfire, his gaze feline. "That spell is apparently so advanced that only a sect elder can hope to master it. You and that sorcerer are just about the only ones who know it. Emperor Genyou figures you might be either master and disciple or fellow students."

Keigetsu shot to her feet in indignation. "But we're not! I don't even belong to a sect! I taught myself using the texts my father left behind. Besides, every spell in existence is listed in the introductory books! Anyone can do it once they wrap their head around the basic principles!"

The others gaped at her in surprise.

Reirin said, "Lady Keigetsu, that's exactly the sort of thing a natural would say…"

"Seems like a classic case of someone not realizing their own exceptional talent because they weren't taught in a group," Keishou chimed in.

"Did we stumble upon a prodigy in the wild?" said Keikou. "Neat!"

When Keigetsu noticed the Kou siblings staring at her with a touch too much excitement, she went red in the face and resorted to

yelling. “Well, there’s no point having a gift that just gets me persecuted!”

“Whatever the case,” Gyoumei interjected, steering them back on track and giving Keigetsu a pointed look to sit down, “Father is not under the impression that Shu Keigetsu is the sorcerer he’s looking for. He is only targeting her as a potential key informant. In that case, there’s no pressing reason for him to execute her.”

No sooner had they seen a glimmer of hope than Akim dashed it with a wave of his hand. “Oh, I wouldn’t say *that*. For who-knows-how-many years, he’s captured cultivators on the sly, tortured them, wrung out all the information he could, and put them down after confirming they had nothing to do with our favorite sorcerer. He’s got no reason to kill uninvolved cultivators, but he’s got no reason to keep ’em alive either.”

The group was torn between groaning, casting desperate glances to the sky, and rubbing their temples.

“Why must the Gen be so difficult?” Reirin muttered.

“As one of their descendants, allow me to apologize on behalf of the clan,” said Gyoumei. Shin-u and Tousetsu, who also had Gen heritage, hung their heads and said nothing.

“What do we do, then?! I’ll be executed regardless of my relationship to that sorcerer!”

Just as Keigetsu was poised to bite her nails in frustration, Keishou reached out to stop her. “Hey, calm down. You’ll be executed on the spot if you have anything to do with that sorcerer—that much isn’t up for debate. But if you don’t have a connection to him, His Majesty will keep you alive as long as you have valuable information to share. All we need to do is prolong that period.”

“But that’s…”

The two Maidens objected in unison.

“…not possible!”

“…not enough!”

Once each had said their piece, they exchanged confused glances.

"What are you talking about, Kou Reirin? His Majesty already knows the ins and outs of the Daoist arts. What kind of information could possibly give me leverage over him?"

"You are a magical prodigy, so I'm not concerned about that. However, I hate the idea of groveling for mercy after we've gone to the trouble of aiding His Majesty with his revenge."

Reirin's adorable pout was at odds with the incredibly audacious words leaving her mouth.

Keigetsu's face twitched. "Oh, come on! You forgave the people of Unso for kidnapping you and Gen Kasui for sticking you down a well! Why are you being so antagonistic toward the supreme ruler of our kingdom?!"

"My, the answer is quite simple." Reirin tilted her head to one side. "The difference lies in whether they involved my loved ones."

Unran had been oppressed as an untouchable, and Kasui had been kept from her revenge and driven to her breaking point. Both had writhed in the throes of their own powerlessness, and Reirin could relate due to her struggles with her own poor health.

By the same logic, she ought to have sympathized with Genyou, but he had been granted the ultimate authority on the continent, only to turn around and use it to persecute her friend. And not just in the heat of the moment; if they didn't take steps to stop him, Keigetsu's life would be forever in jeopardy. She wasn't about to let him off without consequences.

The ideal Maiden was empathetic and compassionate to all, but now that Reirin had developed a budding sense of likes and dislikes, she was learning to assign a priority to things. Some might view that as a descent into villainy, but Reirin was rather fond of this new version of herself.

"Why must you seek His Majesty's permission just to live? You have things to teach him about the Daoist arts, so if anything, he ought to be singing your praises in gratitude. Isn't there some way we could teach him the proper order of things?" Reirin pressed a hand to her cheek with a sigh.

"How can you say that without a hint of shame?!" Keigetsu yelled, aghast. "I'm the one who should be begging for mercy here!"

The fearless butterfly only blinked, as though she found this a bewildering assertion. "Goodness, Lady Keigetsu, you mustn't think that you deserve to be persecuted. Although some Daoist spells may indeed be taboo, your magic has brought people salvation on numerous occasions."

"It has?"

"Yes. To me, to the people of Unso, and to Lady Kasui. Your magic brings about miracles and rescues others from despair."

Keigetsu assumed a blank stare, and Reirin looked her straight in the eye. The flames of the bonfire popped and crackled, casting a bright, powerful light on her profile.

"Your flames are beautiful, Lady Keigetsu. My beloved comet is no harbinger of the kingdom's end—she is a good omen that brings happiness to the people," declared Reirin, alluding to how the comet had changed from a symbol of bad fortune to good over the past century. Not a hint of hesitation could be heard in her voice.

Lost as to how to respond, Keigetsu pressed her lips into a tight line. It was the only way to keep her throat from locking up. "Th-that's ridiculous," was all she managed to squeeze out.

There is something seriously wrong with this woman, Keigetsu thought. Reirin was none other than the future emperor's betrothed, yet she would say things that defied common sense without batting an eye, and with those causal assertions, she could irrevocably paint over the canvas of a person's heart.

So many memories made Keigetsu's chest tight just to think about: The dirty looks from those who had scorned her as the daughter of a cultivator. The dark storage shed where her mother had always locked her away. The textbooks she had studied all on her own. Noble Consort Shu's attempts to exploit her magic. The sneers from the court ladies who had deemed her a talentless mediocrity. Her reflection glaring at her in the mirror, resentful of those underwhelming looks.

And yet, all of a sudden, it was like the black haze hanging over her heart had dissipated into thin air. Keigetsu brought both hands to her mouth.

"Your flames are beautiful."

"I've scarcely heard such an overstatement," she mumbled, looking off to the side.

In the privacy of her mind, Keigetsu thought thus: If she could be likened to a brilliant comet, then the way Kou Reirin lit up that comet made *her* the very sun. She couldn't hope to imitate this woman's gallantry or her ability to melt the heart with a single smile. Though she had gotten quite used to acting the part of "Kou Reirin" by now, she could never fully live up to the name.

While Reirin lifted a hand to her lips, deep in thought, Keigetsu proposed, "Why don't we start by undoing the swap?"

"Pardon?"

"We've figured out what His Majesty is thinking, more or less. But it won't be easy to come up with a way to get the upper hand over him, like you're suggesting. Our best option is to take our time finding a solution and do everything we can to avoid further suspicion till then."

Genyou suspected Keigetsu of practicing Daoist magic. As soon as those suspicions became conviction, he would jump straight to interrogating "Shu Keigetsu," as proven by the earlier water torture session.

"If the worst-case scenario happens before His Majesty realizes we've switched places, the guilt will eat me up inside. I'd rather eliminate as many potential concerns as possible."

That was the last time she ever wanted to see Kou Reirin nearly die in her place.

"'The worst-case scenario'…?"

By this point, the crowd's patronizing smiles were starting to get to Keigetsu, so she rushed to make excuses with a blush on her face. "D-don't get the wrong idea! I'm not worried about you or anything! I just want my own body back, and a ham actress like you can't afford to keep this charade going for much longer! That's all!"

Reirin stared back at her, unblinking, only to abruptly shoot to her feet. "Lady Keigetsu!"

"What?!"

"I have an idea!"

"Huh?!"

Keigetsu gawked at her, taken completely by surprise. Reirin grabbed both of her friend's hands and shook them back and forth.

Then, with an oddly menacing smile on her face, she elaborated.

"I know how to make His Majesty's position perfectly clear to him."

As the two Maidens got engrossed in their conversation around the fire, Tousetsu quietly excused herself. Now was her chance to gather firewood and straw from the palanquin that still lay at the foot of the nearby cliff. It was best to get these chores done while the girls had plenty of other people around to look out for them. Tousetsu certainly wasn't about to drop her guard around Akim.

"Oh, Tousetsu! Off to stock up on firewood? You're such a hard worker. While you're at it, mind checking if there's any liquor stashed inside the palanquin?"

Alas, her efforts to stealthily slip away from the scene were ruined when Keikou looked up and waved a hand in her direction.

"Wait, hold on. You don't drink, right? Can't expect you to pick out the good from the bad, then. I'll go with you."

What's worse, he left the group to tag along after her.

Must he, really? I would much prefer that he stayed behind to guard the Maidens.

As frustrating as Tousetsu found his inability to take a hint, a mere court lady was in no position to defy a military officer. Her face as devoid of expression as ever, she simply replied, "I would be much obliged."

When Keikou found the palanquin stranded at the foot of the cliff, he blithely stroked his chin. "Boy, this sure fell a long way. I'm amazed that it wasn't wrecked. My poor sister sure has had a rough time of it, huh? First her court ladies turned on her, then she was attacked by brigands, dropped down a cliff in a palanquin, and put through water torture."

"Most of that could have been avoided had you stuck around to guard her."

Tousetsu couldn't help letting a nasty comment slip, but to no surprise, Keikou brushed it off with a laugh. "Point taken! I was too focused on getting things ready to blow up the ice."

Of course, she did realize that he hadn't abandoned his guard duty to go fool around. His efforts were the reason that the detonation of the ice and the raven-based back-and-forth had gone as well as they did.

Keeping her urge to nag in check, Tousetsu opted for a change of subject. "Well, amid the many catastrophes, the one silver lining

is that Lady Keigetsu rushed to the scene and cleared up the misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding? What, did those two get into another fight?" Given what a doting brother he was, Keikou honed in on the topic immediately.

"Yes," Tousetsu replied as she gathered up the firewood stacked beside the palanquin and a large helping of straw. "Last night, Lady Reirin came running to Cloud Ladder Gardens all by herself, but Lady Keigetsu told her something along the lines of 'Everyone else helped me out, so I managed just fine without your assistance.'"

Being a man of the Kou, Keikou gave an exaggerated shudder. "Whew, that was mean!"

"From Lady Keigetsu's perspective, it was an attempt to relieve Lady Reirin's burden. Meanwhile, Lady Reirin hid her own reckless behavior from Lady Keigetsu to keep her from worrying."

"Sounds like something straight out of a love story. Why can't they just be honest with each other?"

"I couldn't agree more," Tousetsu said with a nod, "but the pair had been out of contact for almost a month. I imagine that made it harder to come out and say the things they might have otherwise."

Tousetsu cast a glance in the direction of the two Maidens. Her mistresses were on the edge of their seats, embroiled in a heated debate before the flickering flames. Having regained her usual cheer, Reirin was coming up with plan after plan to save Keigetsu from persecution. Tousetsu couldn't help but smile at the sight.

"I feared this might become a repeat of the Rite of Reverence, but despite their conflict, Lady Keigetsu rushed to Lady Reirin's rescue in tears. I imagine that alleviated Lady Reirin's doubts about their friendship." Nothing could be more irrefutable proof of a bond than a dramatic rescue. Taking that for granted, Tousetsu approvingly concluded, "'Adversity strengthens the foundations,' as the saying goes."

"Hrm." Keikou's response was underwhelming; it sounded incredulous, somewhere between a grunt of acknowledgment and a groan. "That's a touching thought and all, but…is that really all it takes to resolve the issue? One side bursts into worried tears, and suddenly everything's fine?" he asked, puzzled.

"Pardon?" Tousetsu asked, surprised. "Why wouldn't it be? Lady Keigetsu was frantic to save Lady Reirin. That must have reassured Lady Reirin of just how much they mean to each other."

"If you say so," Keikou replied noncommittally, neither arguing nor agreeing with her.

Annoyed that he had put a damper on the heartwarming rescue, Tousetsu aimed a scowl in his direction. "If you have something to say, by all means, come out and say it."

"Eh, it's nothing important." With a chuckle, Keikou plucked most of the firewood and straw from Tousetsu's arms. "It's no secret how much every Kou longs to be seen as dependable, that's all. If I wanted someone to rely on me more, only to end up getting saved by them, I don't think I'd feel too great about it. But Reirin's a lot more mature than I am, so who knows."

Tousetsu grew flustered. "Wait, I can carry the firewood my—"

"Denied! You've got to rely on me more, or I'll get sulky." He spoke in a deliberately cutesy voice, only to abruptly look her right in the face. "I know how much you care about your mistress, so I apologize if I upset you just now. Forget I said anything."

"…No need."

"Also, I hear you were the first to notice the raven I sent out. Thanks for that." Keikou fished around in the breast of his robes with one hand, then tossed a shell full of something to Tousetsu. "Take this as a token of my appreciation."

"Why? I haven't done anything particularly deserving of thanks."

"When you forced your way into the battle to save Leelee, one of those throwing darts grazed your leg, right?" he casually pointed out. "Go ahead and use that. It's an ointment that stops bleeding and counteracts poison."

Tousetsu's head snapped up. She hadn't expected anyone to notice. "You could tell from that distance?"

"I didn't see it happen during the fight, but I see it now. You're limping a bit," Keikou answered completely matter-of-factly, then turned back to the palanquin. "Let's see, is there any booze in here? Hmm, looks like it's all medicine."

Tousetsu tightened her grip on the ointment. She really couldn't stand this man. He was so boorish and clueless, yet somehow she could never get anything past him.

"Thank you very much," she forced out with a sour expression. When she heard the man chuckle amid his search for alcohol, she had to wonder if he had eyes on the back of his head.

Alas, Tousetsu herself only had them on her face, which she once again turned in the direction of the Maidens sitting around the fire. It was a familiar scene, with Reirin craning forward to pitch some brilliant idea, while Keigetsu recoiled in disbelief and yelled at her. The pair looked like their usual selves: her mistress making every effort for her friend and said friend playing along despite her dismay.

If you ask me, they're getting along swimmingly.

Tomorrow, they would take on the highest authority in the kingdom. Kou Reirin and Shu Keigetsu's friendship was strong enough to stand against the emperor.

"Ooh! Is this alcohol?!" Keikou cried, sticking his head into the palanquin. "Agh, no! It was a spittoon! I was tricked!"

"I imagine you might have more luck if you weren't searching with one hand."

With a small sigh, Tousetsu took back a small portion of the firewood he had taken off her hands.

Chapter 2:
Reirin Puts on the Pressure

THE FIRST RAYS of morning sunlight streamed in through the eastern windows of Cloud Ladder Gardens. One by one, the contents of the room were bathed in majestic light: the furnishings too elegant to belong in an encampment, the sword reverently placed on display, and the extravagant robe on the hanging rack.

Sitting on his bed, Genyou growled with the realization that a new day had begun. "Blast it…"

The Repose of Souls was two days away. That meant two days remained until the Day of Ultimate Yin, when the solar eclipse would occur and the yin would reach its peak. With so little time left, it was hard not to feel impatient.

"I know he must be here somewhere."

By "he," Genyou was referring to the body-swapping sorcerer. The man who had absconded with Prince Gomei's body was bound to be lurking somewhere close by, still trapped inside his blind vessel. He always left shriveled corpses in his wake, most of them concentrated in war zones and disaster areas. It made sense that he would gravitate toward such areas, as no one would make a big deal out of encountering a blind man or a few disfigured corpses there.

Living in someone else's body clearly demanded a lot of qi, and it appeared the amount he needed was steadily increasing over time. During the period immediately following the sorcerer's escape, only a few shriveled corpses would show up per year. Within a decade, that number had increased to ten. Now, twenty-five years later, they discovered as many as twenty or thirty bodies annually.

It couldn't have been easy to blend into the populace while churning out that many cadavers, and above all, it had to be tough

on the sorcerer to live in a body that was falling apart at the seams. His burden must have been increasing with each passing year.

That means it should be easier for me to track him down, Genyou told himself, clenching his fists atop the bed.

Over the past twenty-five years, he had covertly and exhaustively searched for places where the sorcerer might show himself and had narrowed down the possibilities to a handful of locations. Among those, Tan Pass was the region where the concentration of yin would be highest this year, so it was extremely likely that the sorcerer would put in an appearance there. Visiting the land with the greatest yin energy on the Day of Ultimate Yin would allow the man to finally fulfill his long-held ambition.

On the Day of Ultimate Yin, he will use his body-swapping spell for the first time in twenty-five years and steal the form of another.

If he switched bodies with a complete stranger, it would become all the more difficult to track him down.

The Day of Ultimate Yin was only two days away. Genyou had to catch the sorcerer before then at all costs.

Unfortunately, I could not find my brother's face among those I assembled from the disaster sites.

His brow furrowed as he thought back to the disaster victims the Maidens had brought him yesterday. He had used the verbal alms as a pretext to gather up the blind and injured, but none of the visitors to Cloud Ladder Gardens had looked a thing like Gomei. Despite Genyou's efforts to maintain anonymity, the enemy might have realized what he was up to.

If so, he's bound to make a run for it. Tan has stationed his men all around Tan Pass. Anyone who attempts to flee the area is sure to be caught in his net.

He would lure the man out and block off his escape. Genyou was in the habit of employing two-pronged strategies. Over and over, he assured himself that everything would go well.

For now, I should order a careful sweep of the area for any desiccated corpses lying about. If the search yields results, that will prove that the sorcerer is storing up qi in preparation for a body swap—and that he is somewhere in the vicinity.

As Genyou watched the sunrise soak the floor in its hue, he stood from his bed with repugnance. For the past twenty-five years, he had never once welcomed the dawn of a new day.

Why isn't Tan back yet?

Idly stroking the flute by his bedside, Genyou thought of the head of his secret service. For all the man's insolence, he was highly skilled at his job, yet he had never shown up last night to give a report. Granted, the emperor *had* heard word of Shu Keigetsu tumbling down the mountain in her palanquin, so it followed that Tan would still be in the mountains as well. One would never guess it from his personality, but he was quite methodical with his work. Now that Genyou had ordered him to find out whether Shu Keigetsu was a sorcerer, he would use every trick in the book to put pressure on her and confirm the facts.

Still, it was taking far too long. With the Day of Ultimate Yin fast approaching, Genyou regretted wasting a master spy like Tan on unmasking Shu Keigetsu.

If it turns out that Shu Keigetsu is innocent and has no information of value, this will have been a complete waste of time.

Just as a small sigh escaped his lips, he heard a voice from the window behind him. "Excuse me, Your Majesty."

Genyou whirled around. He had sent all his pages elsewhere, so there was only one person who would enter his room without hesitation.

"You're late."

"Believe it or not, I actually came down from Treacherous Tan Peak as fast as I could."

The man who had let himself in without so much as a sound was the same one Genyou had just been thinking of: Tan of the secret service. Or, to call him by his true name, Akim. He was supposed to have disguised himself as a porter for the Congee Conferment Rite, but his neat bun had come undone, his face was back to normal, and he had stopped making the effort to hide his tattoo.

He glided across the room with the ease of a cat, then offered Genyou a perfunctory bow. "May I give my report?"

"Proceed."

"I caught Shu Keigetsu wielding magic on Treacherous Tan Peak."

Genyou's hand involuntarily clenched around his flute. "Did you find any evidence of a body-swapping spell? It wasn't someone else in her body, was it?"

"I can't say with certainty. I put her through water torture, but she never confessed to anything of the sort."

Not a moment after that solemn reply left his mouth, Akim snapped to attention and took a great leap backward.

Wham!

A sword had streaked across the room and struck the spot where he had just knelt.

"Preposterous." Genyou was the one responsible. Without batting an eye or kicking up a hint of a breeze, he had drawn the displayed sword from its sheath and hurled it at his spy. "I refuse to believe that you would be so incompetent."

Detecting a deep fury in that icy voice, Akim stroked his chin with a distressed twist of his lips. "Aw, jeez… I guess that was a stretch, huh? I was sworn to secrecy, so I figured I'd try playing dumb. Hmm, but if I refuse to come clean, I might die by Your Majesty's hand instead… I'm caught between a rock and a hard place here." His stubby fingers slid up to the black lizard tattoo on

his temple. “For my reference, does this tattoo look like it’s about to catch fire? Supposedly, I’m cursed to have my whole body burst into flames if I report anything related to a body swap.”

“Oho.”

Genyou didn’t hesitate. He grabbed a water jar sitting in a corner of the room and emptied its contents onto Akim.

“Yikes! That’s freezing!”

“That ought to last you a little while. Now get to talking while you’re still wet. If that won’t suffice, I will happily toss you into a well.”

“Boy, what a considerate boss I have.” His face twitching, Akim swept back his wet bangs. Then, so casually it was hard to believe his life was at stake, he told all there was to tell. “It turned out she had swapped bodies with Kou Reirin. It’s true that she didn’t confess to being a sorcerer while I was torturing her, but that’s because she was actually a different person on the inside. As evidence, the real Shu Keigetsu rushed to Treacherous Tan Peak upon learning her body was in danger—in Kou Reirin’s form, of course.”

The color drained from Genyou’s face. He picked up the flute once more and squeezed its bloodstained tassel in his hand.

“Where are they now?”

“I had them undo the switch, since it would get hard to keep them straight otherwise. Or, well, *they* were the ones to suggest it, technically.”

Genyou’s voice came out hoarse, while Akim’s response was as breezy as could be. At that point, however, Akim touched his tattoo to check on how it was doing. When he found that it hadn’t so much as heated up, he muttered, “What, seriously?”

After that, his explanation grew more confident. “I was originally planning to take only Shu Keigetsu into custody, but then Kou Reirin and the others who rushed to the scene—the crown prince, her brother, and so on—threw a fit. It was getting to be a

nuisance, so I doused Shu Keigetsu in water to keep her fires in check and brought them over as a group. For the moment, I have them all tied up in a deserted area." He pulled back his hair as he spoke, losing patience with the water dribbling down his chin. "They claim to have something to say for themselves. A desperate plea for their lives, I assume? I'll take you to where I've detained them. Do with them as you see fit."

"Well done," Genyou tersely replied, not the least bit upset to hear that his own son and the non-sorcerer Maiden were among the apprehended. All he cared about at the moment was wringing information out of Shu Keigetsu. Everything else was equally irrelevant to him.

The emperor pulled the sword out of the floor and hung it from his hip. He cast the flute sitting on the display shelf a single glance, then turned his eyes forward again.

"Take me to Shu Keigetsu."

With that, he followed Akim out of the room.

Genyou and Akim arrived at a wood behind Cloud Ladder Gardens. Once upon a time, it had been home to the stream used to fill the artificial ponds on the encampment grounds, and it blended seamlessly with the mountains in the background. The dense canopy of trees made it dark even in the middle of the day, and no death throes would carry beyond its bounds. It was the perfect place for an interrogation.

Upon closer inspection, a few trees had been cut down to form a clearing. There, the Shu Maiden was tied to a stake by the hands. A short distance from her, Prince Gyoumei, Kou Reirin, and her brother and court ladies—a total of five people—were sitting in the shade of the trees, their hands likewise bound with rope. The gap between Shu Keigetsu and the rest of the group was presumably a measure to prevent her from using her body-swapping spell and escaping. According to the information Genyou had managed to

gather, the caster needed to be in physical contact with the target to maintain control over the spell.

As soon as the girl tied to the stake picked up on the sound of footsteps, she looked up with a start and choked out, "Y-Your Majesty… I beg your forgiveness! Please spare me!"

Getting doused in water must have chilled her to the bone, as she was shaking uncontrollably. The most respect she could manage was an awkward, frantic bow of her head.

"I beseech you, please allow me to offer an explanation! I did indeed learn the Daoist arts from the texts my father left behind, and I can cast a handful of spells. However, I swear to you that I have no ambitions on the throne!"

She had apparently resigned herself at some point during Akim's interrogation, as she made no effort to hide the fact that she was a practitioner. Whipping her sodden hair every which way, she babbled that she wasn't plotting treason. At first, she made an effort to present her case calmly, but her voice gradually hitched with fear.

"A-all I really know is how to light a candle! I swear to the Great Ancestor that I have never once abused my power! I am Your Majesty's, His Highness's, and this kingdom's loyal Maiden! S-so, please—"

"Excuse me," Genyou cut in, cleaving off her caterwauling, "did I grant you permission to speak freely?"

He unsheathed his sword and pressed the blade to the girl's throat, whereupon she gave a strangled cry. Their audience launched themselves forward, struggling against their bonds.

"Father, you mustn't!" the crown prince exclaimed.

"Please stop this, Your Majesty!" the Kou Maiden pleaded. She leapt to her feet, shocked that Genyou had been so quick to draw a weapon. "I beg of you, please listen to what she has to say! I'm certain she can prove her worth to you!"

Kou Keishou tugged on her robes from where he knelt beside her, still bound. “Calm down.” In place of his sister, who was so pale in the face that she looked ready to faint, he prostrated himself and said, “Your Majesty, please consider this a request from Kou Keishou, a son of the Kou and nephew of the empress. I assure you she would never plot against you. We humbly ask for your pardon.”

Keishou was one of the empress’s darlings. The sight of him groveling and pleading his case allowed Gyoumei to regain his composure. “If you will forgive my saying so, Father, she is my fiancée, a loyal Maiden with no treasonous designs. Should you choose to spare her, I believe her magic could prove quite useful to you.”

“Useful?” Genyou sneered. “What use could I possibly have of such abominable magic? If she can cast powerful spells, that makes her a potential threat to be eliminated, and if she can only cast simple ones, there is no point in keeping her alive. One way or another, all practitioners of the Daoist arts must die. There is but one reason I might see fit to spare her.” His eyes narrowed, and the tip of his blade bit into the fair skin of her neck. “And that is if she knows something about the sorcerer I seek. Answer me this, girl: Have you heard anything of a body-swapping sorcerer in the form of a blind, middle-aged man?”

Blood beaded on the girl’s skin and trickled down her throat. She glanced down at it, her voice coming out in gasps. “A-a blind sorcerer, you say?”

“Indeed. Twenty-five years ago, that sorcerer ran off after trading bodies with the Kou-hailing Prince Gomei. He has been trapped in the prince’s body ever since, which means he should be blind and have a scar running down his leg. I have spent many long years following his trail.”

“A scar on his leg? He swapped bodies with a prince?”

Visibly irritated with the blank look she was giving him, Genyou gritted his teeth and commanded, “Speak. Tell me all you know of

his potential hiding places and allies, any weak points to his body-swapping spell, and how best to render him powerless."

"M-my apologies, Your Majesty! I-I taught myself the Daoist arts. I have never belonged to a sect, so I am afraid I know nothing of this sorcerer!"

Genyou nearly stabbed her in a flash of rage. This had been a wild-goose chase after all.

As the Maiden watched his sword tremble with fury, she scrambled to crouch down and press her forehead to the ground. "H-however, I may be able to explain aspects of his magic! As I never received formal schooling, I know of no way to cancel out his spells, but I promise I can find some way to help you!"

Her desperate pleas of mercy couldn't hope to make the emperor waver.

She doesn't know the sorcerer I'm looking for, and she doesn't appear particularly knowledgeable about the body-swapping spell.

In that case, there was no reason to let this pathetic, sniveling sorcerer live.

"I-I beg of you. Please spare me. Please forgive me! Have mercy!"

Sensing that she was moments from being cut down, the captive girl looked up and pleaded with the emperor, tears streaming from her eyes. Their audience likewise raised shouts of protest.

"Your Majesty, I implore you to pardon her transgressions!"

"I respectfully ask the same, Father! To kill a potential asset over a fleeting moment of anger would prove an irreparable mistake!"

"'An irreparable mistake'?" As Gyoumei and his companions pleaded with all their might, rope digging into their skin, a dark laugh escaped Genyou's lips. "None of you have the slightest idea what a true mistake looks like."

Not one of them knew the horror of losing someone precious as a result of their own ignorance. The despair of snuffing out a glorious, irreplaceable life by their own hand.

Genyou narrowed his eyes into a cold glare and wordlessly raised his sword overhead.

"Y-Your Majesty! Please, no! Don't kill me! No!" the groveling girl shrieked, her face frozen in fear. "I don't want to die! Nooo!"

He felt like an idiot for ever proceeding with caution, concerned that she might be the Kou Maiden on the inside. This woman couldn't be anyone but Shu Keigetsu herself. That distinguished niece of his would never so shamelessly give voice to her fear of death.

"It could never be a mistake to kill a useless disgrace like you."

With a sneer, he swung his sword down.

Clang!

The moment Genyou should have cleaved the girl's head from her shoulders, he felt a strange pushback. His eyes widened.

"Oh? Good to know."

To his utter disbelief, the girl had caught the sword between her hands.

Or, more accurately, she had lifted her bound wrists and thrust the rope's knot into the path of his blade.

"Eeeek!" screamed the Kou Maiden tied up in the background —or, rather, the girl who was *supposed* to be the Kou Maiden.

Meanwhile, the girl standing before Genyou didn't so much as flinch. Neither did any of the men. Seconds prior, they had been sitting around the Maiden with their hands tied, but in the blink of an eye, they slipped out of their bindings, unsheathed the swords at their hips, and pointed them at Genyou. Akim sat back and let this happen.

"Wha…?"

The tables had turned.

The girl responded to Genyou's gasp with a twist of her wrists, his sword caught between them. She slid the knot along the cutting edge, revealing what had been stashed inside.

Lo, it was a bundle of metal hairpins that had blocked Genyou's blade.

"Dear me. You nearly shattered my hairpins."

The Maiden slowly raised her arms, letting the severed rope plop to the ground. All that was left in her hand was a hairpin, and she leisurely stuck it into her hair, her distress of moments ago nowhere to be found. Now, she wore the gorgeous smile of a celestial maiden.

"Still, this proves my hypothesis. You have no way of seeing through a body swap, Your Majesty."

"Ngh!"

Genyou's reaction was stronger than expected. Not even the circle of swords pointed at him had made him relax his stance, but *that* comment made him drop his weapon, the color draining from his face.

Clank!



The dull clatter of his sword against the ground attested to his distress. This was the first time the apathetic man had ever laid his emotions bare.

As the emperor stood there stock-still, the Shu Maiden—no, the one masquerading as her—elegantly rose to her feet and bowed. "Allow me to formally introduce myself, Your Majesty. I am the empress's niece, Crown Prince Gyoumei's Maiden, and a daughter of the Kou: Kou Reirin. For the time being, I have traded bodies with Lady Keigetsu."

"But…I was told you had reversed the switch…"

"Oh, I'm sure. I asked Akim to lie and say that we had already switched back."

After their discussion the previous night, Reirin and Keigetsu had opted not to return to their own bodies and instead *pretend* to have done so.

Turning to Akim, she added, "I admittedly had my concerns that you might betray us, so I'm glad you went ahead with the plan as discussed."

"Well, I did consider double-crossing you instead, but then this guy welcomed me back from an all-nighter by chucking swords and dumping water on me. I was feeling a teensy bit ticked off." With a shrug, Akim concluded, "So I figured, hey, why not let things take their course?"

"Tan, you weasel!" Genyou glared at his spy, pale with fury. Then he turned his piercing gaze on his sword-wielding son. "Gyoumei, you dare side with a mere Maiden over the emperor? You would point a blade at your own father?!"

Gyoumei didn't so much as flinch, soberly responding, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, I suppose. I hear you watched the former emperor succumb to poison without lifting a finger."

Genyou's scowl deepened.

"Your Majesty," Reirin unhurriedly cut in. "We executed this bold strategy in hopes of confirming something."

Her pensive gaze settled on the sword Genyou had dropped, as well as his trembling hands. The man had never shown enough emotion to glower at someone before. It was a sign that the imperturbable emperor had lost his composure.

"Despite your suspicions that Lady Keigetsu was a practitioner of the Daoist arts, you never jumped straight to apprehending or torturing her. You let us run free in the outer city, you sounded her out via conversation at Cloud Ladder Gardens, and only once you were convinced she was a practitioner did you take up a sword. And now, you are deeply distraught to find that your assumption was incorrect." Reirin took a step toward Genyou. "I always found it strange that you were so cautious. It was almost as though you were attempting to ascertain something. Or as though you feared the very notion of failing to see through a swap."

Something about Akim's story had struck Reirin as odd. When asked about Gomei's death, Genyou had supposedly grimaced and said, "I made an irreparable mistake," but he wasn't one to be racked with such intense guilt over merely failing to save his benefactor from an assassin. It also reminded her of how, after failing to notice she was swapped and sentencing her to death, Gyoumei had once blanched and uttered those exact same words.

The clincher had been what Keigetsu said.

"If the worst-case scenario happens before His Majesty realizes we've switched places…"

The worst-case scenario.

"Your Majesty, you didn't simply let Prince Gomei die."

The water Reirin had poured on herself dripped down her face, and she wiped it away with her fingers. She had no more need of stage props.

“Oblivious to the fact that the sorcerer and prince had switched bodies, you attempted to strike down the assassin—and ended up killing the prince instead.”

Genyou sucked in a sharp breath, while Reirin reflected on her conversation with Keigetsu the previous night.

“His Majesty killed Prince Gomei on the assumption that he was the sorcerer?”

“Most likely, yes.”

This was when they were all sitting around the fire, just after Reirin had abruptly declared that she had an idea of how to persuade Genyou. The rest of the group was goggling at her in confusion, so Reirin proceeded to explain her thought process.

“Those of the Gen clan do have a tendency to grow abnormally attached. If His Majesty sat back and allowed someone important to him to die, it’s only natural that he would loathe the one responsible. However, if Prince Gomei were merely killed by an assassin, I don’t think he would frame it as ‘an irreparable mistake.’”

Keigetsu gave a noncommittal nod. “Well, I suppose it’s a possibility…” She clearly found this too big a leap in logic.

“What’s more, I’ve felt that His Majesty has been overly cautious about verifying whether you’re a sorcerer.”

“I’ve wondered about that as well,” Keishou chimed in, glancing over from where he sat. “Given His Majesty’s standing, he would be within his rights to take the approach of ‘guilty until proven innocent’ and torture or execute anyone he finds suspicious. Instead, he takes the time to carefully assess the suspect. I had written it off as a personality quirk, but it makes more sense to assume there’s a story behind it.”

Ever since Genyou had attempted to discern Keigetsu’s true identity through conversation, Keishou had gotten the sense that he

was taking a rather roundabout approach.

Across the fire, Akim stroked his chin, impressed. "Interesting. He's already failed to see through a swap once before, and that's why he's being more careful this time around. It sure explains why he's been dragging his feet about getting the deed done." He nodded to himself, then pulled a face. "Assuming it's true, anyway. Gotta wonder why he'd send someone after his enemy while withholding such a crucial piece of information."

Akim sounded a bit annoyed to discover that despite enlisting his help, Genyou had been keeping such a big secret from him for the past twenty-five years.

Surprisingly, Gyoumei's response was sympathetic to his father. "I doubt it would be easy for him to admit. He failed to see through to who his loved one really was, and all his efforts to protect that person only hurt him. The guilt is suffocating enough when the victim survives, so supposing it ended in death…" He trailed off there. After a few moments, a rueful smile came to his face. "No doubt that's our best angle of attack."

Silence fell, save for the crackling of firewood.

After some debate, Reirin gingerly placed a hand over Gyoumei's. "I do not wish to hurt His Majesty's feelings without cause. I simply want him to realize that killing off anyone he deems useless is not the best way to go about his revenge." Gyoumei turned to look at her. Reirin met his gaze, unwavering. "I am not out to condemn His Majesty. If he is willing to come around to our point of view, we can help him. All I want is to make him understand that."

Once she saw the tension bleed from her fiancé's shoulders, Reirin looked out over the whole group and announced, "On that note, I will play the part of 'Shu Keigetsu' right up until the moment His Majesty swings down his blade. My plan is to confront him with the fact that he cannot see through a body swap on his own, thus proving that he needs the help of an expert."

The men and court ladies were already giving her proposal serious consideration, quietly pressing their hands to their mouths or nodding along.

"H-hold it right there!" Keigetsu interjected, pitching forward in disbelief. "That all hinges on you pulling off a decent imitation of me!"

"Correct."

"It's never going to happen!"

"Hm?" Reirin blinked. "That's not true. I have spent the past month tricking the secret service into believing I'm you. Why, you could call me a professional in the field of Shu Kei—"

"Take a look around and recall how that worked out for you! Our secret is out! And if we go back further, His Highness, the court ladies, the captain of the Eagle Eyes, your brothers, and the other Maidens all figured out who you really were! Wake up to reality, you ham actress!"

Even Reirin was taken aback by the insults rolling off Keigetsu's tongue, but she was too stubborn to back down. "Wh-while it's true that my past record has not been the most impressive, much like vegetables, people will grow with a little time and care. We can all learn to do the things that were once beyond us."

Keigetsu jabbed a finger at her, emotions on full display. "You listen here! Your terrible acting is not something that can be overcome with a little growth! You fundamentally lack emotional range, so it's all completely unconvincing! Utterly contrived!"

"Hrk… Perhaps that was the case before, but I can manage it now."

"You're full of it! Do you seriously think you can play at being scared?! I can already picture what will happen! The moment His Majesty brings out his sword, you'll yell, 'Oh nooo' in a perfect monotone, and he'll know something is off!" The more Keigetsu

yelled, the more her past anger resurfaced, until she was practically drilling a hole into Reirin's forehead with the force of her poking.

Reirin tenderly cradled her friend's finger between her hands. "No, I mean it. Things are different now. I've learned what it's like to be afraid." Then she pressed those hands to her chest. "It's true that I had forgotten the feelings of fear and frustration until recently. Thus, I was never quite sure how to go about imitating your emotional range. But you know what, Lady Keigetsu? I truly was scared earlier."

She flashed back to the torture Akim had put her through. It had been cold and dark. She had been completely alone, unable to speak, unable to breathe. Reirin had found that genuinely anguishing. The blistering pain and fear had been enough to drive her mad.

In hindsight, it might have been the first time she had ever perceived fear so clearly. When she was subjected to the Lion's Judgment, when Noble Consort Shu held a blade to her throat, when she was kidnapped and exposed to a contagion, she had thought nothing more than *I'm alive until the moment I breathe my last* or *Feeling the fear before I die is nothing but a waste of strength*. With how unflinching she had once been in the face of death, she had to wonder when she had grown so weak.

When Kasui attacked her and left her to die in a well, she had developed lingering attachments to life. Or perhaps she had already grown fragile by the time she watched Unran nearly die before her eyes. Either way, it had begun sometime after the switch with Keigetsu. It wasn't until she had gained a healthy body, come to enjoy life to the fullest, and learned to experience all sorts of emotions.

"I have a feeling that both fear and hatred are derived from holding something dear," Reirin murmured, tightening her grip around Keigetsu's finger.

People dreaded death because they loved being alive. People were afraid to be hated because they had opened themselves up to others. People craved attention because they valued themselves and felt hatred when something precious to them was put at risk. The secret to Keigetsu's abundance of emotion lay in a powerful love—such was the lesson Reirin had learned in recent days.

"I truly believe I can pull it off this time," Reirin said with the utmost sincerity. "Please trust me."

Daunted, Keigetsu relaxed her finger.

In the end, the group concluded that taking this approach to persuade Genyou was their best bet. And so, after putting one more preventive measure in place, Reirin would put her heart and soul into playing the part of "Shu Keigetsu."

I agreed to the plan myself, so I don't have much room to talk. Keigetsu gulped as she gazed upon the tattered remains of the rope Genyou had cut. *But wasn't this a little too risky?*

Her whole body was beaded with sweat. Genyou's sword had just sliced its way through that gigantic knot. Several hairpins had been stacked inside, yet even that hunk of metal had been moments from shattering. Despite the emperor's reputation for being gentle, he was clearly as skilled a warrior as any other man of the Gen. One wrong move, and Kou Reirin would have lost her head.

Meanwhile, the target of his fierce strike was completely unperturbed. When the emperor said nothing, she held her head high with dignity and asked, "Shall I take your silence as confirmation, Your Majesty?"

She was probably accustomed to putting her life on the line. The same clearly went for the men, given their experiences on the battlefield. Neither Gyoumei, her admirer, nor Keishou, her doting brother, so much as frowned at Reirin's reckless stunt, their eyes firmly glued to the emperor.

They had the right idea, of course. Now was not the time or place to be stunned or intimidated. This was just what the world Kou

Reirin inhabited was like—what it meant to straddle the brink of death. Overwhelmed by her allies' sheer resolve, Keigetsu balled her hands into fists and stuffed down a shriek.

"In that case, I invite you to see things this way," Reirin said softly, giving her words a chance to sink in. "It takes one with a mastery of the Daoist arts to see through a body-swapping spell. If you continue down the path you're on, you are doomed to repeat your mistakes."

She refrained from explicitly adding, *Like you almost killed me just now.* It was clear that Genyou was plenty shaken by this development already. The way he stood there, expressionless, brought to mind a block of ice that adamantly rejected all outside influence. Yet his pallid complexion and quaking hands proved that the ice was quite brittle, ready to shatter like glass at the slightest push.

"Your Majesty, we did not come here to be persecuted. We are here to help you."

Reirin steeled her resolve, knelt before the man, reverently took his hand in hers, and held it overhead. She was being unbelievably rude, running her mouth at the emperor without permission to speak freely, even going so far as to reach for his hand. Still, she couldn't go on without making this earnest entreaty.

"I humbly ask that you take this hand of mine. We wish to aid you, and we are the only ones capable of doing so. Please tell us the full story."

She had no intention of sitting back and getting executed, but she had no desire to fight this man either. If at all possible, she wanted to join hands and get him to acknowledge Keigetsu on equal terms.

"Well, there you have it, Your Majesty," Akim drawled, his arms folded and his back against a tree. "Your revenge hasn't gone anywhere for twenty-five years. Why not get some new blood on the case? I mean, thinking logically, what were you even planning to do

after catching the sorcerer? You can't exactly torture him while he's got your precious brother's body. It can be a real hassle to inflict pain without causing lasting damage." He tilted his head to one side. "This girl might know how to remove the sorcerer's soul from Prince Gomei's body. She's clearly a body-swapping professional."

Genyou said nothing for quite a while, and he didn't return Reirin's grip on his hand. But neither did he shake her off and take back his sword.

At length, he heaved a long sigh. "Why ask me to take your hand when you're already holding mine?"

"Hm? Oh, my apologies! I acted before I could think," Reirin replied in a fluster.

Something about her response made Genyou's thin lips twist into a grimace. It was an almost self-derisive smile.

"Dry yourself off."

Surprised, Reirin attempted to get a look at Genyou's expression, but he withdrew his hand and spun on his heel before she could.

His back turned to the group, he added, "This is going to be a long story."

Chapter 3:
Reirin Lends an Ear

EACH TIME THEY VISITED the national treasury in the innermost depths of the main palace, Genyou's mother, Empress Souen, would tell her son thus:

"The 'Gen' in your given name means 'string.' A bowstring, in this case. You are named for a grand weapon that once exorcised evil and brought this nation to heel."

Her gorgeous, frosty visage was often extolled as that of an ice nymph, but in these moments alone, she would break into a smile and whisper words like sweet nothings.

"You must make that glorious bowstring sing as you aim for the throne."

Souen was the empress, but she had never won the emperor's heart. Despite her status as his official wife, her son was the tenth of the princes. Being of Kin descent, the emperor loved all things extravagant. A Gen was far too plain to catch his interest, so his choice of empress had been a solely political move.

This did not sit well with Souen. Not because she craved her husband's love, mind you, but because she didn't want a single blemish on her tenure as empress.

Souen didn't have the slightest interest in romance. She lacked emotional range, and she had been nicknamed the "Lady of Ice" ever since she was admitted to the court. However, when she became empress and was entrusted with the Imperial Seal, she experienced yearning for the very first time.

A yearning for power.

With a single word—a single glance—she could command the obedience of countless people. They would spring into action like

puppets on strings, and they would die like mindless dolls. She found this hitherto unknown sensation almost intoxicating. The heady omnipotence was akin to chugging a powerful spirit.

The intoxication and exhilaration only grew stronger with time. Each day, she tested the extent of her authority by making unreasonable demands of those around her, almost like holding a jewel up to the sun to examine it. When she found it to her liking, her mood took a sharp turn for the better. If someone ever tarnished its luster, her mood instantly soured, and she would do away with the one responsible.

Power was the one and only thing the Gen-hailing Souen had ever fixated on. And the power held by a woman of the inner court would only be complete when her son became emperor. It was her long-held ambition to put the tenth and youngest prince, Genyou, on the throne.

"You are my greatest treasure. A powerful weapon born to make me shine. I will stop at nothing to make you the next emperor."

Had Genyou ever made an honest attempt to return his mother's suffocating love? It was hard for him to say, in retrospect.

Genyou was a smart child. He was sickly from childhood, which had stunted his physical development, but behind his uncommunicative lips lay a swirl of complex thoughts. His downcast eyes held a glint of intelligence. He already knew that his gently smiling mother had disposed of countless people behind the scenes. If a court lady seemed likely to win the emperor's favor, the empress would kill her before she could catch his eye. If one of the other palaces was poised to rise to prominence, she would dig up a scandal to whip them into a frenzy. When Genyou grew so enamored of his pet dog that he skipped his lessons just once, she had torn the dog asunder.

The empress did not love her child. She cared only for the power her son might bring her in the future—and it didn't take long

for Genyou to figure that out. He didn't particularly despair over it. All he felt was a frosty resignation and a faint revulsion.

By the time he turned six, these emotions were directed not just at his mother but at the world as a whole. That was when Genyou stopped speaking altogether. It felt pointless even to bother. Sometimes his mother would attempt to flatter him into conversation, other times she would put up a front of composure. As soon as she realized neither approach was working, she resorted to yelling and beating him. All the scholars gave up on the "dunce" of a youngest prince, and the other clans came together to bathe him in ridicule.

Still Genyou insisted on maintaining his silence.

As his mother's mood swings worsened, her tyranny reached its peak, until she and the opposing clans were embroiled in an intense power struggle. Even then—no, more adamantly than ever—Genyou passed himself off as a mute, half-witted prince. He had absolutely no desire to be a part of the world around him.

One day, when Genyou was eleven years old, someone taunted him, "Well, if it isn't the Woodwork Prince! Hey, are you flexible enough to bend at the knees? Why don't you grovel for us and prove it?"

It was the fourth prince, a son of the Kin consort. He was three years Genyou's elder. Perhaps owing to his pure Kin blood, he always had a swagger about him. Although the Kou-hailing firstborn, Gomei, had already been chosen as crown prince, he was confident that he could one day depose Gomei and claim the throne himself—a belief he made no effort to hide. He had given the uncommunicative Genyou the nickname of "the Woodwork Prince," and he often gathered his cronies to gang up on the younger boy. It was his way of flaunting his power.

"Nothing to say for yourself? Such disrespect for your elder brother! Someone really ought to teach you a lesson in fraternal duty. I suppose I must take the task upon myself."

When Genyou attempted to ride out the conversation in silence, the fourth prince grabbed him by the arm and dragged him to a well deep inside the inner court. There, the bully's little brother—the Kin-hailing sixth prince—and a few of his other friends among the princes were awaiting their arrival with wicked grins. It was clear as day what was about to happen: They were going to rough Genyou up.

I know what this is about, Genyou thought in a daze as the group held him down. *We had a test on the scriptures today.*

Earlier that day, the princes had taken their monthly quiz during their lessons. It had been pretty standard fare—they were asked to discuss current political issues with citations from the Five Classics—but the results were always reported back to their mothers. Those who hadn't scored well were probably in a bad mood. As proof, the only ones present were the friends of the fourth prince. Gomei, whose status as crown prince granted him a special education, and the ninth prince, who had excellent grades, were nowhere to be seen.

"My fists have received the shaman's blessing. A hit from these can reform even the most heinous of criminals. Why don't I land a few blows to your gut and imbue you with a little virtue?"

"On that note, my legs have a special power of their own! A kick from one of these could tame a bucking horse in no time. Here, allow me to demonstrate."

"Ha ha ha! Go ahead and mount him like one!"

The princes burst into laughter. From the sound of it, today's game of choice would be horsey rides.

Hitting Genyou in the face would lead to a scandal. None of these boys were dumb enough to risk that, so they preferred to focus on wounding his pride. For instance, they might hurt him in places that would be hidden by his clothes or force him to his knees and straddle him.

If Mother ever found out, they would be as good as dead.

Genyou's thoughts turned to the second prince, whom he hadn't seen much of recently. A few days after calling Genyou "the Woodwork Prince" in the empress's presence, he had contracted a fever of unknown origin. None of the other clans had drawn the connection between the insult and his fever, but Genyou had witnessed his mother threatening a washerwoman into planting a poisoned needle in the second prince's robes.

I'm so tired of it all.

He was tired of his mother flying into a rage for such petty reasons. He was sick of how she would take her entirely self-motivated revenge, then twist that into another way to control him, insisting, "I did this for your own good, so do as I tell you." It was all such a hassle. He would much rather let his bullies get a few hits in and then pretend to pass out.

As he stared vacantly at his assailant's raised fist, a cheerful voice rang out, "Whoops! My hand slipped!" A brush hurtled through the air, striking the fourth prince on the back of the hand.

"Ow!"

"Ha ha, sorry about that! Looks like I got ink all over your prized embroidery." A young man came up from behind, grabbed the fourth prince's arm, and raised it in the air. "I'll have the Palace of the Golden Qilin send a formal gift of apology."

The grinning man was none other than Crown Prince Gomei, who was supposed to be busy with his private lessons. At sixteen years of age, he was a whole head taller than the rest of the princes. His purple robe, a color only the crown prince was allowed to wear, lent him a regal and imposing air.

As soon as he arrived on the scene, the other princes lost their nerve and slowly backed away.

"It's a surprise to see you here, Your Highness," one said. "I thought you were still in the middle of your private classes."

Gomei shrugged. “Ha ha! Actually, my instructor ran off on me. Said he has nothing to teach a rascal like me and threw in the towel.”

So he claimed, but he was infamous for rapidly outpacing the knowledge of the adults around him and driving his humbled instructors to resign.

“That left me with a lot of time on my hands, so I figured I might as well get some exercise.” His friendly, droopy eyes sharpened as they settled on the princes. “Would you care to join me for a match, my dear little brothers?”

“Eep!”

Prince Gomei was a master of the pen and the sword. Much like he could talk circles around his instructors with his silver tongue, he could instantly trounce any opponent in a fight. In fact, he might have been an even better warrior than a speaker. It wasn’t too long ago that he had seen his first battle, and the general consensus was that his performance had rivaled that of a seasoned warlord.

“I-I’m afraid I have schoolwork to complete, so you will have to excuse me…”

“A-as do I.”

Hopelessly intimidated, the princes mumbled a few excuses before running off. Only Gomei and the kneeling Genyou were left behind.

“Can you stand?” Gomei held out a hand without hesitation, which Genyou ignored as he rose to his feet. The younger prince then attempted to act the part of a dunce with no manners and stalk off, but Gomei called out to him from behind, “Here’s some advice. If you want people to believe you’re a talentless mediocrity, you should put a little more effort into your facade.”

Genyou stopped in his tracks. When he turned around, he saw that Gomei had picked his brush up off the ground and was flipping its bristles back and forth.

"If you really want to get into your role as the Woodwork Prince, you should wipe the spark of intelligence from your eyes. Instead of ignoring what people say to you, you should smile like an idiot and nod along. And one more thing." He thrust the brush forward, as if to emphasize that this was the most important part. "You shouldn't play instruments in other people's napping spots when you think no one is around."

Genyou was as surprised as anyone that he managed to keep his mouth shut after that. His secret was out. Someone knew that he kept a qin hidden in the deserted mausoleum and played it from time to time.

"Consider me impressed. Wasn't that 'Song of Everlasting Sorrow'? The instructor played hard to get and refused to hand out the sheet music for it, and here *you* remembered it after hearing it performed at a single banquet. Now that I think about it, don't the characters of your given name mean 'the radiant sound of a string'?"

The crown prince had even managed to guess the name of the song and where Genyou had heard it. Genyou said nothing. If word got around that the youngest prince could remember a difficult song after hearing it just the once, his days as the Woodwork Prince would be numbered.

Upon noting how Genyou's frown had deepened, Gomei shrugged and backed off. "None of my business, huh? Sorry for overstepping." Still, as he walked past Genyou, he gave his little brother an encouraging clap on the shoulder. "I really do like your music, though. I'd love to hear a proper performance someday."

Once Genyou was left alone, he stood rooted to the spot for quite some time. A slew of emotions roiled within him, and none were so heartwarming as appreciation or bashful embarrassment. He felt the shame and chagrin of someone looking down at him from on high and reading him like a book, as well as an agitation that sent sickening butterflies loose in his stomach.

Gomei wasn't the first of his elders to act understanding of the youngest prince and his obstinate silence. As far as Genyou was concerned, however, they were all self-absorbed narcissists. Each believed themselves the only one who could see through to his true self and extend a helping hand—and that superiority complex was the real reason they could smile at him like some sort of fascinating curiosity.

He's infuriating.

It was with an unusually clear-cut repugnance that the eleven-year-old Genyou watched the crown prince leave. Gomei walked down the sunlit path without suspecting a thing. A man always looking toward the light would never notice the shadow stretching behind him.

A year later, the twelve-year-old Genyou found himself locked in a lightless dungeon. The reason was simple: The other princes had framed him for poisoning the emperor's favorite horse.

One day, someone had hidden Genyou's personal belongings and called him out to the stable, where evidence had been fabricated against him. Before he could even make sense of what was happening, he'd wound up tossed in a cell.

In recent days, the fourth prince and his cronies had stopped getting their jollies by beating up Genyou. They had switched to framing him as the assailant instead of the victim, slowly but surely setting the stage for him to be executed by someone else's hand. It had long since passed the level of bullying; they were definitively out to get rid of him. One of the reasons for this was that having a flawless crown prince like Gomei around was keeping them out of the spotlight, and they wanted to vent their frustrations. The other was that Gomei would shower Genyou with attention at every opportunity.

"Hello there, Genyou! Any interest in playing the qin for me today? I was hoping to accompany you on my flute."

"Say, Genyou, how would you interpret these lyrics?"

Gomei, the crown prince celebrated for his martial and literary prowess, would disregard every single one of his other brothers to accost the youngest prince. From the others' perspective, this alone was enough to jeopardize their positions, and it was hard to stomach their ostensible failure of a little brother getting all the attention. Although they dreamed of one day dragging the crown prince off his throne, they also craved his recognition as long as he still held the title.

This is all his fault.

Genyou stared down at his rope bindings in the pitch-dark cell, overcome with frustration. At first he had assumed his mother would fly into a rage and storm the dungeons, but he was now half a day into his imprisonment and there was still no sign of her. She was likely taking a wait-and-see approach.

In a complete departure from her once-smothering love, Souen had recently taken a more calculating view of her son. The reason for this lay in the academically brilliant ninth prince slowly working his way into her good graces. He was the son of a patronless court lady, not a consort, but that made it all the easier for the empress to effectively adopt him. For Souen's part, she had gone from scorning him as "the son of a plebeian" to lauding him as her "precious child" upon realizing how gifted he actually was.

She often seemed to be weighing her options of who would make the better pawn: her mute biological son or her quick-witted adopted child. The ideal outcome would have been for her to wash her hands of Genyou and be done with it, but alas, Gomei's unwelcome pestering had given her a glimmer of hope that Genyou was hiding some sort of dormant talent.

Message received. "If you want out of prison, do it yourself—and prove to me what you're capable of."

Genyou's only options were to prove his innocence or bribe his jailer. Either way, he couldn't get through his current predicament as

the Woodwork Prince.

But is it truly worth speaking up over something this inane?

If his mother determined that he could deal with the problem on his own, she would go right back to expecting great things from him. It would be a return to the same old days of being controlled via flattery, pleas, outrage, threats, and violence. He would be forced into a battle for a throne he didn't even want.

Just as he'd turned away from everything, it was as if someone had come along and dunked his face right back into the sewage.

I'm so tired of it all.

Rather than scowl, Genyou erased any trace of an expression from his face and curled up in a corner of the cell.

After who knew how long, the scruffy-looking jailer made his entrance. "I've come to question you, milord. Mweh heh heh!"

For someone about to conduct a "questioning," the man reeked of booze, and he was already gripping a branding iron used in torture sessions in one hand. He had obviously been paid off by one of the other princes.

"I have a message from a certain someone higher up the chain. Once I've branded you with this, he'll let you go in the spirit of brotherly love. Aren't you lucky to have such a generous sibling?"

In a practiced motion, he stuck the iron into a pot of red-hot coals sitting in a corner of the dungeon. By the time he took it back out, the same mark given to cattle was sizzling on the branding head. Were that to be stamped on a prominent part of Genyou's body, his very status as a prince would be in jeopardy. Thus was the true aim of the boy who boasted of brotherly love—the fourth prince of Ei.

"Come now, loosen your collar and show me your chest. Or would you prefer it on one of your limbs? Your face, perhaps? One quick poke of this, and your torture will be over."

The jailer slowly closed in. Genyou stared back at him, unblinking. He had to decide if he was going to move or keep still. Shout or stay silent. Fight back or give up.

The branding iron was within arm's reach now. It had yet to be pressed to his skin, but he could already hear that sizzle so akin to a snake's hiss. Those of Gen descent would never be comfortable in the presence of such raging heat. Its mere proximity turned his whole body stiff, though he desperately tried to deny it.

Right when Genyou clenched both hands into fists, a light blinding enough to blot out the red iron flooded the dark dungeon.

"Stop right there!" came a booming voice. "Who gave you permission to use a branding iron?"

It was none other than Crown Prince Gomei who had graced the dungeons, a torch in his hand.

"Y-Your Highness!"

"His Majesty's horse was old, and it hadn't been eating much for the past week. Did I not conclude that it couldn't possibly have been poisoned? The charges against the youngest prince were dismissed. Untie him at once!" the crown prince barked. As the jailer fled the scene in a panic, he shouted at the man's retreating back, "And get a branding iron ready for the fourth prince!"

With the two of them left alone in the dungeon, Gomei turned back to Genyou. "For the record, I'm not entirely happy with *you* at the moment either. You should have taken steps to protect yourself. Why didn't you put up a fight? Punch out the jailer? What were you planning to do if I hadn't made it in time?"

He took a dagger from his breast and made quick work of the rope. Upon noting that it had been tied tightly enough to leave the youngest prince's wrists red and swollen, Gomei frowned. "Ouch. Looks like you won't be back to playing the qin or the flute for a while yet. If only you'd called for help a bit sooner, I would have come running to your rescue. Is it so hard to manage a scream to keep yourself safe?"

The moment the rope dropped to the floor, Genyou felt something snap inside him.

"And whose fault…is that?" It had been years since he'd last spoken, so his voice caught in his throat, feeble and hoarse. Frustrated, Genyou started over, doing his best to punctuate each and every word. "Whose fault do you think it is that I'm in this mess? This all happened because you refuse to leave me alone."

Was this what it used to feel like to speak? As his emotions were given sound, they sharpened into focus. His once vague distaste and idle irritation swelled inside him as though they had abruptly gained heft, only to spill outward.

"You have some nerve to speak of keeping me safe or running to my rescue! If it weren't for your incessant pestering, I would have been left alone to live in peace!"

"Genyou, I…"

"Oh, you liked how I play the qin? Yes, yes, what a refined nobleman you are to love music so. Now leave me out of your posturing!"

Genyou meant to confront Gomei with the fact that his interest was strictly performative. A pair of brothers forging a bond through music? The benevolent crown prince seeing the true worth in his black sheep of a younger sibling? It was one long, bad joke.

"Wow." Gomei's response to his little brother's outburst was an unexpected one. "Your voice rings so clear."

"Excuse me?"

"Mm, I'm glad I got to hear you speak before your voice changed." He nodded to himself, sincerely moved. "Ah, though I also look forward to hearing what becomes of it."

While Genyou was still reeling, Gomei took a bamboo container of ointment and bandages from his sleeve and applied them to each of Genyou's swollen wrists.

"Let's start with some first aid. The physicians in the main palace can be hit or miss, so you should assess your options carefully. If a doctor picks up on the scent of this ointment, you can trust their nose."

Genyou wasn't sure how to respond to this unsolicited bit of advice.

As Gomei put away his tools with brisk efficiency, he went on, "I won't deny that there are a fair number of thoughtless buffoons among the Kou. I understand why you might struggle to believe that I was so taken with your performance. But you know something, Genyou? I really do love music."

Gomei twirled the dagger he had used to cut the rope like it was a toy. All that sword training had left his hands large and imposing, yet according to the man himself, he preferred to use those calloused fingers to handle a zither over a blade, to grip a flute over a brush.

"Granted, up until a few years ago, even I was of the firm opinion that singing and playing instruments were a woman's domain." He returned his dagger to its sheath. After savoring the light, metallic sound it made, he abruptly looked Genyou in the eye. "Have you ever paid a visit to a war zone or disaster area?"

Struggling to follow the change in topic, Genyou fell silent for some time before answering, "I have not."

"I see. You should make a point of it someday. It's a chance to hear all sorts of music." Gomei made himself right at home in the dungeons, sitting with his elbow propped on his knee and his chin in his hand. "Not the polished sorts of performances we hear in the inner court, to be clear. Soldiers always get drunk the night before they go off to battle, and someone will spontaneously burst into song or start playing the flute. They play songs of home, nursery rhymes, odes to their wives. However awkwardly, those rugged soldiers will sing their hearts out, backs hunched and tears in their eyes."

His intelligent eyes absently lingered on the flame of his torch. "If the enemy camp is close enough, you can hear them singing as well. The lyrics are in a foreign language, but the meaning still manages to come across. Next, imagine you pay a sympathy call to the incinerated villages. The women there sing lullabies with haunted, hollow eyes. If you visit a disaster site, you'll find men chanting rice-planting songs while they gaze upon their devastated fields." Gomei dropped his gaze uncharacteristically and looked at his own hands. "They aren't singing for joy. They aren't playing the flute to show off. They make music because it's their only way to cope. Their songs are almost like a prayer—or a wail."

This soft-spoken speech was so far from what Genyou expected to hear that he stared long and hard at his half brother. He never would have imagined such a happy-go-lucky man telling stories like these.

"I always thought the Kous' composure was one of our best features, but hearing those rasping singing voices and the mournful notes of those flutes made me second-guess myself. All this time, had I been too indifferent to those labored prayers and wails? Had I turned a deaf ear in the past?" Gomei curled the palms he was staring at into loose fists. "Now, whenever I hear music, I make a point of listening carefully. I ask myself questions like, 'What thoughts and feelings are contained within? Is someone wailing? Have I failed to hear their cries and let my subjects' lives slip between my fingers?'"

Genyou remained silent for a long time, observing his half brother in silence. This all sounded to him like a very Kou-like line of thought.

This man was a born ruler. He saw everyone around him as a subject to be protected, and he assumed responsibility for their lives as easily as he breathed. His heart and hands were as vast as the earth, so he lowered his towering body into a crouch and pressed an ear to the ground, desperate not to miss even the shuffle of the insects crawling over the ground.

“So you see, Genyou,” said Gomei, eyes flicking up to meet his brother’s gaze, “I can’t help but worry when you refuse to speak up. Next time you’re in danger, promise me you’ll ask for help. I needn’t be the one you turn to—but should you ever call upon me, I swear to come running.”

Genyou’s brow wrinkled. He realized now that this man was not associating with him as an expression of his own self-absorption. The crown prince had his own set of principles, and those were what drove him to reach out. Still, Genyou couldn’t stomach being treated as a charity case, grouped together with the common rabble Gomei sought to protect. No doubt this man would extend an offer of help to anyone out of simple concern, be they a pauper or a child from enemy territory.

“I would rather you avoided putting me in danger in the first place,” Genyou eventually replied, averting his gaze to stare at his swollen wrists. “There’s a reason the fourth prince and his friends came after me, and why Mother refuses to wash her hands of me, and it lies in your interest in me. You needn’t beg me to seek help when the matter could be resolved by simply avoiding me altogether.”

“Genyou—”

As soon as Gomei craned forward, Genyou cut him off. “I respectfully ask that you take your leave.” He pointed to the dungeon’s entrance, then coolly added, “I thank you for advocating for my release. However, I would be even more grateful if you left me alone from now on.”

Gomei fell silent. For a while, he fixed the youngest prince with a conflicted look, until he eventually shrugged and huffed a small sigh. “Have it your way.” He rose to his feet, brushed off his robes, and turned on his heel. “I wish you the best.”

His unceremonious retreat left Genyou feeling let down, then vindicated. He’d had this man pegged. The crown prince would offer

anyone a helping hand, and yet—no, for that very reason—he would never chase after those who left.

If he was so easily put off, Genyou wished he would have just stayed away in the first place.

Two more years passed, and Genyou turned fourteen. As the days and months crawled by, Genyou managed to stay the course as the Woodwork Prince, but the world around him began to change. For a start, the other princes' bullying and machinations had come to a complete halt. Part of this could be attributed to the harsh punishment the fourth prince had suffered for framing Genyou, but a simpler reason was that most of his half brothers had turned fifteen and moved to personal residences in the capital. Discounting the crown prince, the only princes left in the inner court were the youngest, Genyou, and the ninth prince, who was one year his elder.

Another change was that Gomei had ceased to hang around Genyou. Perhaps that uncompromising rejection was weighing on his mind, or perhaps he was simply too busy to trouble himself. In addition to his duties as crown prince, rumor had it that he was finally drawing up a list of candidates for a new Maiden Court.

In contrast to Gomei and the bright path he walked, Genyou's position grew more tenuous by the day. The ninth prince had secured his place as the empress's darling, and she had bestowed a new name upon him just the other day: Shiyuu, written with the characters for "a valiant arrow." Her thought process was clear: She did not want her adopted son to be the immovable string of the ceremonial bow aimed at the throne but rather to become the arrow itself.

On that note, the final change was that the empress had stopped paying Genyou any attention whatsoever. Souen was fixated solely on Shiyuu, and she had ordered Genyou to move to a private residence before even coming of age.

As far as the boy himself was concerned, this was a welcome development. Genyou went about his preparations to leave the inner court with a rare smile upon his lips. Once he passed through that gate, he would be free to play the flute—even sing—to his heart's content.

Unfortunately, on that blue moon night when Genyou attempted to depart the inner court, disaster struck. Several men dragged him out of his carriage and surrounded him. After ordering the armed men to hang back, the mastermind sauntered into the center of their circle, revealing himself to be the ninth prince, Shiyuu, the same one who had ousted Genyou.

"I was afraid you might be lonely with no one to see you off, so I put a group together to bid you farewell, dear brother."

Given the assembled faces and circumstances, it was obvious that this wasn't an ordinary send-off.

When Genyou frowned and adopted a defensive stance, Shiyuu quirked an eyebrow. "Aha, I knew it. If you were true to your name as the Woodwork Prince, you wouldn't brace yourself like that. You have enough smarts to understand when you're in danger, no?"

While everyone else looked down on Genyou, only the boy who had grown up in the Gen Palace alongside him had remained on his guard.

Shiyuu narrowed his eyes with a foreboding smile. "I also highly doubt you're incapable of speech. It's not uncommon to hear of princes posing as harmless during their time in the treacherous inner court, only to spill all sorts of secrets once they've moved elsewhere. Best to nip that in the bud."

His plan was to kill Genyou the instant he stepped outside the gate. As soon as Genyou realized as much, he swiftly doubled back to the inner court. His mother outranked the ninth prince, so he would be safe once he took refuge in the Palace of the Darkest Edge.

Or so he thought.

"For the record, Her Majesty already knows what's happening here!" Shiyuu called out from behind him. "That's precisely why she instructed me to take you out close to the inner court, where her influence can still reach. You've outlived your usefulness, my talentless Woodwork Prince."

Genyou stopped in his tracks.

Mother's cutting me off.

He was surprised at himself for feeling even the tiniest bit of shock. He should have known, considering this was his mother's typical way of doing things. It was *because* he knew how ruthless she could be that he had set himself up to be cast aside.

What defied his expectations was that as soon as she'd decided she was done with him, she had chosen to come for his life rather than sending him away. It really shouldn't have come as a surprise, though. He had been far too optimistic.

"Oh, but do rest at ease. I may have taken your place as the son on the path to the throne, but I shall generously grant you a new role in exchange: the mastermind behind Crown Prince Gomei's attempted assassination! Quite the pivotal part, hm?"

Assured of his victory, Shiyuu slowly closed the gap between himself and his prey. As he carried on with his gleeful monologue, Genyou kept his eyes pinned to the half brother a year his elder.

"An assassin is making his way to our dear crown prince as we speak. I will be the one to intercept him, but the story wouldn't make sense without a culprit. You're going to fill that role for me. Fret not! You'll be taking the stage as a corpse, so no need to memorize any lines."

None of the eunuchs or military officers meant to be on patrol were anywhere to be seen. They were probably in the ninth prince's pocket. If Genyou fled outside, he would be killed, but he didn't have any allies on the inside either. His back was to the wall. He opened his mouth on pure instinct, only to force it shut a moment later.

"Next time you're in danger, promise me you'll ask for help."

Who was there to call for?

"Should you ever call upon me, I swear to come running."

So much for that. The man was stuck in a crisis of his own when it counted.

"To arms!" shouted Shiyuu, and his men sprang into action. Some came swinging their swords, some brandished daggers, and others at a slight distance nocked their arrows. It would be more than a little tricky to evade all those attacks.

What good was your advice, Ei Gomei?! Genyou internally berated the crown prince.

Then a voice rang out, "What is going on here?!"

A cluster of lights appeared from the cloister that led to the Palace of the Golden Qilin on the western end of the inner court. The glow was so bright that Genyou had to squint. As it turned out, several men with torches were storming their way.

"The youngest prince is under attack. Apprehend the assailants!"

As soon as Genyou recognized the owner of that resonant voice, his narrowed eyes flew wide open. It was Gomei. He had shown up alongside his bodyguards.

"They might be in league with the assassin. Take them alive!"

No sooner did that shout leave his mouth than the skilled military officers charged forth. As the tides turned, Gomei rushed to Genyou's side before anyone else could, holding out one of his strong hands.

"Are you all right?! Some of these men use ranged weapons. We're making a break for the Kou Palace!" Gomei grabbed Genyou's arm and broke into a run, dragging his little brother along with him. He fired off a slew of orders in a single breath. "Run! Stay down! Grab hold of my hand!"

As Genyou kept pace, a few words escaped his lips before he could stop them. “How am I meant to grab your hand when you’re already holding mine?”

Despite asking Genyou to call for help, Gomei had come running before he could so much as speak.

“Hm? Oh, right, you told me to stay away. Sorry, I acted before I could think.” Gomei offered that unabashed apology, only to exclaim a beat later, “Ooh! Your voice changed! Congratulations, Genyou!”

“Is that really your biggest concern at the moment?” Genyou shot back, feeling like it would be a waste of time to pass himself off as mute around this man. “You should pay a little more attention to what’s happening—”

“Get down!”

Just when Genyou had resolved to give his brother a piece of his mind, the words died on his tongue as he was yanked to the ground. A silhouette whizzed right past his face, and a dull *thwack* sounded close to his ear.

Gomei had shielded Genyou and been shot in the arm.

“Tch!” Scowling, Gomei wasted no time yanking the arrow free. He applied pressure to the wound, then turned to Genyou with a smirk. “You should pay a little more attention to what’s happening around you, Genyou.”

“Brother!”

“Looks like the enemy has thrown caution to the wind. We have to hurry,” said Gomei, his voice more serious now, before picking up the pace.

Genyou said nothing in response, too focused on dashing down the path to the Palace of the Golden Qilin. He was out of breath. His heart was pounding. He clutched a hand to his chest, unsure whether the running or the panic was to blame.

When Gomei noticed it, he chuckled and gave his brother a clap on the shoulder. “Don’t lose your head over something like this.”

Heat crawled up Genyou’s throat. That was the moment when he knew that Gomei was the real deal. His words, his thoughts, and his actions were all genuine. If he promised to rescue someone, he would come through no matter what. He was a born ruler, and the only one worth believing in.

As Genyou watched Gomei run from behind, his back looked so indescribably broad. However dark his surroundings, this man would cast a powerful light on any path he walked. He was the embodiment of a full moon—no, perhaps even the sun.

Unfortunately, the moment he made it through the gate of his home palace, Gomei crumpled to the ground. “Ggh!”

“Brother? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.” Each time he tried to get up, the strength would leave his body. After two or three attempts, he finally collapsed onto the paving stones. “Urgh… Aah…”

Gomei’s body was convulsing. He clutched his upper arm for dear life, right around where that arrow had hit him.

It had been poisoned.

“Wait, Brother…” Instinctively, Genyou raised his voice. “Brother?!”

His cries grew steadily shriller. Forgetting all about his self-imposed speaking ban, Genyou shouted in the direction of the Kou Palace. “Hello?! Is anyone there?! Get over here! You have to help my brother!”

Gomei battled a high-grade fever for three nights. When he awoke at last, his mental faculties and memory were intact, but he had lost most of his eyesight.

In the aftermath, Shiyuu was swiftly identified as the culprit and executed. Empress Souen was quick to turn her back on him, claiming that the ambush had been entirely his idea. By pushing the argument that his true goal was to murder his little brother Genyou, not assassinate the crown prince, she was even able to spin the Palace of the Darkest Edge as one of the victims.

To express her deep gratitude to Gomei for protecting Genyou, she also decreed that the Darkest Edge would regard the Golden Qilin as a "sister palace" for the next five years. This was more than a mere appellation; it involved paying stipends on the Kou Palace's behalf and sending them regular offerings. This was likely part of the reason why the empress didn't call for Gomei's disinheritance even after he went blind.

All the same, as the crown prince's eyesight had deteriorated to the point that he could only barely tell the difference between day and night, he could do little but seclude himself in his Kou Palace room and live off the assistance of others. The Maiden Court that had been in the works for him was scrapped.

Soon after Gomei's external wound had healed, Genyou visited the Palace of the Golden Qilin to apologize. Should Gomei or his mother have ordered it, he was fully prepared to gouge out both eyes as atonement.

And yet, Gomei only shrugged and chuckled. "I can hardly fault you when I acted of my own accord. If you're still feeling guilty, just promise me this: Don't ever lay a hand on anyone from the Kou Palace." That was all the man with the bandaged eyes demanded of Genyou. "Oh, and take care of your mother. She has some issues, I realize, but she's the one who brought you into this world."

Gomei's mother, Pure Consort Kou, pensively concurred. "I require no apologies from someone my son chose to protect."

Thus did Genyou swear that he would never allow Kou blood to be spilled within the walls of the inner court—and that no matter how much he despised her, he would not take his mother's life.

Even after taking that oath of atonement, Genyou was at a loss. He felt more inner turmoil than he ever had in his life. All the words and emotions he had once sealed away flooded his chest as if a dam had broken. As those waves lapped against his heart and wore him down, the awe he once felt toward Gomei turned to admiration, and the frustration to loyalty.

Genyou took off the mask of the Woodwork Prince and started making efforts to better himself—anything that could help him better support his older brother. In addition to Genyou's daily training, he accompanied Gomei whenever the elder prince wanted to go for a walk. When Gomei wanted to read a book, he read aloud for him. If Gomei wanted to listen to music, he played the qin. He kept a close eye on his brother's environment and removed any obstacles that cropped up. No matter how adamantly the Golden Qilin refused his charity, he visited the palace every day before dawn to leave a get-well gift, prostrate himself before Gomei's room, and leave.

In hindsight, Genyou never did say much to Gomei. Still, he stuck to the man like a shadow and strove to make his everyday life as comfortable as possible.

"No need to always hang back, Genyou. Come sit next to me. Sunlit Bliss Hill is the perfect spot for sunbathing."

Even after going blind, Gomei retained his cheerful demeanor. He laughed often, threw himself into his hobbies, and occasionally engaged in juvenile pranks. He once even came up with a melody for a poem he'd written and carved it into a mausoleum pillar. Although he cut back on his official duties, he never stopped exercising, and he particularly enjoyed going for walks on a small hill behind the Kou Palace. The gentle slope offered a gorgeous view, and at dawn one could stand there and watch the sunrise envelop the inner court building by building.

Gomei often climbed to the top of Sunlit Bliss Hill with a flute in hand, playing it when the mood struck. "The sun feels so nice," he always murmured between pieces, closing his grayish eyes to bask in the warmth.

Each time Genyou listened to the song of Gomei's flute, his heart ached. He knew the true reason his elder brother loved music.

"They aren't singing for joy. They make music because it's their only way to cope."

Sunlit Bliss Hill looked out over the inner court and the city beyond its walls. What Gomei truly wished to bask in was not the sunlight—it was the view of the kingdom he was once meant to rule. Every day, he climbed that hill in the private hope that its light might reach his eyes.

"Say, Genyou. When I die, I want to be buried here on Sunlit Bliss Hill."

"Surely you jest." Genyou struggled to keep his voice from shaking. "You still have a long life ahead of you. And when you die of old age in the distant future, you will have to be buried in a grand tomb befitting a mighty emperor."

Gomei laughed. "Sounds awful." It was a testament to both his strength and his kindness that he didn't outright deny the possibility. "No, I want it to be here. I'm counting on you to make it happen, Genyou."



After extracting that promise from Genyou, he went right back to playing his flute. The melody was so serene as to calm the most turbulent of hearts.

Despite Genyou proclaiming him a future "mighty emperor," Gomei's chances of assuming the throne were extremely low. The crown prince's loss of vision had ushered in a flood of princes looking to take his place. In the past, only the Gen-hailing Empress Souen had appeared capable of deposing Gomei, but she was now deeply indebted to the Palace of the Golden Qilin—at least as far as appearances went. Slowly but surely, the princes and consorts of the other clans went on the attack.

A few of the princes took each other out. Within three years of Gomei going blind, the ten sons were reduced to half their number. Another two years after that—the year Genyou turned nineteen—the remaining princes banded together to get Gomei disinherited, hoping to leave the position of crown prince vacant.

"How long do you intend to let a blind man serve as crown prince, Your Majesty? It would disgrace the Kingdom of Ei to have an emperor incapable of seeing the subjects he's meant to lead."

"You claim he is pure of heart, but that's all in the past. Now bereft of eyesight or intellect, our ingrate of a brother has begun to question your benevolence. He suspects that you intend to keep him locked up in the Kou Palace for the rest of his life, and his paranoia has turned him resentful."

"Gomei masterminded our brothers' many untimely deaths for fear of being usurped. If left unchecked, that madman may come for Your Majesty's life next."

The three men came up with the most convincing lies they could and reshaped their father's image of Gomei. What they had initially presented as conjecture was soon dressed up as fact and, rattled from losing his sons in quick succession, the emperor fell for

their slander. The empress declined to set the record straight. Ostensibly, she had refrained from going after Gomei for the past five years, but she was still out to make her own son crown prince. The wily woman chose to bide her time and let the arrogant princes run free.

And then, on the day of the Repose of Souls Service five years after Gomei was blinded, the tragedy unfolded.

Where did Brother go?

Clad in his ceremonial robes, Genyou was looking everywhere for Gomei, his impatience evident. His urgency stemmed from the fact that at a banquet the previous night, he'd overheard the older princes getting up to their old tricks of bad-mouthing Gomei to their father.

The emperor had probably been too deep in his cups for his own good. Either that or the dam had finally burst on his mounting suspicions. Whatever his reasons, he had summoned a sorcerer—one who had been arrested as part of a crackdown on the Daoist arts—to the banquet.

Coward that he was, the emperor persecuted anyone who might threaten his reign. The dungeons were currently filled with sorcerers, con artists claiming to be cultivators, and political adversaries he had framed. Among those, he had picked out a sorcerer who boasted of knowing various forbidden spells and ordered him thus: "O wretched sorcerer, if you are truly capable of magic, prove it to me by killing the traitorous Gomei within three days and three nights. Succeed, and I shall acknowledge your Daoist arts as a boon to the state and spare your life."

The emperor feared Daoist cultivators as advocates of a dangerous ideology, but he was skeptical as to whether magic was real. He likely didn't expect the sorcerer's assassination of the crown prince to succeed. Fed up with his ever-growing paranoia and ever-heightening fear, he'd simply put the decision on someone else—the

way one might turn to fortune-telling for guidance. For the sorcerer's part, after all the torture he'd been through, he had jumped on the offer without a second thought.

Genyou was beside himself with worry. That day just so happened to be the Day of Ultimate Yin, which would mark the first total solar eclipse in several decades, so tensions were high as the imperial palace headed into the Repose of Souls. No one else was particularly concerned with the crown prince, who had announced his absence from the event a good deal in advance, but Genyou had shrugged off the page urging him to head to the ceremony venue and kept searching for his brother.

I couldn't find him anywhere in the main palace. He wasn't in the Kou Palace or the mausoleum either, so that leaves Sunlit Bliss Hill.

It was incredibly dangerous for Gomei to climb a hill all by himself when he couldn't see. With all the security personnel focused on the ceremony and the emperor, he would have little hope of fending off an assassin.

Still, the major ceremony probably served as a reminder to Gomei that no one needed him anymore, so he very well might have sought a distraction behind the scenes. Just imagining what he must have felt as he left to "watch" the solar eclipse was enough to put Genyou on edge. He bounded up the stone steps, dodged branches and leaves, and pushed his way through the grass.

After continuing up the path for a while, Genyou finally heard the notes of a flute coming from the summit and picked up his pace. He had come to the right place. As he scoured the area, using the music as his guide, he saw the ground around his feet grow dim.

The sound of the flute abruptly stopped, and Gomei's voice rang out, "Who goes there?!"

Genyou looked up with a start. The sorcerer really *had* come after his brother.

"Brother!"

Past the trees, the sun's outline was being eaten away. The eclipse had begun.

As the forest around Genyou grew darker, he broke into a run, on the verge of screaming. "Brother! Are you all right?!"

When the greenery parted and the view opened up, he was greeted by the sight of an unfamiliar, shabbily dressed man swiping at Gomei with a dagger. He was almost certainly the sorcerer whom the emperor had put up to the task at last night's banquet.

Gomei failed to dodge the attack. Though he'd twisted out of the way as soon as he sensed his assailant, he sustained a huge gash from the knee down.

As Genyou watched his brother collapse to the ground with a stifled moan, he felt his blood boil. This assassin was going to pay. "Get away from him, you cur!"

The moment the sorcerer spotted Genyou, he spun around and made to flee, but Genyou wasn't about to let him. He flew into a rage, drawing his sword and lunging at the sorcerer.

Alas, faster than Genyou's naked blade could hit its mark, the sorcerer whipped back around and shouted, "Rise, my flames!"

As if in response to his cry, gigantic flames manifested out of thin air. A blanket of clouds rolled into the sky, made more ominous by the solar eclipse, and a powerful wind whirled to life with the sorcerer at its center.

With a mighty roar, the fire formed a gale of red and descended upon its prey. Genyou nearly tumbled straight down the hill, but he braced his legs at the last minute and, a moment later, pushed through the hot blast like it was nothing.

"Your tricks won't work on me."

Water dampened fire. His whole body could be set ablaze, and it wouldn't stop him from conquering the enemy before him.

"Wha…?!" Beyond the curtain of flame, the sorcerer was startled. He stood there, stunned, still facing his adversary.

Genyou plowed his way through the rest of the fire, then plunged his sword into the defenseless man's gut without hesitation. He got close enough to feel the man's breath on his face, only to run him straight through.

"Die." Genyou's eyes were cold as ice as he watched the man go wide-eyed with shock, blood gurgling from his mouth. "Good riddance, despicable sorcerer," he spat, then attempted to pull his sword free.

"H-hey now," came a hoarse voice of protest. "You should…pay a little more attention to what's happening around you…"

Genyou froze. The line triggered a vivid memory.

Most shocking of all was that it wasn't the wounded crown prince crouching behind him who had said it. It had come from the sorcerer right before his eyes.

When Genyou stiffly pulled away, he found the man gazing at him with a smile upon his bloody lips. "Wow… You've gotten so tall. Congratulations…Genyou."

"Ooh! Your voice changed! Congratulations, Genyou!"

Memories of what *he* had said five years ago came flooding back.

A choked sound escaped Genyou's throat. Faster than he could even process what was happening, the impact hit him like a barrage of punches, so strong that he couldn't even blink.

No. It doesn't make any sense. How could this man have known to say that?

"What are you…?"

"How many years…has it been? I had no idea…that's what you looked like now. You've grown up so much," the man with the sorcerer's face murmured, eyes narrowed as though the sight of him was blinding—or as though light had entered his world for the first time in years.

Genyou released his grip on his sword, staggered. With nothing left to prop him up, the other man fell flat on his back.

He gasped, reaching a quivering hand toward the sky. "It's all so…dazzling."

Part of the sun was still engulfed in shadow, giving it the shape of a crescent moon. Even then, to this man—to Gomei—it looked radiant beyond measure.

"Is that you, Brother?" Genyou's breath came in gasps. His ears rang, his head creaked, and his heart pounded painfully fast. "What happened?!"

It was a forbidden art—a body-swapping spell. As that horrifying possibility sprang to mind, Genyou whipped around, only to be once again startled by what he saw. Gomei's body, which should have been crouched on the ground with a bleeding gash in one leg, was nowhere to be found. A bloody flute was the only thing left on the gore-spattered grass.

"How did…?"

Genyou couldn't comprehend what had happened. Nor did he want to.

It was unbelievable. It was *unthinkable*. His brother and the sorcerer had switched bodies? But when? Was it when the sorcerer summoned that wall of flames?

Genyou recalled the stunned look on "his" face. The way he hadn't made a single move to defend himself. The sensation of his own sword sinking deep into flesh. The spurt of blood. Those trembling hands. That listless smile. Those kind words.

"I… I just…"

"Say, Genyou…" The man wearing the sorcerer's skin—Gomei—looked at his pale-faced little brother and spoke slowly. Or as slowly as he could when he was so short of breath. He wheezed feebly between words, but he kept his voice soft and soothing. "Look at that. Isn't it almost like…a sunrise?"

Lying flat on his back, he looked to the sky. Half buried in the grass, his cheeks took on a golden glow. Now that the eclipse was over, the sun was gradually returning to its original size.

"I always loved the sight…of morning…gracing this kingdom."

While the sun expanded, Gomei's eyelids drifted shut.

"I've longed to watch it…from this hill…for so long."

Those were his last words.

"Ah…"

Genyou reached out a hand, his fingertips trembling like mad. He didn't recognize this face, but the body contained the soul of Gomei within. The blood trickling from his mouth was still warm to the touch.

"Ah… Aaahhh!" He heard a grating, almost bestial roar, only to realize it had torn from his own lips. "Brotheeeeer!"

Clutching at his own hair with bloodstained hands, Genyou screamed and screamed and screamed.

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By the time the story was over, the steam wafting from everyone's teacups had cooled.

The group was gathered in the emperor's assigned room in Cloud Ladder Gardens. After heading indoors, the court ladies had gone out of their way to serve tea, but no one had taken a single sip throughout Genyou's matter-of-fact account of his past. They couldn't bring themselves to.

Reirin, Keigetsu, and Gyoumei were all sitting at the table, gloomy expressions on their faces. Keishou, Akim, and the court ladies were hanging back by the wall, looking no less glum. Only the coals in the brazier were inanely bright.

"After that, it took me a year to eliminate everyone involved in my brother's assassination."

His eyes on the floor, Genyou quietly told the rest of the tale.

The three princes responsible for spreading the lies were the first to go. Genyou had initially planned to kill his father right away as well, but that would have left him no choice but to succeed the man as emperor. Hesitant to claim a throne once meant for Gomei so soon after his death, he opted to put that murder off for a year.

Although he despised his mother for allowing things to come to this, his promise to Gomei meant he couldn't kill her. As soon as the mourning period for Gomei was over, he forced the empress to assassinate the emperor as atonement, then stripped her of political authority and placed her under house arrest in an imperial villa. In light of his mother's all-consuming love of power, this was probably a fate worse than death.

He had now passed judgment on everyone involved in dispatching the sorcerer, but this failed to lift his spirits. Genyou's revenge would not be complete until he caught the killer himself—the sorcerer who had absconded with Gomei's stolen body.

"I promised that I would bury my brother's body on Sunlit Bliss Hill, so I must retrieve it at all costs. To that end, I've spent years gathering information from cultivators and tracking down the whereabouts of said sorcerer."

The reason he had eased the oppression of Daoist cultivators was to make it easier to round them up and collect information. He visited disaster sites and war zones because he knew the sorcerer was more likely to frequent those areas. Given the high death toll, it would be less conspicuous to drain people's life force and leave desiccated corpses lying around. That, and a wounded blind man would have an easier time blending in.

"This year, we'll have the first Day of Ultimate Yin in twenty-five years. The balance of yin and yang will be disrupted, and souls will more readily detach from the body—thus presenting the perfect opportunity to use the body-swapping spell, even trapped within the vessel of another. I have no doubt that he will visit the land with the

densest yin energy. No doubt whatsoever," Genyou repeated for emphasis, his voice dark. "However, I could not find the sorcerer among the blind and injured I lured out on the pretext of verbal alms."

The man clenched his fists hard enough to turn his knuckles white, his usual composure nowhere to be found. He was getting restless.

Silence settled over the room. Everyone knew Genyou's side of the story now, but they had no idea what to do about it.

"So?" Genyou smiled thinly, an implicit rebuff. "Can *you* turn this situation around?"

Reirin sat straight at attention. Now that she'd talked a big game to the emperor, she had to find a breakthrough solution. But how?

"Excuse me," Keigetsu nervously interjected from beside Reirin, still wearing her friend's face. "M-may I have permission to speak?"

No one would have expected her to present her opinion to the emperor before she was asked.

Despite her lack of confidence in the proper etiquette, Keigetsu did her best to string together a coherent sentence. "Um, you say you're looking for a blind sorcerer with an injured leg, Your Majesty, but are you, erm…absolutely certain that is the case?"

Unsure what she was getting at, Genyou furrowed his brow. "Why wouldn't I be?"

The moment everyone else turned to look at Keigetsu, she felt her mouth dry up. All her life, her magic had been a taboo to be hidden, so explaining it to the highest authority in the kingdom was too terrifying a prospect to consider. A simple request for clarification was all it took to make her feel like she should have kept her mouth shut.

Reirin, meanwhile, shot Keigetsu the look of a student eager to learn. "Goodness, Lady Keigetsu! Did you pick up on a

discrepancy?!”

Keigetsu took a few slow, deep breaths. The way this woman never doubted her for a moment always gave her the courage to hold her head high. *Right. I’m a practitioner of the Daoist arts.* She knew more about magic than anyone in the room.

“I-I was a bit confused by Your Majesty’s claims that the sorcerer has been draining people’s life force to keep himself alive. Qi is something one recovers naturally. Moreover, while the body-swapping spell is indeed an advanced one, it does not require much qi to maintain.” She’d stuttered at the very start, but the longer she talked, the more easily the words flowed from her lips. “As you can see, the two of us have swapped bodies, and I needn’t drain anyone’s life force to keep us this way.”

“Duly noted,” said Genyou, eyes narrowing as they settled back on Keigetsu. “What is your point?”

“I wonder if the sorcerer might require a large amount of qi for another reason. For example…” The next part would be complete speculation. Keigetsu steeled herself before concluding, “Perhaps to offset his blindness and physical disability.”

The group gasped. Reirin snapped her head up and leaned into Keigetsu’s personal space. “Is that truly possible?!”

“Yes. By channeling qi to his eyes, he could constantly perceive the flow of qi around him. He would see things differently than most people, but it would give him an approximation of vision. By channeling qi to his leg, I believe he could move it in much the same way he might levitate objects.”

“Interesting. Rather than repair the body itself, he assists its functions with qi,” said Gyoumei. Everyone nodded along, impressed. “How much would he be able to see with this so-called approximation of vision?”

“Let me think… Keeping in mind that this is entirely my own conjecture…all living things have qi, even plants. He could probably make out a path by the grass growing alongside it. Qi tends to

cluster around the eyes and mouth, as they possess the power of invocation, so he might be able to tell faces apart by the relative position of their features. I imagine he could also distinguish between family units by the color of their qi."

Reirin summarized the key points. "So from an outside perspective, the sorcerer might appear no different from an able-bodied person?"

Keigetsu nodded. "I believe so, but a few things might seem off. He wouldn't be able to perceive objects without qi or the details of people's facial features. Plus, his leg might stop working if he gets distracted."

"He can't perceive objects or facial features, and his leg is liable to stop working…"

Reirin mulled over the explanation, only to abruptly shut her mouth. A chill crawled down her spine as the description jogged her memory.

"Your Majesty." She straightened her posture and asked Genyou, "Would it be all right for Lady Keigetsu to make a flame call? It's a spell that involves talking to another person through a fire."

"A flame call? Why?"

"The truth is, when we set out to negotiate with Your Majesty, we left my brother Kou Keikou and the captain of the Eagle Eyes back at the disaster zone. We hoped that finding the sorcerer you're looking for, or at least a clue as to his whereabouts, might provide us a bargaining chip."

Deeming it too risky to stake everything on Reirin's acting, the group had decided to split into two teams. As Keikou and Shin-u were both quite light on their feet, they had been sent to scour Treacherous Tan Peak and the other disaster sites respectively, on the lookout for a blind sorcerer.

"I have an urgent matter to confirm with my brother, the one in charge of Treacherous Tan Peak."

"Go ahead." Genyou was surprisingly quick to grant permission, given his virulent hatred of the Daoist arts. "I will take whatever clues I can get."

"Lady Keigetsu, connect us to Brother Senior, if you would."

"Huh? Well, all right," Keigetsu shakily replied. The prospect of showing off a forbidden art before the emperor nearly petrified her with fear, but when Genyou himself shot her an encouraging nod, she was reassured enough to glance around the room. She found the coals in the brazier glowing red-hot.

Lord Kou Keikou!

As she fixated on the modest fire and called out Keikou's name in her mind, she felt her consciousness being drawn outward, and a vermillion flame flared up from the coals.

"Ooh! It connected! Wow, so this is a real flame call! It's about time you reached out! I've been waiting forever!"

Kou Keikou's face was instantly projected across the curtain of fire. Even on the other end of a flame, he was as loud and obnoxious as ever, and Keigetsu's brow wrinkled automatically.

Meanwhile, Keikou tested the transmission by alternating between bringing his face close to the fire and backing up. As soon as he noticed Genyou standing toward the back, his expression sobered and he went down on his knees. "I, Kou Keikou, heir to the Kou clan, extend my greetings to Your Imperial Majesty."

"No need for formalities. I have chosen to cooperate with your younger sister for the time being. Seeing as she threatened me," said Genyou, the look on his face a deeply humorless one.

"What?! She did?! I fear my heart might explode from the shock of it all!" Keikou shamelessly replied. Before anyone could call him out on his disrespect, he opted for a change of subject. "Your Majesty's spy over there gave us a bit of context on your situation.

On that note, there is something I would like to show you. Take a look at this."

At that, he appeared to move the candlestick or whatever else was holding the fire. His hand entered the picture, whereupon the view shifted dramatically.

A moment later, everyone gasped at the sight now reflected in the flames.

"Wait, are those…?!"

"Yes. Shriveled corpses."

A few somethings were lying in a heap in a dark shack—and those "somethings" were several corpses deprived of their flesh and reduced to skin and bones.

"Eep!" Leelee and Keigetsu half rose to their feet, their hands flying to their mouths.

In contrast, Keikou was as blasé as could be as he crouched down and shone his candle on the bodies. "I stayed on Treacherous Tan Peak and investigated the locals again, this time focusing on those with eye conditions, but I failed to find anyone who matched our sorcerer's description. Then I remembered that the brigands who disrupted the Congee Conferment Rite were still locked up in a shack, so I decided to check on them just in case. And this is how I found them." He picked up one man's arm without hesitation, waving it back and forth in front of the flame.

"St-stop! Don't show us that!" Keigetsu hollered. "Not only is it a horrifying sight, but those men are positively brimming with impurity!"

"I have to, or this won't be much of a report," Keikou shot back with a shrug, moving the candle even closer to the corpses. He went on to describe the scene in greater detail, mentioning things like mottled patches on the skin and how the degree of discoloration varied from person to person, while Keigetsu shrieked her head off in the background. He concluded thus: "I can no longer identify

them by their faces, but they all have dried globs of congee stuck to their sleeves and hair. It's safe to assume they're the same brigands we vanquished with a rain of congee the other day."

The corpses resembled starvation victims, but no one could turn to skin and bones in such a short period of time. The arms and faces peeking out from their robes had also turned black, which further confirmed that these corpses were the result of an unnatural death—of a sorcerer sucking their life force dry.

"I believe these are the same desiccated corpses of which Your Majesty spoke. That means the sorcerer must be here on Treacherous Tan Peak."

"Brother Senior," Reirin cut in, voice hoarse. Her pulse quickened. She was already filled with absolute conviction. "I apologize for interrupting, but I actually initiated this flame call because I had something to ask you."

He was the one who had decided to keep the brigands locked up before handing them off to the military officers.

"I'd appreciate it if you brought your brother along with you."

"Was I mistaken? You will have to excuse me. You and your escort seemed close as siblings, so I jumped to conclusions."

Even though Reirin was wearing the Shu Maiden's face, he had presumed her and a Kou military officer to be siblings. He used the flow of qi to see, so he perceived things differently from most people.

"Due to an old wound, my leg cramps up if I spend too long in the cold."

He had a scar that ran from the knee down, one so big that it was a wonder he could even walk at all. When he came running over, he'd stumbled over a spoon on the ground and bumped into the table. That wasn't because he was flustered—it was because he couldn't perceive objects that didn't have qi flowing through them.

"Where…?" Reirin's throat dried up, and she broke into a clammy sweat. How hadn't she figured it out sooner? "Where is Doctor Tou, the community counselor?"

At long last, Reirin voiced the name of the man who had seemed so familiar despite it being their first meeting—the name of the sorcerer hiding in Gomei's body.

Chapter 4:
Keigetsu Yells

"WHERE IS DOCTOR TOU, the community counselor?"

"About that," answered Keikou, frowning on the other side of the flame. "I tried to ask him what had happened, but I was told he ran off into the mountains to pick herbs. Apparently, this happens a lot, so he ought to be back within half a—" He cut himself off, the color draining from his face. "Wait, do you think it's him?"

"Yes. He could walk despite a large scar running from the knee down, and he called us siblings even though we look nothing alike. It's highly likely that he is the sorcerer who stole Prince Gomei's body. He uses his qi to overcome his blindness and physical disability."

"Augh! So he was using magic to pretend he can see!" Keikou raked his hands through his hair, frustrated.

Genyou rose from his seat and leaned over the brazier. "Tou, was it? What did he look like? How tall was he? How old?"

"He was shabbily dressed, and his beard obscured most of his face, but given his full set of teeth and lack of pockmarks, he appeared to come from a wealthy background. He was a bit shorter than me, I believe, and around fifty years old."

"Take him into custody," Genyou all but growled. "That's our man. Do not let him escape. I will join you on Treacherous Tan Peak shortly."

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than he turned on his heel and grabbed his sword from its stand. His black eyes gleamed with hatred.

"I must hurry. He may have already realized I'm here. I assume he drained those brigands of their life force in preparation to

flee.”

He appeared intent on heading straight into the mountains, forgoing a carriage or palanquin. The rest of the group shot up from their seats as well, but surprisingly, Keigetsu discouraged this.

“P-please wait! You mustn’t approach Treacherous Tan Peak in an agitated state! That would only increase the risk of alerting the sorcerer to Your Majesty’s presence!”

Genyou urged her to explain herself. Although she grew flustered under the eyes of the crowd, she proceeded to state her opinion. “Based on what we’ve heard so far, the sorcerer is using qi as a guide to ‘see’ the things around him. His Highness has his dragon’s qi, and Your Majesty has very strong water qi. If either of you gets too close, he is bound to grow suspicious.”

“Hm? My qi is stronger than average?”

Keigetsu nodded stiffly. “Yes. Very much so.”

Although Genyou didn’t possess the same radiant dragon’s qi as Gyoumei, he did give off an overwhelming aura of water. Perhaps he had inherited quite a bit of his mother’s Gen blood.

“That reminds me… When I proposed that Doctor Tou come along to Cloud Ladder Gardens, he initially seemed quite interested, only to turn me down as soon as I mentioned that he might meet one of exalted status there,” said Reirin, recounting her previous conversation with Tou. “That suggests he’s quite cautious about coming into contact with the imperial family.”

Genyou punched the wall in frustration. “What would you have me do, then?! Sit back and watch as he makes his escape?!”

“Calm down, Your Majesty,” Akim drawled in place of the startled girls. “This is the entire point of having a secret service. I already stationed a few of my men along the road to Treacherous Tan Peak so they’d be ready and waiting to shake up ‘Shu Keigetsu.’” He jabbed a thumb in Reirin’s direction. “And after this lovely Maiden

trekked down a cliff two days ago, I increased their number fivefold and had them surround the foot of the mountain."

Reirin blinked. "What? All that because of me?"

When she'd rushed to Cloud Ladder Gardens, she had descended a cliff simply because it was the most direct route. She never would have guessed she had slipped through the secret service's surveillance net in the process.

"We ought to thank you for putting us on our guard," Akim said with a chuckle. "I've yet to receive a report of anyone attempting to come down from Treacherous Tan Peak. That means the sorcerer is still up there somewhere."

"But he's gone into hiding. Does that not imply he's caught on to us and begun plotting his escape?"

"Even so, he hasn't gotten away yet. I reckon he's got his hands full with the preparations. It sounds like he has to refill his qi supply from time to time to keep his eyes working, so maybe he doesn't have enough to last him a long trip."

"He just drained ten brigands of their life force! How much more could he possibly need?! You claim to have him surrounded, but if a mere Maiden was able to break through your blockade, that isn't exactly reassuring."

Despite flinching when Genyou raised his voice, Keigetsu thrust herself forward and said, "I-If I may…I believe the chances of him escaping are quite slim."

"What? Why?"

"The sorcerer is likely in a great deal of pain at the moment."

Genyou's eyes widened. He hadn't expected that. "Explain."

"K-keeping in mind that this is merely speculation based on my own experience…" After leading with that caveat and taking a deep breath, Keigetsu worked up the courage to present her theory. "As the Day of Ultimate Yin draws near, yin and yang slowly but surely fall out of balance, such that even I'm having difficulty controlling

my spells. The sorcerer likely attacked those brigands because he requires more qi than usual to aid his bodily functions. However, I suspect this scenario was very similar to a starving dog eating carrion."

"What do you mean?"

"He partook of some terribly corrupted life force—or spoiled food, as it were." The rest of the crowd looked confused, so Keigetsu turned back to the fire connecting the call. "Those corpses have been bothering me since the start of this call. They're so tainted with impure qi that I can tell through the fire. I doubt it was quite this bad when they were alive, but now that they've died and amassed more yin energy, it's nigh intolerable." She covered her mouth with her sleeve, disgusted, and timorously pointed to the visual of the corpses. "Those he robs of their life force are a sacrificial offering, in a sense, and offerings must be pure. Otherwise, the yin will grow too strong, and the invocation will turn to a curse. And these brigands were horribly impure."

"Why? Because they were of low moral character?"

"Oh, you better believe they were," Akim piped up, raising a hand. "Those weren't just any old brigands. They were a group of felons I rounded up for the express purpose of disrupting the Congee Conferment Rite. I can vouch for the depth of their sins."

Hearing the man laugh and confess to his own machinations brought a frown to all their faces.

Keigetsu glared at the spy, then quickly turned her gaze back on the blackened skin of the men reflected in the fire. "Their criminal record certainly doesn't hurt, but what stands out to me here is that the corruption has manifested in patches, as though they were sprayed with something. Hm, a potential source of impurity… Perhaps they fought to the death and bathed in each other's blood?"

As Keigetsu's mutterings grew less confident, Reirin leaned in from the side. "Oh! Could it have been the congee?"

"The what?"

"During the Congee Conferment Rite, one of the court ladies mixed the contents of a spittoon into the congee. Long story short, I ended up trouncing the brigands with a rain of said congee."

Keigetsu's face twitched at this slapdash summary of events, but as soon as she stopped to give the idea some thought, she nodded. "That would do it. Congee—especially the congee served for a rite—is sacred, the grace of the gods given form. Mixing in the contents of a spittoon would absolutely defile it."

"As much as it pains me to say this, the spittoon also contained a good deal of animal blood and human waste."

"Even worse. The fact that the congee was once so pure would make the resulting corruption all the more extreme." Keigetsu's brow creased, perhaps at imagining it for herself, before addressing Genyou once more. "Absorbing that impure qi must have left the sorcerer in agony, Your Majesty. I doubt he could run very far at the moment. I would humbly suggest that you leave the search to someone else rather than risk your qi alerting him to your presence."

She spoke so firmly that Gyoumei gaped at her from the side, impressed. Keishou likewise stared long and hard at Keigetsu from his place by the wall, and the two court ladies clasped their hands in front of their chests.

Genyou made a show of thinking this over. "Very well," he eventually said with a sigh. Then he returned his sword to its stand, picked up the flute in its place, and fired off a series of orders. "Tan, you head to Treacherous Tan Peak first. Begin the search, and tighten the perimeter around the mountain to ensure that he cannot escape. Kou Keikou, you are to scour every nook and cranny of Treacherous Tan Peak. Call upon Shin-u to aid you."

"Will do," the spy replied like it was second nature.

Over the flame, Keikou cupped his hands in a respectful salute and said, "As you command, my liege."

One man slipped out the window, while the other blew out the flame to cut the call short.

"As for you, Shu Keigetsu and Kou Reirin…" Genyou turned his back to the brazier, his icy gaze settling on the Maidens. "It's all over if the sorcerer takes advantage of the Day of Ultimate Yin to steal a new body. As you have been quite adamant that I stay out of the way, I expect you to come up with an alternative plan to catch him. You have until noon." After setting the deadline, he added, "Or you're both dead."

Having been held back at the brink of revenge twenty-five years in the making, it was no surprise that he would be in a bad mood. As Genyou left the room with his flute in hand, Reirin offered no response but a silent bow.

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As soon as the door closed behind the emperor, Keigetsu loosed a breath she'd been holding and slumped over, hands pressed flat against the table. "I can't believe I mouthed off to His Majesty…"

"I know, Lady Keigetsu! That was incredible!" Reirin's face lit up, and she clapped her hands together. "While everyone else acted in haste, you alone calmly stated your opinion. You uncovered the truth with a combination of your keen eye for detail and knowledge even the emperor does not possess, and I couldn't be prouder! You simply dazzle me!"

"I was just caught committing treason and warned there will be no second chances! How is *that* your takeaway?!"

After showing off her forbidden magic and even speaking her mind to the emperor, Keigetsu had endured enough stress to last her a lifetime. And yet, the boar in butterfly's clothing was as cheerful as could be.

"But you were so dashing, confidently pulling off things that would be impossible for anyone else!"

"True. Father only agreed to back down because he realized you had the upper hand in the argument," Gyoumei chimed in. "You truly do have a godsent gift for magic. You rattled off fact after fact

about the Daoist arts that Father never managed to learn from any of the cultivators he tortured. No doubt he was as surprised as anyone."

"A-a godsent gift?!" This was the first time Keigetsu had ever been praised as exceptionally talented at anything. She was so startled that she tripped over her words. "I-I wouldn't say that! I just happen to have a good deal of experience with body swapping, that's all!" She flapped her hands back and forth, her face bright red.

Over by the wall, Keishou quipped, "That's our magical prodigy for you. She's built experience no ordinary person possibly could! Leelee, Tousetsu, why don't you pour our dear prodigy another cup of tea?"

"St-stop throwing around the word 'prodigy' like it's nothing!" shouted Keigetsu, jabbing a finger in his direction. "You clearly don't believe it!"

Keishou was undeterred. "Come now, that's a hurtful accusation. I mean it, ladies, fill her cup to the brim. It's the *ordinary* thing to do here."

"We'll need some snacks to go with the tea. Shall we order some sesame balls, Brother Junior?"

"No need. I already asked the kitchen to make some."

"You always do think ahead! I ought to go fetch them while they're still ho—"

As the Kou siblings raced to reward Keigetsu's efforts, the girl in question squared her shoulders and shouted, "Don't get carried away!"

Reirin flung open the door regardless, only to go wide-eyed at the sight that greeted her. A trio of unexpected guests was standing around awkwardly: Kin Seika, Ran Houshun, and Gen Kasui.

"Oh, hello, ladies. What brings you here?" asked Reirin, putting a hand to her cheek.

"Er, well…"

The three girls exchanged embarrassed looks.

After a few moments, Seika was the first to bow. “We extend our greetings to Your Imperial Highness and our fellow Maidens.”

The other two Maidens were quick to follow suit.

“We apologize for eavesdropping,” said Houshun, her face falling.

“A short while ago, we witnessed you and His Majesty heading this way, and your expressions were quite grim,” said Kasui, a note of hesitation in her voice. “We were concerned something may have happened.”

Reirin and friends realized what the girls must’ve thought. These three Maidens had helped them to cover up Keigetsu’s magic. From their perspective, just as they had thrown the emperor off their trail, “Shu Keigetsu” had gone missing in the mountains, and “Kou Reirin” and Gyoumei had never made it back from their official visit. When the three of them finally showed up again, they were getting dragged off to the emperor’s room with palpable tension in the air. No one could blame the girls for assuming that Genyou had caught wind of the magic and passed down his judgment.

“That’s when Lady Seika suggested that we wait outside the door to get an idea of what you were talking about,” Houshun timidly added.

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t make me out to be a nosy busybody, Lady Houshun. I was concerned, so I simply suggested that we go check on what was happening.”

“Were His Majesty upset, I hoped that a fellow Gen like myself might be able to talk him down, so I decided to wait outside,” said Kasui. “However, His Majesty had just left the room when we arrived.”

Their responses gave a clear picture of the sequence of events. Seika had probably come over out of genuine concern, just as she claimed, while Kasui had been spurred on by a sense of duty and

Houshun had tagged along for the ride. They'd made it as far as the door, but Genyou had come out before they could enter, and stopping to prostrate themselves as he left meant they'd missed their chance to go in.

"Apologies for the scare, my Maidens," said Gyoumei. "The truth came out that Shu Keigetsu can use magic, and that she and Reirin have swapped bodies, but we managed to talk it out with His Majesty. We've established that if we successfully aid His Majesty with his long-held ambition, he will cease his suppression of the Daoist arts." His succinct explanation deliberately left out their life-and-death gamble prior to bringing Genyou to the negotiating table, as well as the fact that they had been threatened with death upon failure.

"What ambition?" asked Seika.

Keigetsu and Reirin exchanged glances, unsure how much they could divulge of the emperor's private affairs. An explanation would necessitate mentioning the string of graphic fratricides that had plagued the inner court, along with the fact that the former crown prince had been killed after his body was stolen with magic. All of these events were under a gag order.

Reirin wistfully dropped her gaze. "Well, you see…"

Keigetsu grimaced and stammered, "Th-the thing is…"

All of a sudden, Gyoumei turned around and leaned against the window. As he looked outside, he broke into a completely unprompted monologue. "Oh, I spy Father under the pavilion at the pond. I was wondering where he'd stormed off to. He must be in an awfully foul mood if he didn't bring a page with him. It's a worrying sight, isn't it, Keishou?"

Reading between the lines, Keishou nodded. "Indeed it is, Your Highness. As one of the emperor's most faithful servants, I'm too concerned to take my eyes off him."

"As am I. We men have a bad habit of fixating so hard on one thing that we completely *neglect to listen* to the women around us,

but I’m more concerned with keeping an eye on my father than my Maidens at the moment.”

“Understandable. We have to be sure he’s all right.”

As the two men theatrically stressed how worried they were, Reirin and Keigetsu realized what they were trying to do. Not even the crown prince could officially override a gag order, but this was his way of granting the Maidens permission to touch on the dark side of the inner court.

While Gyoumei’s back was turned, the pair led the other three Maidens deeper into the room and made sure the door was firmly shut. Only then did Reirin—still “Shu Keigetsu” as far as appearances went—whisper, “The truth is, His Majesty is out for revenge.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes. He has suppressed Daoist magic due to a personal grudge, not for fear of rebellion. His Majesty despises a particular sorcerer and has spent years searching for him. He placed Lady Keigetsu under surveillance because he suspected her of having ties to this man.”

Even if Gyoumei had allowed it, Reirin wasn’t interested in advertising Genyou’s past to anyone who would listen. She instead provided a rough summary that omitted the particulars of the incident from twenty-five years ago. The other girls were familiar enough with the rules of the inner court that they inferred the circumstances and declined to press the matter.

“So that’s the story, hm?”

“Indeed. His Majesty’s more concerned with taking revenge on the sorcerer than cracking down on the Daoist arts. We offered our help as experts in the field of magic. Should we succeed, he’s willing to end the persecution altogether.”

The Maidens all breathed a sigh of relief.

“Oh, good. Then you needn’t worry about an immediate execution,” said Seika.

"That's such a relief," Houshun agreed.

"Joining forces with your oppressor is exactly the kind of move I would expect from you, Lady Reirin," said Kasui. "You never cease to amaze me."

Keigetsu scowled, a bit miffed that Kasui had spun this into an excuse to compliment Reirin. "I'm not sure that 'joining forces' is the most accurate way to describe it. It's more like we *have* to succeed at this revenge quest under threat of death."

It was infuriating how quick these three were to put the prince's butterfly on a pedestal—particularly when her true nature was that of a raging boar.

"This woman takes such an aggressive approach to negotiating that my heart nearly stopped a dozen times over," she went on. "I swear she's going to get us both killed one of these days."

They'd only managed to force the emperor into negotiations by getting one over on him and letting things come to blows. Even now, their execution was merely postponed, and Genyou had threatened to kill them if they didn't come up with a plan to catch the sorcerer by noon. When Keigetsu drew attention to these points, Reirin sheepishly covered her ears and joked, "Ouch!"

Kin Seika jumped to Reirin's defense, thrusting a finger in Keigetsu's direction. "Why must you always be so critical, Lady Keigetsu? Lady Reirin was only doing her best to help you."

"My point is that the way she goes about it is too chaotic!"

"The absolute nerve of you to complain after someone came to your aid! *You* are the practitioner of the Daoist arts, and *you* are the one who cast a body-swapping spell. You are the only one here His Majesty is truly out to get. Lady Reirin was kind enough to offer her cooperation despite shouldering none of the blame, and you repay her with criticism? How entitled can one person be?"

Kin Seika always took the moral high ground. Her platitudes tended to strike Keigetsu as laughably naive, but she managed to hit

where it hurt just as often.

Keigetsu had only meant it to be a bit of lighthearted banter, so she bristled at the incredibly blunt scolding. She automatically blurted out, "I never asked her to—"

"Now, now, Lady Seika," Kasui cut in to mediate, dousing the sparks of conflict. "I imagine it's less that she took issue with Lady Reirin's methods and more that she was simply worried. We all know Lady Reirin's penchant for outrageous stunts."

Reirin attempted to side with Keigetsu as well. "Yes, that's exactly—" The moment she opened her mouth, however, the other three Maidens pricked up their ears with looks of concern, and she bit back the rest of her sentence.

It was hard to say if her status as the empress's niece, her nickname of the prince's "butterfly," or her poor health was to blame, but people tended to lavish Kou Reirin with an excessive amount of attention. They would listen intently to everything she said, work out the implications, and take those under careful consideration. If she jumped to Keigetsu's defense now, it would only reinforce the idea that Shu Keigetsu was the bully and Kou Reirin was the victim.

Lately, Reirin found that frustrating. She didn't want people to peer up at her with longing or look down on her in pity. She wanted them to engage with her casually, just like they did with Keigetsu.

When Reirin chose to hold her tongue, Houshun stepped up to smooth things over. "Exactly. Lady Keigetsu was only concerned. The moment she heard that Miss Reirin had gone missing in the mountains, she risked everything to run to her rescue, remember? She's a wonderful friend."

"Would you please not make me sound so sentimental?!" Keigetsu shouted, denying the assurance outright. "I-I wouldn't waste my time worrying about this dauntless boar of a woman!"

As soon as she said it, Keigetsu realized she might've been too harsh. Still, yelling was the only way she knew how to distract from her burning cheeks. Hearing people dress up her actions with pretty

words like “concern” and “friendship” made her deeply uncomfortable.

“I felt responsible, that’s all. It would weigh heavily on my conscience if she died in my place, but there was no deeper reason for it. I’d do the same for anyone. I’m not *entirely* without scruples. You hear that, Kin Seika?!”

Voice hitching, Keigetsu hurled whichever words first popped to mind. Even she was a bit appalled by her own bravado, but she was also confident that Kou Reirin would dismiss this level of vitriol as a “love bite.” After all, Keigetsu had defied the emperor to rush to her rescue. If Reirin still had doubts about Keigetsu’s feelings of friendship or concern, there had to be something seriously wrong with her.

“Lady Keigetsu!” Tousetsu called out from her place by the wall, a hint of panic in her voice, then promptly shut her mouth.

“Goodness, Lady Keigetsu, you needn’t shout so. You’ve made your point quite clear.” Kou Reirin brought a hand to her cheek and smiled like always. Of course she did. It was practically routine for Keigetsu to shout insults she didn’t mean and for Reirin to let them all roll off her back.

“Anyway, this is no time to be having pointless arguments.” Keigetsu opted for a change of subject to dispel the lingering awkwardness. “We have to come up with a plan to catch that sorcerer by noon, or His Majesty will have our heads for sure.”

“Right.” Reirin nodded, happy to jump on the segue. “I am quite ashamed that I failed to pick out the sorcerer back on Treacherous Tan Peak. In hindsight, there were so many hints.” As she sighed, her sleeve slid down the hand still pressed to her cheek. Upon glimpsing the red braid tied around her exposed wrist, Reirin caressed it as though reminded of its presence. “I really should have suspected something as soon as he gave me this bracelet.”

Keigetsu stared at Reirin’s wrist and the red bracelet on it, forgetting all about her inner turmoil of moments ago. “What is

that?"

Thinking back on it, she *had* noticed that Reirin was wearing an unfamiliar wristband when Akim bound her hands that morning. Most of their conversations since the previous night had taken place in the dark, and they'd had their hands full working to outmaneuver Genyou, so Keigetsu hadn't been in a state of mind to inquire about the new accessory. Now that she was looking at it up close in a secure room, however, she felt a faint, uncanny aura emanating from its red thread.

"Where did you get that bracelet?" she pressed.

"Oh, this? The sorcerer gave it to me as thanks for the Congee Conferment Rite. A girl from the settlement braided it and put it on for me, and it's really quite beautiful. In hindsight, however, it may have been an attempt to win me—"

Keigetsu made a rough grab for the other girl's hand. "Let me see that!"

Reirin blinked, surprised. "What's wrong, Lady Keigetsu?"

"There's a spell on this."

"What?"

The other four Maidens shot her a blank stare, and the men turned away from the window to glance over.

"A spell? Are you certain?"

"Yes. It's hard to tell without concentrating, but it's exuding a qi that is neither mine nor yours. And it's coming from this red thread specifically… I bet it was dyed with the sorcerer's blood. Tying the bracelet activates the spell."

"But a girl named Leanne tied it for me, not…" Reirin trailed off with a frown, then mumbled, "Oh, but she did say 'Doctor Tou dumped the materials on me and demanded I do it.'"

Things were adding up.

"What sort of spell is it?" Her expression sobering, Reirin fished around in her sash. She produced an identically colored braid, one size bigger than her own, and held it out to Keigetsu. "As a matter of fact, he was quite insistent that I give a second one to Brother Senior. Do you know why?"

"It's a marker."

After taking one look at the proffered bracelet, Keigetsu snatched it right out of Reirin's hand and tossed it into the brazier.

"Ah…"

"If I had to guess, he's been searching everywhere for a body he can swap to on the Day of Ultimate Yin. This time around, he wants it to be a healthy one with working eyes. After all the years he's spent in Prince Gomei's body, his qi has probably taken on an earthen bent, so it would be ideal for his next vessel to have a strong affinity for earth as well. Cue you two coming along and meeting all the criteria. If I were him, I'd go after you too."

The bracelet soaked up the heat of the coals and slowly burned to ash.

"It's the mark of his sacrificial offering, so to speak. The disruption in the balance of yin and yang will make it harder to sense qi, but using his blood as a medium means he'll be able to locate it with ease. It might even enable him to steal your life force or swap to your body from a distance. It's dangerous to keep wearing it!" Keigetsu scowled and whirled on Reirin. "Why are you standing around with your head in the clouds?! Take it off already!"

"It was tied with a special knot that makes it difficult to remove. I'm supposed to leave it there until it snaps, so I imagine it's a very strong—"

"Just cut it with a knife!" Keigetsu yelled. "That should break the spell!"

The rest of the Maidens chimed in with concern. Houshun covered her face with her sleeves and agreed, "She's right, Miss

Reirin! You have to get rid of it!”

Kasui said, “If it’s a knife you need, I would be happy to find one.”

“No, I’ll get it!” Seika insisted.

Both girls made to leave the room in search of a blade, only for Reirin to call them to a halt. “There’s no need.” Clutching her arm, she said the last thing any of them had expected to hear. “I think we’re better off not cutting it.”

“Pardon?” the other four Maidens asked in unison.

Reirin tilted her head to one side, distressed. “If it’s a marker, doesn’t that mean the sorcerer can use this bracelet to track what I do? He might grow suspicious if I were to suddenly discard it.”

It took Keigetsu a moment to process what she was saying. “Yes, perhaps, but leaving it on could provide him an avenue to cast magic on you.”

“All the better! That sounds like the perfect chance to track him down and lure him out.” Reirin’s eyes sparkled as though she’d just hit upon a brilliant idea. “Why don’t I leave the bracelet on and act as the bait? That ought to increase our chances of capturing the sorcerer, right?”

“Listen here, you.” Keigetsu’s voice grew low and dark. Why did that boar of a girl always have to act this way? “Do you understand what kind of magic I’m talking about? In a worst-case scenario, he might take your entire soul, not just your life force. Your extracted soul could end up stuck in the sorcerer’s body—or wiped out altogether, if we’re unlucky.”

In contrast to the way Keigetsu’s voice trembled, Reirin only cocked her head again, a blank look on her freckled face. “Er, but it would be *my* soul that gets wiped out, correct? Then—”

Before she could finish that sentence, she slapped her hands over her mouth, but it was easy to imagine what she had been about to say: *“Then I don’t see the problem.”*

I can't believe her! thought Keigetsu, gritting her teeth. She heard the other three Maidens gasp behind her.

Kou Reirin was too unconcerned with her own life. It was clear what she was thinking: Even if her soul was extracted, she would be the only one affected. Keigetsu just had to return to her own body before the sorcerer could get inside. Supposing she didn't make it in time, she could still live on in the body of "Kou Reirin"—the body of the prince's butterfly, which she had once coveted enough to steal.

Why is she always like this? Keigetsu clenched her hands into fists. *Did our fight last night mean nothing?!*

Keigetsu thought she had proven their friendship when she came running. She had communicated with every fiber of her being that she was worried—that she wanted Reirin to stop being so reckless. And Reirin had nodded along. She had promised never to forget. How could she offer up her life like it was nothing, then?

Yes, it was true that Keigetsu had found acceptance *because* this girl was so altruistic as to forgive her aggressors. But now that they had fostered a friendship, the devotion that was once Kou Reirin's greatest virtue had turned into a source of deep frustration. Underneath that gentle smile, it was as if she had left everything behind to gaze alone into the distance.

"Um, Lady Keigetsu, I assure you that I will make every effort to keep this body safe. But to ensure that we catch the sorcerer, we really must—"

Ker-crash!

Reirin never got to finish her attempt to smooth things over. Keigetsu knocked all the teacups off the table first.

"Eep!" The other three Maidens shrank in on themselves. The men leaned forward with concern.

None of that could hope to quell Keigetsu's rage.

"This again?" The same brazier fire that had been eating away at the bracelet flared. Keigetsu's voice was shaking just as hard.

"Why do you never change?"

Shaking with *anger*, of course. Her eyes ablaze with fury, she slammed her fists atop the table.

"Lady Keigetsu, I—"

"You're always like this. 'I'll do it, I'll die, so it'll be all right.' You always jump straight to the most dangerous course of action."

All the feelings Keigetsu had been unknowingly suppressing came gushing forth. The first thing that popped into her mind was the sight of Reirin standing up to the emperor. That had been a risky strategy. Genyou's sword had cut through several layers of rope in a single slice. One wrong move, and he could have cleaved her head from her shoulders instead.

This girl always took the initiative to cast herself into a maelstrom of danger. In Keigetsu's stead, she had endured water torture, faced off against a dangerous assassin, and offered her neck to the emperor. Going back further, she had been dropped down a well and buried under a pillar.

"It will be all right," she would always say, a smile blooming on her face. *"To start feeling the pain before I've even been hurt would be nothing but a waste of strength."*

She never felt fear. It was almost as though pain didn't register for her.

Keigetsu thought, *But…*

"No! I don't want to die! Nooo!"

She recalled Reirin's terror-stricken shrieks when Genyou held his sword to her neck. Had that really been an act? Was there really not a shred of sincerity to those cries?

"I truly was scared earlier."

The girl claimed to have remembered the feeling of fear. What if she had actually begun to dread death, and she was hiding her

suffering behind that calm smile? What if Keigetsu was the one forcing her hand? The thought was too much to bear.

"Do you have any idea how I feel every time I watch you do this?!" Keigetsu's voice cracked. Her head felt like it was burning up, and that heat throbbed and raged until words started spilling from her mouth of their own accord. "Last night, didn't I tell you I wouldn't let you forget this?! And you said you never would! Then why—" Upon noticing the vulnerable look on her friend's face, Keigetsu spun around in a huff. "Forget it! I hate you so much! I don't want to waste my time talking to you!"

Shoes clacking against the floor, she flew out of the room without a care for etiquette.

"Lady Keigetsu!" Reirin reached out a hand on impulse, then pulled it back with a start as soon as she realized what she was doing. "In times like these, it's best to give her some space," she murmured, as if trying to convince herself.

Struggling to stand by and watch, Gyoumei signaled Keishou with a jerk of his chin. "Keishou, go calm her down."

"Yes, Your Highness. Leave it to me." Keishou had obviously been anxiously awaiting the order. No sooner did he bow than he rushed right out the door.

Gazing upon the wreckage that had become of the teacups, the concerned Seika, Houshun, and Kasui piped up in succession.

"Um, Lady Reirin…"

"Are you all right?"

"I hope you didn't cut yourself on any of the shards."

Before any of them could approach, Gyoumei said, "The court ladies will clean up the debris. Sorry, but could I ask you three to return to your rooms?"

"C-certainly!"

Although Keigetsu was the one who had thrown the fit, this was still an embarrassing scene for Reirin. He probably wanted as few people involved as possible. Inferring as much, the three Maidens bowed politely and left the room without a fuss.

"Pardon me." Tousetsu bent down and did her part as a court lady to clean up. While she worked to gather up the shards with brisk efficiency, anxious sweat beaded on her forehead. She couldn't stop thinking back to her conversation with Keikou the other night.

"That's a touching thought and all, but…is that really all it takes to resolve the issue? One side bursts into worried tears, and suddenly everything's fine?"

She had been so sure the issue *was* resolved. From an outsider's perspective, it was obvious that the two girls were worried about each other. Yet in practice, things had gone exactly as Keikou predicted. As unattuned as Tousetsu was to the subtleties of emotion, she couldn't begin to guess what was causing the hard feelings.

Nor am I sure whose side to take.

Keigetsu had let her emotions get the better of her, hurling abuses just because she was embarrassed and throwing a tantrum when things didn't go her way. On the other hand, Tousetsu agreed that her mistress needed to fix her habit of gambling with her life at the drop of a hat.

"Uh, Lady Reirin," Leelee ventured, looking Reirin over to make sure she hadn't been hit by a flying shard. "A-are you all right?"

She asked because this whole scenario was taking her back to the Rite of Reverence. Back then, Reirin had plunged into the Violet Dragon's Spring to save Keigetsu and angered her as a result. After Keigetsu declared their friendship over, the Kou Maiden had been a mess: She had dropped a mooncake, spilled her ink, let her room fall into disarray, and ultimately allowed Kasui to take her out from behind. Leelee was worried they were in for a repeat of that debacle

when they couldn’t afford the slightest distraction from catching the sorcerer.

However, Reirin only blinked in response. “Hm?”

“W-well, er, you know…” In her efforts to tread with caution, Leelee landed on a very roundabout wording. “Lady Keigetsu said the word that starts with ‘h’ and ends with ‘e.’”

Reirin burst out giggling. “Oh, Leelee, you silly dear, I’m perfectly fine. Lady Keigetsu gave me permission to interpret her insults however I see fit. It no longer bothers me to hear her say she hates me.”

“Uh, I don’t think she quite did that, but if you say so…”

“Don’t worry. I plan to apologize once Lady Keigetsu has calmed down.”

Her serene smile was the perfect picture of composure. Perhaps a fight was no big deal the second time around.

A wave of relief washed over Leelee. “Well, I’m glad to hear—”

Before she could finish, Gyoumei observed that Tousetsu had finished cleaning up and said, “I have something to discuss with Reirin. Mind stepping outside, court ladies?”

The abrupt order had Leelee and Tousetsu exchanging flummoxed looks. It wasn’t really appropriate for the crown prince and his Maiden to be alone without so much as a single attending court lady. Still, they knew how much Gyoumei treasured Kou Reirin. Assuming he wanted to comfort her after that harsh dressing-down, they complied without protest. Court ladies were in no position to defy the crown prince in the first place.

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

The pair bowed and attempted to slip out quietly, but Gyoumei called them over and whispered a few words of instruction into their ears. Surprise flashed across their faces, but it didn’t take them long to nod firmly and make a swift exit.

That left Gyoumei alone with Reirin, who stood there with a puzzled expression.

"Um, Your Highness, what did you wish to talk—"

"Sit." Gyoumei cut off her confused inquiry, took her by the arm, and sat her down in a chair.

"No, it would be wrong of me to be seated while you—"

"Listen carefully." When his cousin attempted to get up, Gyoumei put his hands on her shoulders, gently pushed her back down, and brought his face up to hers. "Until I say otherwise, you are forbidden from responding to me with anything but 'Yes, sir.'"

"Pardon?" Reirin blurted out, only to be immediately corrected.

"No, not 'Pardon?' Say, 'Yes, sir.'"

"Y-yes, sir."

As his fiancée blinked up at him, her bewilderment evident, the gorgeous crown prince declared, "It's time for a lecture."

***

As luck would have it, "Kou Reirin's" assigned room in Cloud Ladder Gardens was on the opposite end of the emperor's, so Keigetsu had a long way to run. The military officers guarding the halls, the servants changing out the candles in the rooms, and the court ladies carrying trays all did a double take when they caught sight of the Maiden dashing down the cloisters, tears streaming down her face and manners the furthest thing from her mind.

The prince's butterfly would never run until her skirts were in disarray or shed tears in public. Keigetsu realized as much, but all she could think was, *To hell with that!* Crying was like breathing; if she inhaled a nasty reality, she had to expel it somehow. Holding it in would kill her. Even without getting into that logic, there was nothing she could do to stop the unending flow of tears and anger.

Why is she like this?!

Keigetsu was filled with rage, impatience, and helplessness, along with self-loathing for the tantrum she had just thrown. The flood of emotions tasted downright disgusting on her tongue, intensifying to the point that she feared her head would explode. Knowing that her shameful conduct was bound to set off a new wave of gossip, she was tempted to flee Cloud Ladder Gardens altogether and go into hiding.

After running like mad, Keigetsu finally found "Kou Reirin's" assigned room and dove inside. The sight of her perfectly arranged bed made her angrier than ever. It was a pristine white, and no matter how many wrinkles Keigetsu made with her tossing and turning, she would always find it neatly made the next morning. It was just like the girl herself. No matter how much Keigetsu lost her head and yelled, Reirin never changed.

Keigetsu reached for her hairpin, yanked it free, and slammed it on the bed. "What is her problem?!"

Caught in the bed's soft embrace, she hardly caused a creak in the metal. Keigetsu felt as though her own anger had been brushed aside. Her irritation mounted, and she picked up a large pillow and swung it down with all her might.

"How stupid can she be?!"

There came a muffled *thump*.

But it wasn't enough. Not yet.

"Why does she always—"

Just as she was panting and looking for her next thing to throw, a voice called out to her from behind. "Wow, looks like you're having a grand old time in here."

She jumped, startled. "Eek!" Although she whipped around, she recognized the man by his voice before she even had to look.

It was Kou Keishou.

"Apologies, but I'm going to shut the door in the interest of keeping the noise down," he said. "I promise I won't do anything

untoward."

"Go away! I want to be left alone!"

Keigetsu's ear-piercing shriek earned a chuckle and a helpless shrug from Keishou. "See? That didn't take long." He deftly closed the door behind his back. "We're 'siblings' at present, so no need to worry about any scandalous rumors."

"That's not the issue!"

Most of the time, Keigetsu found this man's unruffled poise in the face of her shouting to be comforting. At the moment, however, it had the opposite effect. The blither he was, the more incensed she became. She hated that feeling of disconnect between them—like nothing could reach him, nothing could get across to him, and nothing could make him understand her feelings. Keishou's composure reminded her of Kou Reirin, and in the blink of an eye her anger and frustration fused together, setting off fiery sparks inside her.

"What? Are you here to calm me down? Let me guess: His Highness wants me to apologize to his precious butterfly, and he sent you to convince me!"

"No one is looking for you to apologize. Not me, and not His Highness. But yes, I did come to calm you down."

"Mind your own business!"

His breezy tone sent Keigetsu over the edge. Granted, she would have been even angrier had he jumped right to scolding her, and she would have spurned any attempts at sweet consolation. At present, she was predisposed to find anything she laid eyes on—no, anything that reminded her of that woman—absolutely infuriating.

"You listen here. I won't come around on this so easily. I am *extremely* upset right now."

The man continued to approach, undeterred by Keigetsu's rage, so she grabbed another pillow off the bed and hurled it at his face.

Whap!

Keishou caught it with ease and tucked it under his arm. "Yes, I'm getting that," he said.

A pillow wasn't good enough. Too far gone to back down, Keigetsu snatched up a small flower vase sitting on the table and lobbed that next.

"Could you at least pretend to care?! That lack of concern is the reason I'm so mad!"

Whap!

This, too, he caught without letting a single petal fall.

"You're just as bad as her! You're both so aggravatingly composed! You have no clue what I'm feeling!"

She threw a mirror. He caught it again.

On top of the chagrin Keigetsu felt, the things Reirin said earlier came flooding back to her, bringing tears to her eyes. That girl could sacrifice her own life like it was nothing. No matter how much Keigetsu shouted at her from behind, she would respond with only a smile and a wave before casting herself off a perilous precipice, caught in a perpetual danger of her own making.

"Why doesn't she get it?! Why is she always so reckless and stupidly self-sacrificing?! Doesn't she realize how heartbroken I'll be if she actually dies?! Have none of my feelings gotten through to her at all?!"

Keigetsu threw anything and everything she laid eyes on: A pot. A hand fan. An inkstone. A teacup saucer. A decorative plate embellished with gorgeous gilding. Alas, Keishou snatched every last object out of the air before it could break. That unsatisfying impact—that muffling of sound—made her cry harder than ever.

It was so reminiscent of *her*. Not a single one of Keigetsu's feelings ever got through to her. They had no effect whatsoever.

"I told her to stop putting herself at risk! So why doesn't she ever change?! Do the things I say mean nothing to her? Do *I* mean nothing to her?! I've had it up to here with her nonsense!" For the finale, she unleashed her loudest scream yet and chucked a heavy teapot.

"Whoa there!" Keishou cried out, nimbly catching it by the handle. "Phew. I'm not sure anyone but me could have caught that one."

Don't sound so proud of yourself! Keigetsu wanted to snap, but she was completely out of breath after all that throwing. Her current slender arms weren't built for lifting a slew of heavy objects.

"All done?" the Kou man asked. "My turn, then."

"Excuse me?"

Smiling, Keishou set the items he had caught on the table, only to retreat to the door. At some point beforehand, he had hung a bag on the door handle. He took that bag in hand—and, not a moment later, thrust one of its contents straight into Keigetsu's mouth.

"Nothing like sweets to cure a bad mood! Here, eat up!"

"Mmgh?!" Seeing as he had closed in on her in a flash and shoved something into her mouth, she was briefly afraid she had been poisoned. A beat later, however, she processed the aroma of sesame seeds and the sweet taste of a rice cake.

Was that a sesame ball?!

"What comes after the berserker ball? Let's see here…" While she was still reeling, Keishou stuck his hand in the bag and foisted sweet after sweet on her. "Have a mooncake! Have some roasted chestnuts! Have a tanghulu skewer! Have a flower cake, steamed bun, and longan candy!"

"Wha—?!" Keigetsu opened her mouth to shout, and the sesame ball stuffed into it nearly fell out in the process. She caught it between her teeth in the nick of time, but her hands were saddled with more and more treats while her mouth was occupied. "Mmph!"

"There's more where that came from! Next comes a plum pastry, then a red bean cake, and after that we've got dried apricots, candied lotus seeds, honey, and starch syrup!"

Most of the treats were wrapped in oil paper, but things like honey came in a jar, so Keigetsu's burden was getting to be quite heavy. Left with little choice, she gulped down the sesame ball and yelled, red-faced, "Knock it off!"

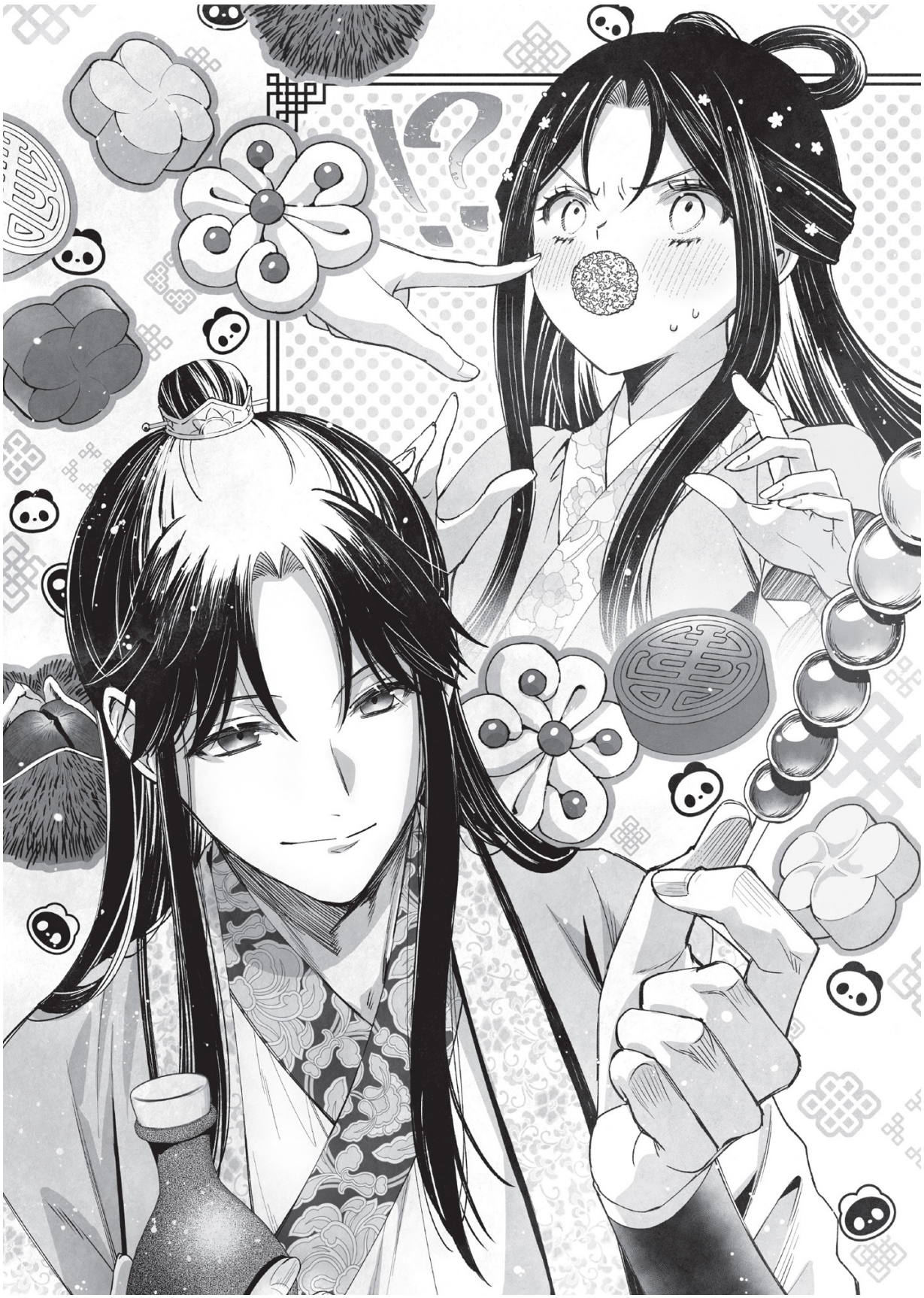
"Oh, were you hoping for me to feed them to you?" Keishou caught the mooncake she was about to drop and brought it to her lips without hesitation. "Open wide!"

"No! I want you to let me get a word in before you foist things on me!"

"Why?" All traces of Keishou's playful manner vanished, replaced by a soft smile. "*You* never let anyone get a word in when you're screaming."

Keigetsu was blindsided.

As she lapsed into silence, Keishou took the mooncake away. In a voice as warm as the sun-dappled earth, he went on, "From a third-party perspective, it's clear as day that you're worried about Reirin, and that really does mean a lot to me." One by one, he emptied her arms of the treats and laid them out on the table. "But it's too much for the recipient herself to juggle. She's gone through her whole life without a plate to put concern on."



The decorative plate Keigetsu had flung earlier was sitting on the far end of the table. A beautiful work of art though it was, it wasn't suited for practical use.

"Let me tell you a story," Keishou began as he traced its sleek gilded patterns. "This was when Reirin was around six years old, I believe. A relative of ours gifted us these delicious apricots, and my brother suggested we preserve them in alcohol. The idea was that we would each keep our own jar and treat one another to its contents upon coming of age."

Although Keigetsu was confused by the abrupt digression, this sounded believable enough to her. The Kou siblings had probably always been close, they had probably always been popular with their relatives, and they had probably always enjoyed making homemade treats.

"What does that have to do with—"

"Reirin immediately gave her share of apricots to our brother. She smiled innocently and said, 'If we each wait until we come of age, I doubt I'll make it in time.'"

The follow-up was so shocking that Keigetsu was struck speechless.

No, that wasn't quite right. It was the *plausibility* of it that stole the words from her mouth.

Keishou smiled sadly as he watched the color drain from Keigetsu's face. Eventually, he looked away and idly arranged the dried apricots atop the table. "Even more than *what* she said, it was the nonchalant, cheerful way she said it that really stuck with me. Hm, what's a good analogy here? It was as though she was playfully pointing out the obvious, like, 'The sun would never stay in the sky past nightfall, you silly.'"

Kou Reirin had always dwelled in the company of death. As early as age six, she had lived her life with the knowledge that it would soon be over.

Overwhelmed, Keigetsu balled her hands into fists. “That’s exactly what I can’t stand about her.” She hated it enough to make herself cry.

“I know. We find it just as frustrating. Or so I claim, but we never actually tried to do anything about it. I’m sorry.” Keishou reached out to gently dry her tears on his sleeve, his voice thick with remorse. “It hurt to watch, but part of us was probably relieved to see her so unperturbed. After all, if she ever came crying to us about how she didn’t want to die, there would be nothing we could do for her. What would we have done if our darling baby sister spent every day weeping for fear of death? I can’t even imagine.” By the end, it sounded more like he was talking to himself than to Keigetsu.

Dismissing those thoughts with a light shake of his head, Keishou crouched down to the Maiden’s eye level. “Our sister could tell as much, so she cast aside her fear and regrets. And we both applauded that as a show of resolve. We’re partly to blame for Reirin being so desensitized.”

“Then, what? You want me to let it go on your account?”

“No. Here comes my main point.” His black eyes bore straight into Keigetsu. “After our sister congealed into a distorted shape, you are the only one who ever managed to put a crack in her.”

The light those words shone on Keigetsu’s heart was like a candle unexpectedly offered to her in the darkness. “What? Me?”

“Yes. We left Reirin to her own devices in an attempt to be kind, but you always take care to scold her. ‘That’s not normal! You should feel more fear! More anger! More desire!’”

“Hmph. Are you calling me hotheaded?”

Keigetsu turned her head aside in a huff, but Keishou doggedly met her gaze again.

“No. You’re dazzling,” he said, so earnestly that it was impossible to pick the statement apart. “Our sister has changed since switching bodies and spending time with you. She’s learned to

lose her temper, feel down, get into fights, and run in circles—all the things a sixteen-year-old girl is supposed to do. I thank you for that from the bottom of my heart."

"I-It wasn't because of me that she—"

"It was all you," he declared with finality. Keigetsu gasped. "Lady Keigetsu, in my sister's eyes, you are more radiant than a full moon that emerged on a pitch-black night. Your words are the only thing that can sway her."

Keigetsu bit her lip, her sole defense against the sob threatening to escape. Why were the Kou siblings like this? She was nothing but a sewer rat wallowing in the muck, yet the sister always called her a comet, and the brother likened her to the moon.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," said Keigetsu.

"I assure you it isn't," Keishou responded with a smile. Then he faced the table once more and began to tidy up the many items littering it. "My point is, Lady Keigetsu, that your words are more certain to get through to her than anyone's. You needn't hurl figurative plates at her with an onslaught of shouting."

The jumbled pile of teaware and furnishings was rapidly put back in order. Keishou placed the mooncake he had tried to feed her on the decorative plate, then presented it to her with a graceful flourish.

"My sister has only just begun to awaken. Would you consider presenting your feelings to her one at a time? Everything you say means so much to her that she longs to savor each and every bite."

When presented separately on the large, elegant plate, the mooncake was appetizing enough to make her mouth water.

It was strange. This man had barged into her room and even attempted to cram sweets into her mouth, yet his words penetrated Keigetsu's defenses so easily that she felt no desire to refute him. Before she knew it, she had even accepted the proffered plate. The glossy mooncake looked so very dense and delicious. Knowing

Keishou, its filling was probably even her favorite: black sesame and walnut.

Now that I think about it, Keigetsu realized as she gazed upon the mooncake, *I'm not sure I ever told her I was worried about her.*

Earlier, she had been so furious that all she could do was scream, "Why don't you get it?!" When her friend reacted with dismay, she had snapped that she hated her, even said she didn't want to talk to her, and stormed off.

The night before, she thought she had made Reirin promise to stop being so reckless, but in hindsight, she had broken down crying partway through and settled for practically threatening her with "I won't let you forget this!"

Going back even further, when she rushed to save Reirin from the well, or after watching her fall into the Violet Dragon's Spring, Keigetsu had been so overcome with shock and rage that all she did was shout things along the lines of "Why are you like this?!"

It occurred to her that maybe, just maybe…

I might not have room to talk about anyone else.

Keigetsu fidgeted, embarrassed. It was even worse when the girl she was dealing with was in some ways an infant, having only just begun her emotional awakening. Chances were good that she meant no harm and genuinely didn't understand what Keigetsu was trying to express.

Perhaps I went about this all wrong. I should have looked her in the eyes and spoken slowly, the same way I'd explain things to a small child.

Rather than raising her voice, she should have said, *"I'm worried about you. Please reconsider that strategy."*

After how much of her childhood she'd spent getting berated by her mother, Keigetsu ought to have known how helpless and scared it could make someone feel to be the subject of a one-sided tirade.

"Looks scrumptious, doesn't it?" Keishou asked of his proffered treat. "I asked the kitchen to prepare the sesame balls earlier, but the rest I packed hoping I'd have a chance to give them to you." He grinned. "The filling is black sesame and walnut, by the way."

At that, all the tension bled from Keigetsu's shoulders. "Knew it!"

"Hm? Knew what?"

"Nothing."

Perplexed, Keishou furrowed his brow and leaned in closer, but Keigetsu turned her back on him. She didn't need a mirror to know she was smiling, and she would have hated for him to see it.

"Fine," she said. "I'll start by eating this mooncake."

Keigetsu pulled out a chair and sat down. As soon as she had indulged herself with the mooncake, she would go talk to the other girl. She *did* seem to recall deciding to take the first step toward resolving their next fight.

"After that, I'll—"

Go apologize. Before she could say as much, she heard two voices from beyond the door and paused with the mooncake halfway to her lips.

"Pardon the interruption. Permission to enter, please."

"We come bearing a message from His Highness."

It was Tousetsu and Leelee.

"Whoops, forgot it was still closed," Keishou mumbled as he got the door. The two hardworking court ladies briskly let themselves inside.

Keigetsu set the mooncake back on the plate. "What sort of message? For what it's worth, I'm done lashing out. I plan to apologize to Kou Reirin once I've finished up here," she said, sheepishly wiping her fingers on her sleeves.

The pair of visitors exchanged glances, then nodded.

"That's excellent news," said Tousetsu.

"In that case, this ought to be the perfect time to tell you," said Leelee.

"Again, tell me what?" asked the Maiden, a dubious look on her face.

Both court ladies put a hand to their mouths and bent forward, as if they were about to let her in on a secret. "You see…"

Keigetsu reacted to the message with a surprised blink, then looked to Keishou for guidance.

Chapter 5:
Reirin Bares Her Soul

AFTER KEIGETSU and the court ladies vacated the room, a lengthy interrogation was commenced by Gyoumei, who towered menacingly over Reirin where she sat.

"You prefer to leave the bracelet on because you believe it's the most logical way to catch the sorcerer, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are determined not to waste a moment in apprehending him."

"Yes, sir."

"That may require taking some risks, but you feel it's only right to do so as long as you are the only one affected."

"Yes, sir."

Well, "interrogation" might not have been the most accurate descriptor, seeing as the questionee was only allowed to answer with "Yes, sir."

"You are feeling a bit impatient. You've staked Shu Keigetsu's life on the success of the operation, after all."

"Yes, sir."

Reirin nodded along with everything Gyoumei said, as she had been instructed. Since he had prefaced this as a lecture, she'd dreaded what he might say, but the points he'd made so far had been accurate. She took no issue with any of it.

"You think of Shu Keigetsu as a very dear friend."

"Yes, sir. Precisely."

"You are more than happy to put your life on the line for a loved one."

"Yes, sir."

"Given how much she means to you, you are devastated that she just said she hates you."

"Ye—"

Right as Reirin was about to go with the flow and concur, she clamped her mouth shut. She couldn't agree with this one so easily. Saying she was devastated after making her friend mad would be playing the victim, and she wasn't hurt at all. It wasn't the first time Keigetsu had claimed to hate her, and the Shu Maiden had already stated quite openly that she didn't feel a strong friendship for Reirin.

Her and Keigetsu's level of investment in their relationship was unbalanced. Reirin had known as much from the moment she saw Keigetsu surrounded by friends under the pavilion. To be wounded by such a self-evident truth would be as foolish as rolling around on a bed of nails and crying about how much it hurt.

"No, si—"

"Reirin, I believe I told you not to respond with anything but 'Yes, sir,'" Gyoumei said flatly.

After a long silence, Reirin reluctantly changed her answer. "Yes, sir."

"There we go. That's better. This is an order from the crown prince, so a harrowing punishment awaits you if you disobey. I expect you to keep up the enthusiasm for nodding along." Despite the fact that he had never once abused his power this way, Gyoumei sounded perfectly matter-of-fact. Reirin screwed her lips into a childish pout, but he refrained from admonishing her and instead pressed on with his questions. "Although you claimed to be fine, you are anything but. You're actually quite upset, aren't you?"

"No, I'm—"

"Have you forgotten my order?"

A very long pause. “Yes, sir.” Reirin’s face puckered like she’d taken a bite of something sour. She absolutely hated showing weakness.

“That must be hard. You put on a brave face for the court ladies, but you are actually feeling very sad.”

“No—yes, sir.”

“You’re feeling lost.”

A pause. “Yes, sir.”

“You don’t want anyone to see you being vulnerable, but it’s hard not to cry.”

Reirin pursed her lips into a thin line. She didn’t want to agree. She wasn’t even close to crying. She had managed to keep her calm and carry on as usual.

“Have you noticed, Reirin?” the crown prince said after the Maiden once again fell silent. “The statements you hesitate to agree with are your true feelings. People don’t mind nodding along with things that have no basis in reality.”

Her eyes flew wide open. “Oh!”

About time, Gyoumei thought when he saw the startled look on his fiancée’s face. At long last, he had managed to get past step one.

The conversation wouldn’t get anywhere until Reirin acknowledged that she was hurt. Gyoumei was intimately familiar with his cousin’s disposition; as far as he was concerned, she needed to see that her own palms were riddled with cuts before she could tend to someone else’s emotional wounds.

Now I can finally get on with the lecture.

As Reirin’s eyes glistened with emotion, Gyoumei said softly, “Tell me, Reirin, do you understand why Shu Keigetsu was so upset with you?”

After a lengthy silence, Reirin answered, “Yes, sir.” With less confidence, she added, “I believe so.”

“Shu Keigetsu is concerned that you keep pushing yourself too hard. Hence, last night, she rushed to Treacherous Tan Peak without a care for revealing her magic. If someone I worked that hard to save kept coming up with plans to throw her life away, I would be just as furious. You ought to be more receptive to her feelings,” Gyoumei said firmly. “Why do you insist on rejecting such a passionate display of friendship?”

Reirin snapped her head up. “I have done no such thing!” Her expression was even more earnest than Gyoumei had expected. “It was not my intention to reject her. I understand that Lady Keigetsu braved great danger to come to my rescue, and I’m deeply grateful for it. That is precisely why I’m so desperate to return the favor. I wish to repay her as soon as possible. All I want is for her to be happy.”

The words sounded genuine. At the very least, the girl herself clearly believed them to be true.

The problem runs deeper than I thought.

There was more to this than Reirin being obtuse. Upon intuiting as much, Gyoumei glanced around the room, his gaze landing on the table beside him. The teaware the group had been drinking from was still laid out on its polished surface.

“I’m parched.” He pulled out a chair and plopped himself down. “All this effort to get things through your thick head has made me terribly thirsty. Oh, what a hardship.”

“Uh…” Reirin blinked in confusion; that had certainly come out of nowhere. Still, considerate as she was, she followed his gaze and rose from her seat. “I apologize for not noticing sooner.” She poured hot water into the teapot and refilled his cup. “Here you go.”

“Oh, thank you.” Gyoumei didn’t take the proffered tea. Without so much as savoring its aroma or sparing the delicate teacup a glance, he took Reirin’s hands in his own and worriedly

asked, “Did you burn yourself? It must have been difficult to work with a different tea set than usual. Was it too heavy for you?”

“It wasn’t, no…” Reirin gently extracted her hands. She wished he would give the questions a rest and just drink it.

“I’m so thirsty,” Gyoumei muttered again, despite having yet to touch the tea already served to him.

Had the water been too tepid? Confused though she was, Reirin brewed a hotter cup of tea with water from the iron kettle atop the brazier.

“Thank you,” he said with a smile, but he didn’t reach for the second cup either. “You have a real talent for serving tea. Here, take this as a token of my gratitude.” The affluent crown prince then produced an opulent fan from his robes.

“No, that’s entirely—”

Reirin attempted to refuse, but Gyoumei pushed it into her hands. Then he slumped back against his chair once more and stared up at the ceiling. “Oh, how I thirst.”

By this point, even Reirin could tell he was messing with her. She knit her brow, but just to be on the safe side—if the crown prince truly was thirsty, she had to do *something* about it—she changed the tea leaves, brewed a fresh cup of tea lukewarm enough to drink right away, and placed it next to the other two.

“Thank you. I’m a lucky man. Let’s see, what should I give you as thanks? Do I have anything suitable on hand?” Gyoumei rummaged through his sleeves without taking the teacup.

“Your Highness,” Reirin finally interjected when the third cup went untouched. “What are you doing?”

“Exactly what you’ve done,” he shot back. Reirin sucked in a breath. “I don’t mean to refuse your charity. I understand you were worried about me, and I’m grateful that you went to the trouble of making me tea. Hence, I wish to repay you as soon as possible. I want to see you smile.”

It was an echo of Reirin's own speech. When she said nothing in response, Gyoumei pointed to one of the teacups. "And yet, I can take a good guess at what it made you think: 'Stop prattling on and just drink the damn tea!'"

"Oh!"

He was exactly right.

"Listen here, Reirin." Gyoumei stood from his seat. He sat Reirin down instead, leaving both hands planted on her shoulders. "You pour someone tea because you wish to alleviate their burdens. The first thing the server wants is not repayment, it is for the recipient to drink the tea and quench their thirst. Shu Keigetsu is not looking for you to return the favor. All she wants is for you to accept her feelings and stop behaving so recklessly."

As Gyoumei watched the Maiden hang her head, he picked out one of the cooler cups of tea and offered it to her. "Does that make sense to you?"

Reirin cradled the teacup in both hands and lapsed into silence.

At length, she spoke in a small, trembling voice. "It…it does not."

Soft ripples danced across the surface of the tea. She sounded like a child.

"Debts must be repaid," she said. "If you've caused someone trouble, you must atone, and if someone has done you a kindness, you must reciprocate."

Favors were to be returned. That was the principle by which Reirin had lived her whole life. If she made those around her worry, she would cover up her poor health so as not to cause them further distress. Everyone treated her kindly, so she put color in her cheeks with makeup to make them happy. Her mother had died giving birth to her, so she lived on despite her illness to ensure the woman could rest in peace.



Debts called for repayment, and sins called for reparations. Striking this balance was the only way she had managed to keep her wobbling body upright.

"She was kind enough to reach out to me…even when I've done nothing to deserve it. I cannot take that for granted. I must pay her back—and soon."

Each time Reirin broke into a fever, she was reminded that she didn't have much time left. The same went for each time she woke up nauseated. Each time she practically passed out atop her bed. Whenever she couldn't stomach her food, whenever she saw her pallid likeness in the mirror, whenever she struggled to breathe for the briefest of moments. She couldn't bring it up to anyone else, but the smallest aspects of her daily life always filled her with a sense of urgency.

She couldn't take advantage of anyone's kindness. If she relaxed for even a moment, she would never will herself to stand again.

"I don't have much time," she finished.

Gyoumei held his tongue and gazed upon his fiancée. His silence was partially owed to the glimpse he'd gotten of her hidden darkness, but he also suspected that feelings even she had yet to identify still lay buried deep within her. Normally, no matter how she felt on the inside, an obedient girl like Reirin would have at least brought the proffered teacup to her lips.

The problem runs deep indeed…but this might be as far as we get today, Gyoumei thought with a small frown and a sigh.

Not long ago, Reirin had given up on forming genuine connections with others or wanting things for herself. Seeing as she had only just begun to regain the proper emotional range of a teenage girl, he couldn't expect her to work out all the nuances in one go.

"For now, just acknowledge that Shu Keigetsu is worried about you." He placed his hands over Reirin's, which were gripping the teacup hard enough to turn her knuckles white. "She considers you an irreplaceable friend."

Then the unexpected happened. Reirin suddenly relaxed her grip, and tears poured from her eyes like a taut thread had snapped.

"Is that true?" The tears streamed down her face and dripped onto the ends of her sleeves. "Am I truly someone irreplaceable to Lady Keigetsu?"

As the wet droplets seeped into her robes, Reirin's forehead creased. Her face twisted into a grimace, teardrops slipping past her defenses. For the first time in quite a while, she actually looked her age.

"I…find that difficult to believe," she said.

"What? Why?"

"Because…" Clenching the teacup in her hands once more, Reirin bared the feelings she'd been bottling up for days. "Because Lady Keigetsu can make better friends than me in no time…"

"Hrm?" Gyoumei straightened up with a serious look and stared down at Reirin for a few long moments. "No, I don't think—" He started to say something, but after glancing around the room, he bit back the words and nodded. "Right. Go on."

"Yes, sir…"

Since Reirin was looking at the floor to hide her tears, she couldn't see what kind of face her cousin was making. Still, he had instructed her to keep talking, so she did her best to string her thoughts into coherent sentences.

Gyoumei's words had triggered a flood of emotion inside her. After averting her eyes from that roiling mass of feelings for too long, she at last lifted the lid and let them see the light of day.

"When I came running from Treacherous Tan Peak, I saw Lady Keigetsu having tea under a pavilion with the other Maidens. She

chatted with everyone so amicably that I was dazzled by the sight."

"Mm-hmm."

"That was when it hit me…that Lady Keigetsu was going to be all right. She would be just fine without me. She could make everyone else…make things *work* with everyone else."

"I see."

Feelings coursed through her too fast to put into words. She said things in the wrong order, and the gist of it all was childish, but Gyoumei listened carefully all the while.

Forgetting to set the teacup back on the table, Reirin went on, "Lady Keigetsu is such a wonderful person. She grew up in unfortunate circumstances, but as soon as one gets to know her better, her charms become immediately apparent. I was reminded of that anew."

When she closed her eyes, she saw that pavilion bathed in the red light of the torches. The sight of Keigetsu casually bantering with the other Maidens, wearing her emotions on her sleeve. The girl's back as she turned on her heel and retreated to that bright spot.

At the time, Reirin had been tempted to tug on her friend's sleeve and hold her back. For a fleeting moment, she had thought to stop Keigetsu from leaving the nest, and she was ashamed of herself for it.

"I felt responsible, that's all."

"I'd do the same for anyone."

Where did she get off being so selfish? She was only one of Keigetsu's many friends.

"I realized I had gotten ahead of myself. By chance, I happened to become her first friend…but I would soon become expendable," Reirin told herself, the tea shuddering as she gripped the cup tighter.

She couldn’t overstep her bounds. She had no right to reach out.

“That is all the truer when I am bound to die and leave her behind.”

Reirin had merely stated a self-evident fact, yet her voice trembled as she said it. When had she become so weak and foolish?

“Or so I believed…but then Lady Keigetsu rushed to my rescue last night. She always shines so bright, like a comet. I have no right to burden her…and yet, she never fails to show up in my times of need. The least I can do is repay her somehow.”

Impatience had driven Reirin during her confrontations with Akim and Genyou. She had brimmed with energy, and her mind had been sharp. Defeating them would help Keigetsu, after all. When she tricked Genyou into nearly beheading her and when she refused to remove the bracelet, her excitement had gotten the better of her. Or perhaps “desperation” was a better word for it.

It was something she could do for Keigetsu.

It was *all* she could do for Keigetsu.

“I wish to do something for Lady Keigetsu while I still have value. Last night, she told me that she wouldn’t let me forget what she had done. I owe her a great debt. I must pay her back as soon as possible—before it’s too late.”

If she caught the sorcerer, it would bring an end to Genyou’s revenge. He would lose his reason for suppressing the Daoist arts, and the world would become a place where Keigetsu could live without fear.

“Moreover, if I make myself useful…perhaps I can live on in Lady Keigetsu’s memory.”

Keigetsu would surely go on to live the happy life she deserved. As she beamed under brilliant rays of sun, it would be nice if—just every now and then—she remembered that a girl named Kou Reirin had once made up the ground beneath her feet.

"In the end, I suppose it all came down to my own greed." The more Reirin talked, the more she realized how selfish her motivations had been, and a self-deprecating smile rose to her lips. "All I wanted was to be first place in Lady Keigetsu's eyes. But the reality is that I am not, so I hoped to do something useful enough for her to remember me by."

The longer she went on, the more pathetic she felt. She couldn't believe how immature and self-centered she had been.

"And so I rushed into things, only to anger Lady Keigetsu as a result. I'm such a fool."

"You *really* are," a voice rang out from behind her.

Reirin whipped around with a start, only to be rendered speechless. There stood Shu Keigetsu, hands on her hips and wearing the Kou Maiden's own face.

"Wha…? Lady… Huuuh?!" sputtered Reirin, springing from her chair fast enough to knock it over. She dropped her teacup in the process, which Gyoumei nimbly caught and set back on the table, chuckling.

Heedless of Reirin's panic, he greeted Keigetsu—and Keishou, who was peeking in from the doorway—with a jerk of his chin. "You did a good job sneaking in, Shu Keigetsu. Color me impressed."

In truth, it was the crown prince himself who had ordered the two court ladies to bring her here. He had sat Reirin down with her back to the door so she wouldn't notice Keigetsu entering the room.

"Y-Your Highness?! How could you?!"

"Reirin, consider this your punishment for disobeying my order and saying anything other than 'Yes, sir.' You are to spend at least the next half hour talking with Shu Keigetsu. You are forbidden from putting up a brave front or downplaying your feelings for that entire duration." He faced Keigetsu and ordered, "Tell me if she does." And with that, he briskly exited the room.

"Your Highness!" Reirin called out, but he shut the door firmly behind himself, leaving her at a loss.

When she spun back around, she found Keigetsu standing next to the chair, hands still planted firmly on her hips.

A heavy silence settled between them. Unable to bear it, Reirin broached, "Er… H-how much of that did you hear?"

"Everything after you broke down and thought, 'Drink the damn tea!'" Keigetsu replied, raising an eyebrow.

For once, Reirin was first among them to start shouting. "That was almost the entire thing!"

She clapped her hands over her face and gave a soundless moan. The shock had dried her tears, but her cheeks turned red as a trade-off, her blood boiling with shame.

This is a disaster!

Keigetsu had heard everything: how Reirin couldn't bring herself to celebrate her best friend's success, how she had secretly grown weary of her own many illnesses, and how she had run in circles trying to make a difference in Keigetsu's life. And this despite her always insisting that Keigetsu should get closer to other people, or going on about how much the Kou clan valued independence.

I wish there was a hole I could crawl into… No, I wish I could punch myself in the face!

As Reirin instinctively scanned the room for a blunt object, Keigetsu said, "Kou Reirin."

"Y-yes?!"

"You are an absolute fool."

"Yes, ma'am! I am an absolute fool!" Reirin parroted, shrinking in on herself.

Keigetsu hung her head and pressed her lips into a tight line.

"Lady Keigetsu? What is it?"

Upon closer inspection, the girl's eyes were watering. Keigetsu exhaled a deep breath, as though putting something behind her, then turned her gaze back up again. "Look," she began, punctuating each and every word. "Let me make something clear. I've only been playing nice with the court ladies and the other Maidens because I knew it's what *you* would do."

Reirin blinked. This came as a surprise; she had always assumed that it was Keigetsu's dream to get along with the people around her. "Um, really?"

Keigetsu narrowed her eyes. "Obviously. Why else would I waste my time with people who change their tune as soon as they start seeing results? The other Maidens only started talking to me because I moved up the ranks after the Rite of Reverence, and the court ladies only warmed up to me because I helped you out a few times."

"I don't think that's—"

"But it *feels* that way to me!" Keigetsu blurted out, then mussed up her hair in frustration. "Argh! No! I'm not here to talk about my incurable inferiority complex! That isn't my point."

A flush spread across her cheeks. She gritted her teeth as though fighting something within herself, then went on in a strangled voice, "My point is that you're the only one who looked my way from the start."

It would have been so much easier to start yelling. Her voice trembled with the effort of speaking softly.

"When I was at rock bottom, when everyone else derided me as a sewer rat, you were the only one to spare me a glance. You were the only one who offered me a hand, and you were the only one who kept encouraging me no matter how bad things got."

Keigetsu no longer shouted at Reirin for not "getting it." One at a time, she clumsily plucked words from the depths of her heart and laid them out atop a plate.

"You think you just *happened* to become my first friend? Wrong. It's because I became friends with you that I could become friends with anyone else."

Reirin listened in a daze to this moving speech. Each and every word shone a light on the depths of her heart. Was it because Keigetsu was speaking so slowly? Reirin was overcome with emotion, and her nose stung.

Keigetsu balled her hands into fists and faced her breathless friend head-on. "Because you were the first friend I ever made, you'll always be special. Isn't that obvious?"

Her face was bright red, and tears had begun to fall from her eyes.

"And so…"

Keigetsu did not scream. Voice quaking, she looked Reirin straight in the eye and said:

"I'm worried about you. Don't take needless risks. Rethink your strategy."

For a while, Reirin stared back at Keigetsu and said nothing. Although it was her own face she was looking at, the soul inside made those eyes positively radiant. Each word spoken to her glittered like a star, and Reirin had to stop and gaze up in wonder before responding.

"Lady Keigetsu."

"What?"

"You, er…" After playing back the speech a few more times in her head, she picked out the most accessible part and cradled the words close to her heart. "You were worried?"

It was as though something Reirin had only ever seen in silhouette had suddenly gained mass and color. Even after all this time, she had to carefully inspect the declaration by repeating it back.

"That's right," said Keigetsu.

"About me?"

"Yes." With a loud click of her tongue, Keigetsu wiped the tears from her eyes. "When I said that I 'wouldn't let you forget this' yesterday, I meant that I wanted you to stop stressing me out. How did you take that to mean that I wanted you to repay me for my concern? How stupid can you be?"

Unfazed by the harsh insult, Reirin took a step forward, both hands still pressed to her chest. "And you were worried about me because I'm your friend?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"A special one?"

Like chasing after the stars, Reirin hoarded every precious word. Keigetsu finally snapped and shouted, "Give it a rest! I already said that!"

"I'm so happy!"

Reirin rushed forward and flung herself at Keigetsu in a hug.

"Eek! Stop clinging to me!"

"I refuse!"

Keigetsu immediately tried to push her away, but Reirin skillfully evaded the attempt and tightened her arms around her friend.

"Seriously, stop! You ought to know how brittle these bones—" Keigetsu started to raise a fuss, but as soon as she heard a small sniffle next to her ear, she stopped screaming.

"Lady Keigetsu." Reirin hugged the Shu Maiden hard enough to deny her a look at her face. "Allow me to make a shameful confession."

Reirin had to tell her. After this girl had laid down her arms and communicated her feelings with gentle, measured words, she owed her that much. She would lower her own defenses and express the

feelings she'd kept bottled up, no matter how embarrassing or repellent they were.

"I was feeling petulant. *I* wanted to be your most important friend."

Her voice shook. The moment she put her feelings into words, they seemed so childish, and she second-guessed whether she should even be saying it.

"I always wished so desperately to see you succeed, yet as soon as I saw you getting along with the others, I thought, 'Oh, so I was never actually special'…and it made me want to cry. In my desperation, I got it into my head that I had to offer *something* to make me stand out from the crowd…but all I managed to do was make you angry."

Reirin was filled with doubt. Would Keigetsu get fed up with her infantile ramblings? Would laying these contemptible feelings bare disgust her? Or were these the kinds of issues everyone struggled with in their interpersonal relationships?

"Lately, I've been getting greedier and greedier. I have come to forget my station, long for first place…and even fear the death I once accepted."

Her emotions were in turmoil. Her words were as disjointed as the scattered pearls of a broken necklace, and she found it impossible to control her voice. She couldn't remember it ever being so difficult to speak slowly.

"I am degenerating into a weak, unsightly person. E-even so…"

Hugging Keigetsu tighter—praying with all her heart, like making a wish upon a star—Reirin went on thus:

"For all my faults, would you allow me to remain your dearest friend of all?"

For a long time, Keigetsu said nothing. But neither did she push her friend away, and Reirin felt hot tears dampen the fabric near her shoulder.

"There's nothing to 'allow.' You already are," Keigetsu eventually replied, her voice muffled.

Reirin jerked upright, and this time the Shu Maiden snorted and shoved her back.

"So? What part of that confession was supposed to be shameful?" Keigetsu asked, sweeping back her hair and curling her lips into a smirk. The tip of her nose was still red, but she was back to her usual haughty self.

"Huh?"

"Frankly, that was a bit of a letdown," Keigetsu said firmly. "You say you've gotten unsightly? Give me a break. Your old self was considerably more insufferable. If anything, this is an overdue improvement."

Reirin stared blankly at her, wondering if this was an attempt at consideration.

"I mean it," Keigetsu added with a completely straight face, at which the Kou Maiden burst into helpless laughter.

Oh, I should have known! Reirin thought.

This girl was easily upset, quick to feel discouraged, and prone to lashing out—but that also made her a vibrant soul, more tolerant of negative emotions than anyone. She was as radiant as a comet, capable of blowing all Reirin's worries away with a scant few sentences.

"You're such a peculiar person, Lady Keigetsu!"

Much to Reirin's surprise, the flood of laughter never seemed to recede. Her eyes filled with tears, and soon she was crying and laughing at the same time.

With the exact same kind of half sob, half laugh, Keigetsu shouted, "And *you* are such a pain in the neck!"

Neither of them could say what was so funny. But as Reirin and Keigetsu peered into one another's eyes, their emotions got

away from them, and for a while they just stood around giggling.

At long last, Reirin got her mirth under control and wiped her eyes. “Oh dear, this is no time to be laughing. If we don’t catch that sorcerer soon, His Majesty will kill us both.” Feeling a weight was off her shoulders, she fixed her friend with a tender gaze and said, “Very well, Lady Keigetsu. I shall think of something better. I won’t allow the sorcerer to take my qi or my soul. I will take off this bracelet and come up with another plan.”

She gently caressed the braid wrapped snugly around her wrist. Earlier, she had been convinced that it would be most efficient to act as the bait, but in hindsight, she had no idea why she had been so hung up on that method. Her best friend was worried sick about her, so she was better off devising a different strategy.

“Yes, you do that,” Keigetsu arrogantly shot back.

The bell announcing midday rang outside the open window, and the pair exchanged glances.

“It’s already the first hour of the horse. We only have an hour left before we’re due to share our plan with His Majesty,” said Reirin.

“We certainly wasted a lot of time,” Keigetsu spat. “We’d better gather everyone in this room and get to strategizing.”

She approached the window, thinking to close it before they left the room, but froze as soon as she heard music coming from outside. Following it to the source, she saw the pavilion in the middle of the pond. Beneath the shadow of the roof, someone was playing a flute with their back turned to the girls.

“Who’s playing?” she asked.

“Hm?”

“That flute.”

Reirin strained her ears beside Keigetsu, then nodded. “Oh, that would be His Majesty. He apparently likes to play the instrument by himself from time to time. I imagine he’s quite frustrated to have his hands tied, so perhaps he needed a distraction.”

"Hmm…" Keigetsu lowered her eyes and took some time to appreciate the melody. "Is this a requiem? A song to put souls to rest?"

"My, does it sound that way to you?"

"Yes. It really resonates, you know? I can practically feel it putting my mind at ease. I can understand why His Majesty would choose to play it when he's feeling agitated." Keigetsu seemed quite intrigued. Despite her distaste for music, she rested her chin in her hand on the windowsill and listened intently. "Whoever wrote it was a straightforward sort. It's not especially sophisticated, but that makes it easier to get immersed in. It gets stuck in your head before you even try to remember it. Unaffected songs like this tend to be pretty powerful from a magical standpoint too."

"You would consider this song 'powerful'?"

"Yes. I doubt I'd have any trouble memorizing *this* song. At the end of the day, all things really do have a level of magical affinity. If this had been our song for the Repose of Souls, I might have had an easier time of it."

Reirin stared long and hard as Keigetsu mumbled to herself. When her friend attempted to close the window, Reirin stopped her, leaned in, and asked, "Pardon me for asking, Lady Keigetsu, but would lyrics increase the song's power?"

"Hm? Lyrics?" Keigetsu frowned, caught off guard by the question. "Hard to say… It would depend on what they are. So long as they don't clash with the melody, the answer is probably yes. Words are essentially a form of incantation."

"If the poem came first, and the melody was added after the fact, surely the two halves would be in harmony, yes?"

"Well, those odds are better than the reverse. When a song starts from the melody, the lyrics can sound forced, or the rhythm of the lyrics and the notes of the song can be mismatched, making it really hard to si—" Just as Keigetsu was getting swept up in the

conversation and airing her grievances, she abruptly whipped her head up. "Wait, what are you up to?"

"Devising a new plan," said Reirin, grinning. "I have done as you asked and come up with a strategy that involves removing this bracelet and keeping myself out of harm's way. You see…"

After Reirin revealed her idea, Keigetsu shot her a withering look. "I'm not convinced that counts as rethinking your strategy… But sure, let's give it a try."

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Around the same time, one man had his ear pressed to the other side of the door.

"Oh, good. Sounds like they made up."

As Keishou eavesdropped without a hint of shame, he cast a pitying glance at his companion, who was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. "Really, though, Your Highness, how did you get stuck mediating between your future wives?"

Needless to say, the other man was Gyoumei. The long-suffering crown prince gazed out of the cloister, his eyes glazing over. "An excellent question." His voice was tinged with exhaustion, but the look on his face said, *What am I going to do with those girls?*

Keishou leaned forward to say something, but before he could open his mouth, Gyoumei tore himself away from the wall and muttered, "At least we can focus on meeting Father's demands now." A sharp light glinted in his intelligent eyes. "No self-respecting crown prince would leave all the strategizing to his Maidens. It's time to come up with a plan of our own and put an end to this."

"Yes, Your Highness," Keishou responded with a bow, his expression sobering.

At that moment, the door opened from the inside.

"Oh! Your Highness! Brother Junior!"

"You were listening through the door?!"

It was Reirin and Keigetsu.

"This is His Majesty's bedroom, so we couldn't very well leave you Maidens to use it unsupervised," Gyoumei said, and Keishou hastily agreed.

"Exactly! It's definitely not that we were planning to step in if things came to blo—"

As the men made excuses, one defiantly lifting his chin and the other flapping his hands back and forth, Reirin cut them off with a smile. "I'm glad you're here. We worked out a new plan to catch the sorcerer, and we would like to hear your thoughts."

"A new plan? Already?" asked Gyoumei, incredulous.

Brimming with confidence, Reirin replied, "Yes! We have devised a clever strategy that draws on our strengths."

"Your strengths?"

The two men looked the Maidens up and down, then traded puzzled looks.

"Another explosion?" Gyoumei mused aloud.

"It could be vandalism," Keishou suggested.

"Arson…"

"Don't discount blackmail."

As they whispered among themselves, Keigetsu flushed a deep red. "Excuse me, Your Highness, Lord Keishou! Kindly refrain from lumping me together with this madwoman!"

Reirin met the men's reactions with a blank stare, then bashfully pressed a hand to her cheek. "Oh, don't be absurd. I would never do anything so outrageous."

The other three fixed her with looks of disbelief. Unfazed, she clapped her hands together and tilted her head to one side.

"You see, we were thinking we'd act the part of proper Maidens," she said, "and focus our efforts on singing."

With a smile that at least *looked* sweet, Reirin went on to convey the plan she had discussed with Keigetsu.

"Oho."

"Intriguing."

The crown prince and his trusted aide nodded along, stroking their chins and folding their arms.

Reirin's brother broke into a pleased smile. "Good for you, Reirin. You've learned to think up plans that rely on the help of those around you." He glanced at his younger sister, then at Keigetsu. The look in his eyes was one of heartfelt gratitude. "It's a welcome change."

After that, they worked out the details and divided up the roles, then traded nods and strode out of the room in perfect sync. They passed through the cloister and arrived at a gorgeous pond with lotuses floating on the surface. In its center was the open-air pavilion where Genyou was playing his flute.

"We extend our greetings to Your Imperial Majesty," Gyoumei called out to him from behind, speaking on behalf of the group.

His father paused his song. On the end of his flute hung a bloodstained tassel.

As Genyou slowly turned around, Gyoumei knelt, while the other three prostrated themselves.

"If you've thought of a plan, out with it. If not, leave me at once," the supreme ruler of the kingdom bluntly commanded.

Reirin lifted her face. "Then allow me to start, if I may be so bold." Meeting the emperor's icy gaze with Shu Keigetsu's radiant eyes, she firmly declared, "We have devised a plan to catch the sorcerer."

Chapter 6:
Reirin Teaches

"LOOK, LEANNE! The blanket of ice over the river is gone! Not a trace of it left!"

"That military officer was telling the truth!"

As Leanne listened to the excited ramblings of her two childhood friends, she gazed out over the water in awe.

It was late in the afternoon, one day out from the Day of Ultimate Yin, and they were standing on the riverbank not far from their settlement. This was normally the time of day when the kids would be busy tending the fields or weaving textiles, but today they had ditched work and made their way to the river just past the forest. This river flowed from a lake to the north, zigzagged its way downstream, and—perhaps because the flow stagnated around those meanders—always froze over until early spring.

But lo, the sheet of ice covering the surface had been shattered to bits. Most of it must have been washed away soon afterward, as only a few stray chunks bobbed around the rocks jutting up from the water.

"I never imagined they could break up the ice in a single night," one boy muttered, shaking his head in disbelief.

"He said they used explosives, right? That's awesome!" said the other, sounding genuinely impressed.

While the boys rejoiced, Leanne muttered, "I had my doubts when the military officer came by yesterday…but I guess it really *is* possible to break up the ice with manpower."

As a matter of fact, Leanne and her friends had come all this way to check on the river because a military officer (his name was

Kou Keikou, apparently) had come by yesterday, claiming to have blown up the river as a flood-control measure.

Two nights ago—the night after they had completed the Congee Conferment Rite and seen the Maiden and her entourage off—the locals had been fast asleep inside their ramshackle huts when they were jolted awake by a thunderous roar. The noise had been loud enough to send vibrations through the earth. With the Day of Ultimate Yin drawing near, the residents had panicked, thinking it a terrible omen, and spent the remainder of the night trembling with fear. Tou was usually the one to calm everyone down in these situations, but as luck would have it, he had run off to pick herbs.

As they were floundering about without a leader to guide them, the military officer Kou Keikou had arrived on the scene with the sunrise to his back. He was supposed to have accompanied the Maiden back to the encampment, but he had split off from her group and doubled back.

"Apologies for the lack of advance notice, friends!" he'd said. *"That was actually a measure to prevent the summer floods. We blew up a section of the ice on the river east of this settlement."*

It took his audience a while to process the smooth explanation. They had blown up the ice on the river? To prevent the summer floods?

When the locals shot him blank stares, the lone military officer had elaborated without a hint of fatigue about him. He told them that there were many rivers and lakes around Treacherous Tan Peak, and some of them would freeze over during the cold season. As the cold abated, melted hunks of ice would clump together and form a natural dam. When the weather warmed up during summer and the ice dam melted, all the impounded water would gush forth. Thus, if they broke up the areas liable to turn into dams just as the ice had begun to coalesce, they could prevent the floods.

"Of course, that would be tricky to accomplish with manual labor. And so we prepared this black powder for the occasion!"

He had then proudly showed off a pot that, as far as Leanne's people could tell, was filled with nothing but fine, dark granules. According to him, if you mixed it in just the right proportions, stored it in just the right container, and ignited it just the right way, it would cause a tremendous explosion.

"We still need to break the ice on a lake farther upstream, but that will have to wait for another day. We chose to carry out the first trial ourselves. It was the will of His Imperial Highness and his Maiden."

His powerful assertion had the crowd exchanging glances. Had the crown prince and his Maiden—who had already graced them twice for the Congee Conferment Rite—really made the call to help them? That would be a blessing beyond measure. Compared to serving them a single bowl of congee, this would more reliably benefit a much greater range of people.

"We really should *do a topographical survey and adjust the watercourses and retention basins, but that would require time and funds. While this is nothing but a stopgap measure, you should all be aware of the option to blow up the ice until we find a permanent solution,"* Kou Keikou had added as a caveat, but the residents actually preferred the practical, fast-acting fix. They needed to survive the upcoming summer before they could worry about a more fundamental solution ten years down the line.

The crowd had expressed their gratitude by going down on their knees and bowing deeply. Those who had suffered from past floods were nearly moved to tears. Meanwhile, the children were split into two groups: those struggling to follow the logic, confused looks on their faces, and those who understood it but had their doubts. Needless to say, Leanne was in the second category.

As young as these kids were, they had never known a floodless summer. Although the degree of damage varied from year to year, the settlement was always powerless to stop its suffering. They had come to view their miseries as an invariable fact of life.

And so Leanne had ditched her farmwork for the day and made her way to the bank of the allegedly detonated river. The ice had been solid enough to support a person's full weight without breaking, so she found it hard to believe that it could be shattered with such a fine powder. Convinced that the military officer was lying, she had set out to catch him red-handed—only to be blown away by the sight of the pulverized ice.

"But look how thick it was," Leanne said to herself, scooping up a clump of ice drifting by. Even now that it had melted enough around the edges to turn clear, it was hard as a rock and too big to fit snugly in her hands. Not even slamming it on the ground or stomping on it could break it.

And yet, the Maiden had shattered it to bits.

"Say, would you care to make a bet with me?"

Suddenly, the gentle voice of that freckled Maiden played back in Leanne's head.

"Should I succeed at performing a small miracle, I want you to stop insisting that nothing will ever change."

She had met Leanne's unrelenting impudence with an impish smile. When Leanne blustered that nothing would ever change, that divine intervention would never come, the Maiden had proven otherwise—and in such a striking way.

This must have been the "miracle" she was talking about.

If it was, Leanne had decisively lost the bet. She wasn't the crying type, yet the sight of the flowing river had nearly brought tears to her eyes, and she had been tempted to take back everything she'd said.

She sure pulls some crazy stunts.

When the Maiden proposed a bet with that oh-so-ladylike smile of hers, she had actually been hatching a dangerous plot to blow up the ice. The thought was almost enough to make Leanne burst out laughing.

In hindsight, the Maiden had always been like that. Just as she seemed content to let the locals berate her, she would suddenly go fishing, and just as she appeared to submit to enemy brigands, she would teach them a lesson with a boiling pot of congee. She was refined yet unconventional, with a mesmerizing quality about her.

At long last, Leanne was ready to admit something to herself: There were people out there willing to offer them a helping hand.

Her Ladyship plans to visit Treacherous Tan Peak one more time, right?

Leanne recalled the Maiden saying as much before she left. Would she really come, though?

No, knowing her, she would definitely make good on her word.

I can't wait to see her.

As Leanne fought to keep her secret hopes in check, one of her friends finally tore his eyes from the river and shouted, "All right! Let's head back to the settlement and tell the military officer that the ice really did shatter! And then I'm gonna help him out! Next comes breaking the ice on the lake upstream, right?"

"Did you forget, dummy?" the other one shot back. "The military officer's been off searching the mountains since yesterday. He won't be back at the settlement." With a sigh, he mused aloud, "Where'd Doctor Tou run off to, anyway? I hope he comes home soon."

The reason for his glum tone was that Kou Keikou had gone looking for Tou and been constantly on the move ever since. Right when the kids were warming up to the exuberant military officer, he had wrapped up his succinct explanation of the black powder and inspected each and every one of the residents' faces. Then, after saying he was going to check on the brigands and venturing into their shack, he had emerged with a panic-stricken look and left to track down Tou, the community leader.

"The grown-ups said that the brigands all died. Doctor Tou was supposed to be in charge of watching them, so it's no wonder the military officer is so mad."

"Pretty much. But the doctor left to pick medicinal herbs for us, so it'd be nice to cut him some slack." The boy turned to his female companion. "Don't you think, Leanne?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah, sure." Leanne automatically nodded, but her response was a noncommittal one. She wasn't convinced that Tou had actually gone to pick herbs.

The children had witnessed Tou heading into the mountains before dawn yesterday, just shy of Kou Keikou's visit. At the time, Leanne was scared out of her wits over the unexplained boom. Afraid that the approaching Day of Ultimate Yin had brought a natural disaster with it, she kept wandering outside every few hours to take a look around.

On one of those occasions, she'd spotted Tou wrapped up in a straw raincoat and headed into the mountains. She couldn't see much of his face, but Tou was the only local that tall.

With how anxious she was feeling, Leanne was relieved to see the community counselor. She had rushed over and called out, *"Doctor T—"*

The moment he turned around, she had been stunned into silence. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that her whole body had gone stiff. It was an instinctive reaction of fear and disgust, like gasping in horror upon seeing a bug jump out of a corner.

"Yes? What is it, Leanne?" Tou had asked, reaching a hand toward her.

Right as his bony fingers were about to brush her cheek, Leanne had instinctively pulled back. She slowly edged toward the rows of huts behind her.

"Leanne? Is something wrong, dear?"

The man had moved closer, his voice as sweet as honey, only to abruptly drop his hand.

"Doctor Tou!"

"Doctor, did you hear that huge boom earlier?!"

A few more children came bounding up from behind Leanne. She wasn't the only one who had been too worked up to stay in bed.

"Oh, Doctor Tou! We're so glad you're all right!"

"What was that sound? Do you have any idea?"

And it wasn't just kids. Anxious adults had emerged from every corner, pretending to have been drawn over by the children. Although there was no point in taking up arms against a natural disaster, they had equipped themselves as best they could—some brandishing hoes, others wearing cooking pots like helmets.

"What's the raincoat for, Doctor Tou?" one of them had asked. *"Planning to go somewhere?"*

"Er, yes," Tou had mumbled, turning his back to the crowd. *"It sounds like there may have been a landslide, so I'm concerned about the herbs growing on the mountain. As some of them can only be harvested around this time of year, it's best if I go take a look."*

Not a moment later, he had excused himself and taken off into the pitch-dark mountains.

"But it's dangerous to go now!" someone had lamented. *"He could get caught in a landslide."*

"He's so diligent."

The locals had watched him disappear into the distance, fiddling with their hoes in dismay.

Back in the present, one of Leanne's friends said, "It's rough not to have our leader around during a crisis, but the way he can care about medicinal herbs at a time like this is part of what makes him so great."

"You said it," the other replied. "Seriously, though, shouldn't someone have stopped him? I hear the mountain's crawling with brigands and muggers, and sometimes people'll come across corpses reduced to skin and bones."

"Yikes! Sure hope Doctor Tou doesn't die out there."

Leanne responded with nothing more than a hum of acknowledgment.

The boys were right. Tou's determination to pick herbs in spite of the risks made him a model doctor and a wonderful, caring man. Why, then, had she done nothing to stop him from leaving? Worse, she'd even tried to run away when he spoke to her.

It's just, well…when Doctor Tou turned around, something about his face didn't look right.

She thought back to how Tou had looked the other day. Most days, the man's features exuded a refinement and intelligence rarely seen among residents of the settlement. Those droopy, grayish eyes of his gave him a gentle, friendly air. But when he looked at her then, his eyes had held an eerie gleam, and his face had been mottled with dark patches. Granted, his raincoat had been pulled over his head, not to mention that it was still dark out at the time, so it was possible Leanne had been seeing things.

That wasn't the first time I've gotten that bad feeling.

Idly rubbing at the goosebumps on her upper arms, Leanne recalled the colored threads Tou had given her. When she wove those into a bracelet, an ineffable sense of foreboding had washed over her.

That red thread felt especially wrong.

In Leanne's culture, it was a long-standing tradition for women to weave those bracelets. Making them was a way of praying for the recipient's well-being or for their wishes to come true, so it was important to pick colors that fit the wearer.

When Leanne had been instructed to make one for the Maiden as thanks for the Congee Conferment Rite, the first thing to spring to her mind was the vast earth, so she had initially opted to use a yellow thread. Tou had immediately ordered her to use the red one, a dark scowl on his face. The menacing look had taken Leanne by surprise. All traces of his usual serenity had vanished, and he had grumpily pushed the thread into her hands.

To be fair, it *had* been a gift for the Shu Maiden, so perhaps it only made sense to match her clan color. Convincing herself with that logic, Leanne had woven the red thread into the center of the braid. Yet the provided material didn't feel right in her fingers, and she couldn't shake a nagging feeling as she went about her work. Rather than frustration with the way she was struggling, it may have been fear of the man standing watch over her all throughout the process.

Tou was knowledgeable and never resorted to violence. He was the most trustworthy adult in the whole community. Or so Leanne had always believed, but in that moment, there had been something uncanny about him.

"Here's hoping Doctor Tou makes it back safe," came one of her friend's voices, snapping Leanne back to reality.

"Same!" said the second boy.

Should I tell the others? Leanne wondered for a fleeting moment, casting her two friends a sidelong glance.

After some debate, she discarded the thought. The military officer had already gone looking for Tou, so it wasn't Reirin's place to get involved. It wasn't worth dwelling on two mildly unsettling encounters.

"Agreed," Leanne said with a nod, then turned away from the river along with them.

Upon passing through the forest and making it back to the settlement, they blinked at the sight that awaited them. A circle of people had formed near the cluster of huts.

"What's going on over there?"

It didn't take long for them to hear cries of "Milady!" or "We thank you for coming!" from the crowd, and the two boys exchanged glances.

"It's gotta be the Maiden!"

"She came back!"

Their eyes lit up, and they broke into a run. Leanne rushed after them.

I can't believe I get to see her so soon! she thought, heart thumping with excitement.

She debated what she ought to say first upon making eye contact. Perhaps it would be best to start by apologizing for all her previous rudeness.

The "Shu Keigetsu" who had graced Treacherous Tan Peak was no figurehead of a noblewoman. She wasn't a Maiden who merely sang, smiled, and spoke pretty words. She was pragmatic, she was practical, and she stood on the same ground as Leanne and her neighbors.

Just when Leanne had pushed her way through the crowd, the familiar Maiden addressed them with, "Pardon the many intrusions. I must also apologize for bringing such a large group this time." Leanne was so confused that she stopped in her tracks.

Upon closer inspection, a parade of beautiful women had come streaming out of the palanquins behind her. One was so elegant as to be taken for a celestial maiden, one boasted stunning good looks, one had skin as fair as a snow fairy, and one was as small and adorable as a kitten. Although the ladies were dressed in rather plain robes, their gorgeous features and graceful bearing made it clear that they were all high-ranking nobles.

The freckled Maiden standing at the front of the pack smiled and offered the locals an explanation. "Allow me to introduce you. This is my best and dearest friend, Lady Reirin, the Kou Maiden. This

is Lady Seika, the Kin Maiden; this is Lady Kasui, the Gen Maiden; and this is Lady Houshun, the Ran Maiden."

"A-all five Maidens in one place?!"

"What brings them here?!"

A stir swept through the crowd, but she brushed that aside and glanced at the palanquin all the way in the back, its windows pulled firmly shut.

"As for *that* particular palanquin…" For whatever reason, she trailed off with a helpless shrug. "It contains an exceedingly precious treasure, which I shall introduce to you all in due time," she went on more evasively. "In any case, this is an unofficial visit, so please don't go to any trouble to accommodate us."

The locals started asking questions, their consternation evident.

"Er, but what business do the five Maidens have here?"

"Are you ladies 'bout to serve us some more congee?"

The Maiden dressed in vermillion flapped her hands back and forth, surprised. "Oh, no! Today we are here to bestow you with a song, not congee. The task would be too much to handle alone, so I enlisted the help of the other Maidens."

"A song?"

The crowd traded puzzled looks. This was unexpected. Since when did a Congee Conferment Rite include a song?

Gotta admit, I'm intrigued, thought Leanne.

If this had happened before the Maiden served them congee—before she had blown up the sheet of ice—they probably would have met this offer with hostility, screaming, "Screw that! Give us food instead!" or "Singing won't stop the floods!" But now that their most pressing concerns had been addressed, the thought of these high-class Maidens performing for their community held a certain appeal.

"Since ancient times, it has been said that on the Day of Ultimate Yin, the balance of yin and yang will be disrupted, souls will depart their bodies, and calamities will occur," the freckled Maiden at the center of the circle explained, her speech elegant and her voice resonant. "Originally, the term 'Repose of Souls' alluded to calming displaced souls and returning them to their proper vessels. Its connotations were later expanded to include pacifying the spirits of the dead, and it has thus become a Day of Ultimate Yin tradition to sing a requiem both to honor the dead and to ward off evil."

A few of her turns of phrase were difficult to understand, but the point appeared to be that the girls were going to sing a requiem just for them. Leanne's heart leapt with excitement. With such beautiful noblewomen singing it, even a gloomy song like a requiem was bound to be pleasing to the ear. Would they sing in a chorus? Would they dance along to the music? She could hardly wait to watch.

"On that note…we were hoping to teach you all a requiem."

The enthusiastic crowd—Leanne included—went slack-jawed with surprise.

A long silence fell.

A few beats later, the crowd began to buzz.

"Huh?! *We're* going to be singing it?!"

"Correct. It's always best to take matters into one's own hands. Moreover, as you are all still alive and well, you belong among the performers of a requiem, not the audience." The Maiden refused to budge, meeting their clamoring with a sweet smile. What's more, she turned to the row of Maidens and said, "Now then, let's have a word from each of your instructors."

The first to come forth was the lady with the stunning good looks. "Greetings. I am the Kin Maiden, Kin Seika. The arts are all about ambition. I do not plan to coddle you simply because you have no prior singing experience. Only one day remains until the

Day of Ultimate Yin, so expect me to be a strict teacher. I shall brook no whining."

"Uh…"

The locals' eyes darted about nervously.

Next, the maturest of the bunch, a Maiden with a steely yet gorgeous visage, stepped out in front of the group. "I am the Gen Maiden, Gen Kasui. The song we picked for the occasion has a straightforward melody and simple lyrics, so it ought to be easy to memorize. Rest assured, anyone could master it with a six-hour practice session."

"Six hours?!"

Leanne and her neighbors slowly backed away, daunted by her matter-of-fact yet intimidating air.

Hiding the lower half of her face with her sleeves, the girl as adorable as a little critter added, "I am the Ran Maiden, Ran Houshun. Er, for the record, there are twenty-four hours in a day, and it is currently the first hour of the sheep. The eclipse will happen tomorrow at noon, so that leaves us almost twenty-three hours to get ready. We have plenty of time."

Despite the sweet, encouraging "Don't worry!" she tacked on at the end, this implied that they would have to practice the song all night long if they couldn't memorize it in six hours.

"I am the Kou Maiden, 'Kou Reirin,'" said the Maiden as gorgeous and ethereal as a celestial maiden, a faraway look in her eyes. "Please don't hesitate to inform me if you find their teaching styles too intense. All I ask is that you value your own lives."

She sounded almost like a military officer herself.

Last of all, the freckled Maiden's face crinkled into a smile. "Hee hee. You say the silliest things, Lady Kei…Reirin." She then

retook charge of the proceedings, clapping her hands together. "Well then, let's do this with a bang!"

***

"Hup!"

Outside the door of the dilapidated shed, the Shu Maiden—or Reirin, the one wearing her face—adjusted her grip on an armful of straw pillows and mats. The sun had long since set, and a brilliant moon hung in the sky. The chill in the night air was enough to turn Reirin's breath white, but she was in such high spirits that this served as nothing but another source of joy.

After deliberately exhaling a few breaths to watch the white puffs form beneath the moonlight, she broke into a delighted grin. It was so cold—and she was having so much fun.

This chill would probably be quite tough on those unaccustomed to it. I hope the others are doing all right.

Although the bedding blocked her view, she managed to reach out from under it and nudge the sliding door open. Without a single brazier to warm it, the inside of the shed was freezing, but it was still a fraction warmer than the outdoors. Reirin tiptoed across the dark, cramped space, careful not to accidentally kick anyone.

"Excuse me, ladies. I borrowed some straw pillows and mats from the locals."

The four Maidens who had accompanied her to Treacherous Tan Peak were resting in the shed.

Yesterday afternoon, following her confrontation with Genyou and her fight with Keigetsu, Reirin had worked out a new plan to catch the sorcerer. From there, she had explained the situation to the other Maidens—or forced their hands into helping, really—spent the whole night transporting them to Treacherous Tan Peak, and arrived earlier that afternoon. The girls had helped her to teach the locals a song with a certain goal in mind, but the rigorous travel

itinerary combined with the work of instructing a large group had worn them out. By dinnertime, their throats were all sore, so they had asked the locals to clear out a shed and allow them to sleep there. Assuming they would want to wipe themselves clean and change clothes, the men had volunteered to stand watch from a short distance away.

And with all that settled, Reirin had offered to take on the task of carrying the bedding over.

"If using your robe for a blanket is too cold, try wrapping yourself up in one of these mats as well. Then, once you've all had a short rest, er…what would you say to taking these straw pillows and having ourselves what they call a 'pillow fight'?" she bashfully suggested. When there was no reply, she tilted her head to one side. "Hm?"

Upon setting the bedding aside and straining her eyes in the darkness, she was surprised to find all the Maidens lying in an exhausted heap, none of them having so much as changed clothes.

"A-are you all right?!" she exclaimed in a panic. But when she crouched down to check their breathing, she heard the rhythmic sounds of sleep and murmured, "Oh dear."

Here she thought the Maidens had been holding it together, but it seemed they had reached the limits of their stamina.

"They're sound asleep…"

Even Kin Seika, who always stood with her head held high, had practically passed out on the floor. Gen Kasui seemed more likely to be a night owl, yet she had slid to the floor with her back propped against the wall and dozed right off. Ran Houshun had probably made the conscious choice to go to bed, as she was curled up in a corner of the shed.

As for Kou Reirin—or Keigetsu, currently trapped in her body—she appeared wary of the cold. She was lying in the very center of the shed, the place where she would be least likely to feel any drafts, and wrapped up in multiple robes like a caterpillar. Although

her long cascade of hair poked out from the bundle, it was impossible to tell whether she was lying on her back or stomach.

"Um, ladies…?" Reirin hesitantly called out. She felt bad about disturbing their sleep, but her loneliness had gotten the better of her. After all, they had still been awake when she left to pick up the bedding a few minutes ago.

For instance, Keigetsu had been complaining, *"Argh, my feet and my throat are killing me! You're a slave driver, Kou Reirin!"*

And Seika had countered, *"Then would you kindly cease your screaming? It's exhausting to listen to. While you're at it, move out of my way."*

And Houshun had asked, *"Erm, does anyone have any candy, perchance?"*

And Kasui had said, *"Do you mind if I stretch my legs? I'm bound to kick you if you stay where you are."*

The shed had been abuzz with activity, not a beat missed in the conversation but everyone managing to talk past one another. Given how little experience Reirin had with group activities, she had been struck by the quintessential "girls' school" atmosphere of the scene. She'd been dying to join in on the fun as soon as she brought the bedding over, but alas.

"H-hello? Is no one awake? No one at all? Really?" she whispered, cupping both hands around her mouth. She could hear some very soft snoring, but it was possible not all of the Maidens were that deeply asleep yet. "Erm, you'll get better rest if you sleep in a more comfortable position, so why don't we rearrange ourselves and use these pillows? Ideally, we could lay them out five in a row. And then we could gossip. Perhaps even have ourselves a pillow fight…"

No one responded to her suggestions. Well, a low snore drifted over from Kasui's direction, but that was it.

Reirin let out a whine, burying her crestfallen face in her hands. “I was too late.”

Due to her weak constitution, Reirin had never gotten to sleep over at a friend’s house or travel in a large group the way her brothers had. It had been a long-cherished dream of hers to spend the night among a group of fellow kids, indulging in gossip and having fun throwing pillows at each other.

“Weh… But I wanted to stay up talking…and have a pillow fight…”

“How do you still have the energy for that?” came a voice dripping with resentment, accompanied by a wriggle of the cocoon of robes.

Reirin’s face lit up, and she crawled over to where she assumed a head was buried under the mountain of garments. “Lady Keigetsu! You’re still awake? I knew I could count on you!” she gushed, though she endeavored to keep her voice down.

“You just woke me up.” Keigetsu peered out from between the robes to glare at Reirin. “Give me a break… I had to climb Treacherous Tan Peak for the second day in a row…and first we had it out with His Majesty…and to make matters worse, tomorrow is the Day of Ultimate Yin. Let me get some sleep, for mercy’s sake…”

She didn’t hold the glare for long before her eyelids started to droop.

“Oh no! Forgive me for always demanding so much of you, Lady Keigetsu! But I truly am grateful.” When Keigetsu attempted to shut the door on the conversation, Reirin scrambled to wedge her figurative foot in the way and say her thanks. “To my credit, I did attempt to lighten your burden by enlisting the help of the other Maidens. Ah, but the key to the plan still lies with you, our magic-wielding symbol of hope.”

“Uh-huh…”

“And my very best friend in the whole world.”

"Mm…"

"Who will always be special to me."

"…"

Reirin took every chance she saw to emphasize their newly affirmed friendship, but whether inadvertently or by choice, Keigetsu fell back asleep without responding. The Kou Maiden waited to see if her friend's light snoring might give way to a reply, and upon realizing it wasn't going to happen, she broke into a tiny smile.

Not a sardonic smile. A real, bashful one.

She didn't need to hear Keigetsu agree. She already knew they were bound by the strongest friendship imaginable.

"I'll be counting on you tomorrow."

Reirin draped an extra mat over her snoozing friend's huddled form. She made the other Maidens more comfortable as well, slipping pillows under their heads or adding robes to their piles. Seeing as their own clans didn't stand to benefit from this operation, she couldn't thank them enough for accompanying her all the way to Treacherous Tan Peak.

When she rose to her feet and glanced around the shed, she was treated to the sight of her four friends lost in peaceful slumber. A short while ago, Reirin never could have imagined having so many precious things to protect.

"Sleep well, ladies."

After whispering a wish for them to get a good night's rest, she tiptoed out of the shed. Her anticipation of the next day's final showdown was running high, and she hoped the frigid air might calm her nerves.

As she gazed up at the moon, she searched for signs of a bird. *Brother Senior's dove has yet to arrive, I see.*

To guarantee their capture of the magic-wielding Tou, Reirin's team had chosen to carry out their plan on the Day of Ultimate Yin.

Several traps had already been set, but to lure Tou into them, they first needed to track down his whereabouts. The plan was for Keikou, Shin-u, and Akim's secret service to split up across the mountain, locate Tou by the end of the day, and get back in touch.

If they still have yet to find him, either he's done a very good job hiding himself or he's left the mountain altogether.

Pessimistic thoughts seeped into Reirin's mind, but she dismissed them with a furious shake of her head. The secret service had the foot of the mountain surrounded, and they had another measure in place to ensure that the sorcerer didn't come down from the mountain. Tou *had* to be somewhere on Treacherous Tan Peak.

It will be all right. We're bound to catch him. We shall show His Majesty what Lady Keigetsu can do and pave the way for him to authorize magic.

Reirin blew on her frozen hands for warmth. Watching the white clouds dissipate reminded her of the shattered ice on the river, and she thought, *I swear to make a difference.*

She was going to change it all: Genyou's deadlock, the unjust persecution of cultivators, and the mind of a girl who blustered about miracles never happening.

Leanne has had quite a change in attitude.

As she reminisced about the girl who had been hanging around her not long ago, she stroked the red braid on her wrist. After a day apart, Leanne had met Reirin with friendly candor, a complete departure from her previous contempt. Not only had she welcomed the Maidens' visit, she had even been a big help with Reirin's plans, scolding the boys over their hesitance to sing and teaching Reirin how to braid a bracelet of her own.

"Thank you so much, Leanne!" Reirin would often say, eyes sparkling with joy.

Each time, the girl would look off to the side. "It's no big deal. I owe you for losing our bet."

Upon catching the way the tips of Leanne's ears had turned red, Reirin would break into a smile.

Thanks to Leanne and the other Maidens, we've managed to get our part of the preparations done in time. All that's left is—

When Reirin turned her eyes back to the road, still stroking her bracelet, she noticed someone standing just past the dark spot where the row of huts ended, bathed in moonlight.

"Ah," she let slip. It sounded like a soft exhale, but translated into Keigetsu speech, it would probably be something close to *Yuck.*

The subject of her gaze was a man holding a flute and gazing up at the moon: Emperor Genyou.

Given his intense water qi, it would have been ideal for him to stay at Cloud Ladder Gardens and evade the sorcerer's notice, but he had been staunchly unwilling to leave a revenge twenty-five years in the making in someone else's hands. Reirin's team had thus opted to disguise the source of the water qi by bringing along the five Maidens—particularly the Gen-hailing Kasui—and taken Genyou with them to Treacherous Tan Peak. As a trade-off, they had stationed Gyoumei and his strong dragon's qi at the foot of the mountain to discourage the sorcerer from heading to lower ground.

In summary, the five Maidens, Genyou, and Keishou were positioned near the settlement on Treacherous Tan Peak; Keikou, Shin-u, and Akim's secret service were searching the mountain; and Gyoumei was staking out the foot. Bit by bit, they were boxing the sorcerer in and driving him into a corner.

Genyou had insisted that he would remain anonymous and seek no special treatment throughout his stay on Treacherous Tan Peak. True to his word, he'd stayed cooped up in his palanquin the entire time. Normally, when the emperor made an official visit, he would demonstrate his majesty by flying a huge flag bearing the five-clawed dragon, a symbol of the imperial family. The monarch was supposed to be so tightly guarded that even touching said flag

was punishable by death, but the man himself had refused the security and done everything in his power to avoid standing out.

With the still of the night now upon them, he had finally stepped out into the open. He must have wanted the chance to stretch his legs or else been beckoned by the moonlight.

Alerted to the sound of Reirin's voice, Genyou turned his chilly gaze in her direction. Reirin greeted him with a swift bow and gracefully strode over to his side. It would cause problems if she addressed him by his title loudly enough to be overheard.

"How fares Your Majesty?"

"Fine."

"We feel simply terrible that we've been forced to confine you to such a cramped palanquin."

Genyou summarily dismissed her token attempt at consideration. "Spare me. I would rather you focus on our plans for tomorrow than worry about etiquette." Tightening his grip around his flute and refusing to make eye contact, he added, "Our strategy hinges on the abilities of a girl infamously likened to a rat. We cannot be too careful."

Even after hearing her best friend insulted, Reirin was never one to ignore the rules of decorum. She smiled politely and opted for a change of topic. "See that, Your Majesty? There's a hoe lying on the ground over there."

"What of it?"

"Just something I noticed."

Or not. Her animosity was leaking out despite her best efforts.

Bad Reirin! This man is the highest authority in the land. It's not right to think, "You have some nerve to insult Lady Keigetsu when you couldn't hope to carry out this plan without her!" That said, His Majesty certainly has some nerve…

Reirin did her best to rein herself in, only to fail miserably the next moment. Now that she thought about it, Genyou had relentlessly hounded her best friend and nearly killed Reirin herself by Akim's hand. Emperor or not, it was difficult to muster any genuine fondness for him.

While Reirin's eyes lingered on the hoe, Genyou's mouth twisted into the slightest of grimaces. "Looks can be deceiving, I see. I was misled by your fragile exterior. I took you for a dutiful niece, but it turns out you're so wicked, brash, and impulsive as to pick a fight with the emperor."

"Life is full of surprises," Reirin replied without batting an eye. Though her tone was ladylike, her words were anything but. "I used to think of Your Majesty as my gentle uncle, so I was equally shocked when recent events revealed a very different side to you."

Until the persecution of Keigetsu entered the equation, Genyou had seen Reirin as a humble Maiden, and Reirin had seen Genyou as a kindhearted uncle with a serene smile. At this point, however, they had both stopped bothering with appearances. The pair had traded their superficial smiles for similar deadpan expressions—one staring at the moon, the other at a hoe.

I wonder if Aunt Kenshuu is aware of her husband's temperament, Reirin thought, impolite though it was.

It seemed unlikely that her esteemed, all-seeing aunt, the wise Kou Kenshuu, would be oblivious to Genyou's true nature. Assuming she knew the truth, that raised questions of what sort of bond the pair had built. It was hard to picture the conversations between a couple as mismatched as the dynamic, open-minded, cheerful, mischievous Kenshuu and the vindictive, insidious Genyou.

Stop that, Reirin! It's terribly improper to fantasize about the private life of a married couple, and you must never disparage others, not even in the privacy of your mind. As the saying goes, there's no accounting for taste. She made an honest attempt to admonish herself, but she wasn't doing a particularly great job of it.

Ultimately, she opted to cut the conversation short. Standing around talking with someone she found objectionable would do nothing but cut into her precious sleep. "Er, Your Majesty, why don't you head to bed soon? Tomorrow is the long-awaited Day of Ultimate Yin. A good night's rest will go a long way toward achieving your goal."

After staring at the moon in silence for some time, Genyou murmured, "It has been a good many years since I last felt impatient for the dawn." It sounded almost like a soliloquy. "Every time the sun rose over this kingdom, I could feel my brother blaming me. Mornings always filled me with a sense of dread."

Reirin almost stole a glance at Genyou, but she had enough sense to stop herself.

Emperor Genyou always kept to the main palace, and he never stuck around the inner court until morning. No matter how early it was, he would always be found in full formal dress, denying even his own son a glimpse of weakness—and perhaps it was all because that glorious time of day conjured memories of his loathsome past. Prince Gomei was supposed to have lost his life in the middle of the day, not the morning, but the man had always loved the dawn, and Genyou had robbed him of that light twice over. Once when he took his eyesight and again when he took his life.

Come to think of it, even reaching back into my childhood memories, I have never seen nor heard of the emperor sleeping soundly.

He would sit in the dark and make it to morning without a wink of sleep. Reirin could relate to that agony, and she knew it couldn't be eased with superficial sympathies.

"O traveler slumbering at journey's end, what visions dance in shuttered sight? Do they blossom in the domain of life?"

Instead, she chanted the lyrics of the song she had been humming all day long.

"What echoes weave through frosty ears? Do they carry the mirth of those once dear?"

Genyou slowly turned around, but he didn't command her to stop. Picking up on the fact that he was likewise appreciating the lyrics, she crooned the last few verses.

"Sleep, sleep, find peace where a warm breeze blows. From the north comes a heavenly sun to bathe you in its glow…"

This was the song the Maidens had taught the locals, one that had started out as a poem carved into a pillar of the inner court's mausoleum. Its meaning was thus:

O traveler slumbering at journey's end,

What do you see behind closed eyes?

Is it flowers blooming in the land of the living?

What do you hear with ears nipped by cold?

Is it the laughter of those you left behind?

I wish you a peaceful rest where a warm breeze blows.

The sun over Paradise shall soon rise in the north and envelop you in its light.

It was probably a requiem. Its metaphors were straightforward, and it wasn't particularly sophisticated. The choice of the word "north" also came across as odd, seeing as the sun rose in the east. Still, the poem was filled with compassion for the dead, and its melody was so pleasing to the ear that simply humming it could put the mind at ease. As a matter of fact, Keigetsu herself had praised its power to pacify the soul.

Yes, this was indeed the same poem Gomei had carved to keep himself busy after losing his eyesight. He had added a melody by writing musical notes next to the verses—though given Leelee's lack

of musical background, it had looked to her like nothing but a string of random characters—and turned it into a song. This was the piece Genyou had played back at Cloud Ladder Gardens, and it had sounded so familiar to Reirin because she'd implicitly remembered reading its notes.

"When I first read the poem in the mausoleum, I was too young not to question why it would mention the north," Reirin told Genyou as he clenched a hand around his flute. "But now that I know it was written by the blind Prince Gomei, and that he spent his days in the innermost depths of the Palace of the Golden Qilin, I finally understand its true meaning."

Genyou offered only a dubious frown, so Reirin elaborated further. Making her point required exposing a glimpse of her own weakness.

"The Kou Palace is on the western side of the court. The morning light never quite reaches the room in its innermost depths. This makes it easier to sleep without interruption, so the sick are often made to rest there out of consideration. But to be perfectly honest, the longer a night drags on, the harder it is on the bedridden."

Sometimes when Reirin fell ill at court, she would be confined to the same room where Gomei once slept. It was a tranquil and quiet space, stripped of all external stimuli until it was pervaded with nothing but compassion. Yet it was always a trial to be trapped in that perpetual gloom. To spend so many long hours lying alone in the vast and vacuous chamber.

"The patient is filled with anxiety over being left behind, being forgotten, but they cannot speak up for fear of burdening others."

In those moments, Reirin always stared into space and strained her ears from her sickbed. She longingly sought signs of the sunlight ever so slowly dyeing the palace in its hue—of the court ladies in the neighboring room stirring one by one.

"They come to crave tidings of the dawn or the presence of others. A person perpetually kept waiting will be far more alert to a visitor's arrival than that visitor realizes. They become sensitive to even the slightest hint of light or footsteps." Reirin paused there and fixed Genyou with a penetrating look. "Your Majesty, you told us that you called upon Prince Gomei every single morning after he went blind. The light of the torch Your Majesty held, the sounds of you setting down your gifts or prostrating yourself… I believe those became Prince Gomei's idea of dawn."

Genyou gasped.

"Each time you paid Prince Gomei a visit from the northern Gen Palace, you shone a light on his heart more brilliant than the sunrise."

Reirin could imagine how the prince must have felt as he lay in that room, deprived of his eyesight and all hope of accession. As the days went by, he had likely received fewer and fewer visitors. Over time, those who sympathized with him had no doubt begun to handle him like a delicate glasswork. This was to be expected, so Gomei probably couldn't bring himself to discourage them. All he could do was find ways to fill the slow crawl of time day in and day out, waiting for the end.

Forced to live in that bleak world, Gomei must have found immeasurable solace in Genyou's daily visits from the Gen Palace. In that western room never graced by morning light, the torch Genyou held aloft had surely looked more dazzling than the sun—so much so that Gomei could still make it out with his impaired vision.

"From the north comes a heavenly sun to bathe you in its glow…"

That poem was dedicated to the dead laid to rest in the mausoleum, but it was also aimed at Gomei himself. Without sight and distanced from the voices of his subjects, he wrote it as a reassurance—as a reminder to himself that he had his own beacon of light.

Genyou's eyes widened, and he said nothing for some time. Eventually, a trembling breath escaped his lips, a precursor to some kind of utterance. Then he closed his mouth, thinking better of it, and instead clenched his flute in both hands and pressed it to his forehead.

"I always thought it was a requiem," he murmured, low and hoarse. "Even stripped of his future prospects, my brother was a kind man. I assumed he wrote it to console the departed souls resting in the mausoleum. Hence, I never drew the connection between the word 'north' and myself."

Genyou had only seen his brother for his strength, so he had never even considered the possibility that the prince had written the poem for his own solace. Quite the oversight, considering Genyou knew full well that the man had his moments of doubt.

"Moreover, the Palace of the Golden Qilin rarely let me in to see him, so I assumed that my visits meant nothing to him."

In Genyou's eyes, Gomei had been as radiant as the sun shining high in the sky. He'd never dreamed that Gomei saw *him* as the light.

"I can only hope," he let slip at last, a wobble in his voice, "that I brightened my brother's life even the smallest of fractions."

For a while, Reirin looked on without responding. She knew she had no right to brush against the coldhearted emperor's most tender spot.

Still, after some thought, she added, "Those of the Gen prefer to hide the things dear to them, but the Kou long to parade them for all the world to see."

Long ago, Kenshuu had scolded Reirin's brothers for picking out a pillar for their graffiti. The lecture had come across as humorous, but perhaps her true aim had been to keep the pillars reserved for Gomei's writings. After all…

"To leave his poem somewhere as conspicuous as a pillar and carve it so it could never be erased, he must have been quite proud of you."

Gomei had etched his poem into the most prominent spot of all in the hope that Genyou would find it.

A long silence fell. "Your Majesty," Reirin said to break it.

Genyou said nothing. He only tightened his grip on his flute to ride out a wave of violent emotion. He looked less like the ruthless ruler of a nation and more like a child devastated to have lost sight of his parents.

"You didn't simply let Prince Gomei die. You attempted to strike down the assassin—and ended up killing the prince instead."

Although it was a matter of life and death for her and Keigetsu, Reirin had chosen to prod at Genyou's greatest vulnerability the day before. Despite telling Gyoumei she had no desire to hurt the man, she had gone and ripped his heart out.

"About yesterday…"

She didn't want to apologize. She had only done what was necessary, and the two of them had been at war, in a sense. Still, she felt the need to acknowledge that she had stooped to rather cruel methods.

"I behaved like quite the villainess. I shall gladly accept the stigma."

Genyou raised his head to look at her. The corners of his eyes appeared damp, but Reirin chose to write that off as a trick of the moonlight.

After battling some kind of emotion within himself, Genyou spoke in his usual mild tone. "I should head to bed. I have an important plan to carry out in the morning."

Saying as much was probably the biggest gesture he could make toward accepting Reirin, Keigetsu, and her magic.

Just as Reirin was about to send him off with a demure bow, she heard an approaching sound.

Flap, flap, flap!

A white-winged dove cut through the darkness and swooped down to meet Reirin and the emperor. The pair started in surprise; its movements were clearly not those of a wild bird. Genyou reached skyward, and the dove landed smoothly on his arm. A thin strip of paper was tied around its leg.

Found the sorcerer. He's hiding in a cave across the lake north of the settlement. No changes to the plan.

Once the pair finished scanning the note in Keikou's handwriting, they exchanged glances and nodded.

Chapter 7:
Reirin Seals

LET'S TURN BACK THE CLOCK to a short time before the dove reached Reirin and the emperor. While carrying out Genyou's orders to scour Treacherous Tan Peak and find Tou, Akim yawned loudly beneath the moonlight.

He also did some complaining while he was at it. "Another bust. Can't find this guy anywhere."

The sorcerer had yet to be found. Akim had received his orders the previous morning, which meant it had been two whole days since he'd headed to Treacherous Tan Peak, met up with Keikou and Shin-u, and split back off from the other two to search the mountain.

Only one day remained until the Day of Ultimate Yin. With his mission deadline closing in fast, this would normally be the time to start panicking, but after traipsing up and down the precipitous mountain over the past couple of days, his frustration was winning out.

"His Majesty sure does overwork his men," he grumbled, brushing aside a vine of ivy with his foot. Obviously, the sorcerer was not hiding underneath. Yet Akim had already searched all the most likely hiding places, such as the charcoal burners' huts, hunting grounds, and water sources, so the vegetation was just about the only thing left to check.

The props he carried to don his "Anki" disguise at a moment's notice weighed him down, and sneaking around to avoid detection was a pain in the neck. It would be over the moment Tou saw him coming, so he couldn't even light a torch. He had to constantly watch his step, monitor what his subordinates were doing, and keep an eye out for any incoming messenger pigeons carrying instructions

from Genyou or the Maidens. With so many tasks to juggle, he was well within his rights to heave a sigh or two. And it was cold to boot.

I hear we're avoiding magic in case the sorcerer picks up on it, but I bet there's a spell that would let us find him in a flash. Thinking back to his encounter with Shu Keigetsu and the first display of magic he'd ever witnessed, Akim sighed and lifted an overgrown tree branch out of the way. *Magic sure is convenient.*

He envied the ability to forgo a messenger pigeon or courier and communicate in real time. Sure, that kind of power certainly could spark a political conflict, but its potential was so great that he would personally love to add a Daoist cultivator to his team.

Oh, but speaking of people I'd love to have on the force…

As Akim got lost in his thoughts, he picked up an incoming sound. His first instinct was to adopt a fighting stance, but upon recognizing the footsteps heading toward him, he lowered his arms.

"Greetings, Sir Akim!" Along came Keikou, heir to the Kou clan, parting the foliage in his path with a rustle. "How are things going on your end? Have you found the sorcerer yet?"

Like always, the man enunciated clearly and showed not a hint of fatigue despite the late hour. His search had been centered around the western side of the summit; it seemed he had come up empty and made his way back to the midpoint. The trio had arranged to meet up at the halfway point every so often to stay informed of each other's progress.

With only the moonlight to guide him yet no hesitation in his gait, Keikou strode over to Akim, who shrugged. "Sadly, no. Frankly, I doubt we're going to have much luck searching this enormous mountain with so few people. I'm way too old for this."

Keikou bellowed a laugh and bumped shoulders with the spy. "No need to be modest! You're capable enough to handle the work of a hundred men. Just look at how many traps you laid to fluster 'Shu Keigetsu,' and all by yourself!"

"You've got it all wrong. I handled everything out in the open, but my men helped me with the finer details behind the scenes. As you know, they're even stationed around the base of the mountain to intercept the sorcerer." Akim spread his hands, grimacing. "Though I can't get in touch with a few of 'em, for whatever reason."

"Ha ha, that would be my fault! I was steamed that you killed three of my dearest doves, so I decided to return the favor."

The pair crunched their way through the thicket.

"Whew," Akim eventually said with a chuckle. "I knew you were secret service material. Wanna join up?"

"Hmm, no thanks! A sleazy way of life wouldn't suit me."

"Hey, I oughta take offense to that."

Akim's own subordinates had been murdered, yet he laughed without a care in the world.

The man walking alongside him was no different. Keikou's messenger birds had been killed, so he'd gotten payback—or perhaps he'd made an example of the men because his little sister had been tortured. His policy was to always claim compensation for damages done to him, but once he considered the scales balanced, he had no problem engaging an enemy in casual conversation. It was pragmatism taken to an almost twisted extreme, but it was a stance the two men shared.

"There you both are," came a voice. The bushes rustled, and a third man popped out. It was Captain Shin-u of the Eagle Eyes, who had received the same order to catch the sorcerer and been assigned to cover the eastern side of the summit.

"Hello, Captain," Keikou said with a smile, undaunted by the man's cold, blue eyes. "Any luck?"

Despite the friendly greeting, the way Shin-u subtly avoided eye contact indicated that the two weren't on the best of terms. Akim stood back and observed their interaction with interest.

"I haven't seen the sorcerer himself, but on my way to the summit, I spotted footprints on the surface of a lake," said Shin-u.

"On the surface of a lake?" Keikou parroted. "Wait, I get it! The lakes are frozen over, so nothing's stopping him from walking across. I didn't think of that."

"When I climbed a tree to investigate, I saw a cave of some sort on the opposite shore. I suspect the sorcerer is hiding in there."

"You could make out a cave on the opposite shore?" Akim blurted out. "At night? Without a light?"

The handsome, blue-eyed man matter-of-factly replied, "I have good night vision. I've always managed without light to see by."

Keikou's eyes widened. "Oho. Sounds like the captain of the Eagle Eyes lives up to his title."

Akim, meanwhile, dove into idle chitchat. "Wow, must be nice. Look at me in comparison, getting farsighted in my old age…"

Shin-u ignored them both. "I considered chasing him down then and there, but I ultimately refrained from crossing the lake. Were he to sense the approach of someone with the same Gen heritage as His Majesty, it might put him on his guard. It wouldn't seem strange for the Maiden's escort or 'Anki' to be on Treacherous Tan Peak, so I would appreciate it if one of you two checked to see if Tou is inside."

Keikou curled his lips into a grin, pleased to hear that Shin-u had backed down exactly when he was supposed to. "Excellent work."

After finding out the exact location from Shin-u, Keikou and Akim headed straight for the cave, figuring it was best to strike while the iron was hot. The target might see them coming if they cut straight across the lake, so they went all the way around the shore and approached the cave from the side, stopping a little under a hundred strides away. Given Tou's mastery of the Daoist arts, he might sense their qi if they got too close.



“What’s our next move, Kou Keikou?” asked Akim, casting his partner a teasing look.

Keikou was as easygoing as ever. “Powerless man that I am, I may have to turn to my animals for help.” With a flourish of his fingers, he played a bird whistle inaudible to the human ear, and a white dove promptly swooped down onto his arm. “This fella here is a perfectly ordinary dove. No magic to his name, just a little brains and brawn.”

With a murmur of “I’m counting on you,” Keikou released the dove into the night sky, and the perceptive bird flew a slow circle around the lake. When it passed by the cave, it darted inside in a motion that looked completely natural.

A beat later, a man’s angry shout rose from within. “Where did this bird come from?! Blast!”

Light spilled out from the cave mouth. Someone must have lit a fire—and the only person who could summon a flame on such short notice was a sorcerer.

“Jackpot,” said Keikou. “Who would’ve guessed he’d be hiding just a stone’s throw away from the settlement?”

He blew the whistle again. His beloved pet returned, having successfully evaded the man’s attacks. The dove gave a proud flap of its wings, which Keikou returned with a loving pat.

“Great job. Did you poop on his robes or something?” he asked. The dove only cooed in response, but this was apparently enough to constitute a proper conversation between them.

Unable to help himself, Akim cut in, “Hey, you *sure* you don’t want to join the secret service?”

“Ha ha ha! Not a chance.” Even as Keikou affably refused the offer a second time, his eyes remained fixed on the cave. “Glad we were able to track down the sorcerer. Now all that’s left is to carry out tomorrow’s plan. We’ll be counting on you to bring him to the right place, Sir ‘Anki.’”

"Not that I mind, but do we really have to wait until tomorrow's eclipse? Can't we just take him into custody now?" the spy asked wearily, cracking his neck.

"We'll be in trouble if he swaps bodies as soon as he's caught and gets away," Keikou chided him. Being the impatient sort himself, he understood the urge, but his sister was right. If they wanted to *fully* capture the sorcerer, they had to carry out their plan during the solar eclipse on the Day of Ultimate Yin—and do it right after the sorcerer had used his body-swapping spell.

"Ugh… That means I've got to keep an eye on him until noon tomorrow, doesn't it? It's so cold… And I'm so sleepy… This is too much to ask of an old geezer like me."

"Why not take turns with your men?"

"I don't wanna hear that from the guy who rendered a handful of my precious personnel useless."

"Anyway, I have a letter to write to His Majesty, so if you'll excuse me," said Keikou, letting the snide remark roll off his back.

Akim clearly didn't value his men as much as he claimed, as he dropped the matter with a shrug. "Kids these days, man."

His commentary did nothing to stop Keikou from leaving. After watching him go, Akim found a suitable tree to climb. Once he had a clear view of the cave from the gaps in the leaves, he started a small fire with tools he had on hand. He drew a ring in the air with the flame, then immediately extinguished it. Akim had his own methods of communicating with his men from time to time.

"The moment has come," he said to himself.

The sorcerer in the cave had no idea that the besieging forces were steadily closing in.

"Time to make an explosion."

Akim looked out over the frozen surface of the lake, praying that Genyou's stagnant revenge and halted time would be smashed to bits and set into motion.

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Tou awoke to the sound of his own pained moans.

"Urgh…"

Impure qi was still circulating through his body, so he felt dreadfully ill. Most of the swelling and discoloration of his skin had subsided, but his innards were churning. Clawing at the walls of the cave he'd chosen as his hideout, he scowled with regret and once again berated himself for ever bothering with that "snack."

The very next moment, he once again made excuses to himself for doing so. *I had no choice. I had to stock up on qi if I hoped to get away.*

His choice to go after those brigands was a sign of how desperate he had been. Three nights ago, he had heard that deafening, foreboding roar shake the settlement. Springing from his shabby woven mat, he'd hastily checked the surrounding qi to see if the approaching Day of Ultimate Yin had induced a natural disaster, but he hadn't sensed the kind of ominous forces that would bring about calamity. Relieved, he had lain back down on his bed.

A few hours later, he was plagued by a new worry. If a natural disaster hadn't caused the noise, then what *had* been responsible? He could have sworn it had sounded like cannon fire.

As soon as the thought occurred to him, Tou had flown from his mat, too anxious to stay put. What if a member of the imperial family had discovered his whereabouts and brought in the troops to take revenge? Perhaps the Maidens had been sent into the region as the vanguard, he realized.

Tou had spent the past twenty-five years catastrophizing about how he was being hunted, convinced that he would face death upon

capture. When he attacked Ei Gomei all those years ago, Ei Genyou, the youngest prince at the time, had glowered at him with enough bloodlust to warrant the suspicion. If looks could kill, Tou's head would have long since flown from his shoulders. Just recalling the sight of that ghastly countenance was enough to send a chill down his spine.

A year after Tou left the imperial capital, that very same man had been crowned emperor. Word had it that he had been proactively paying visits to disaster areas and war zones ever since. It was possible that the man simply enjoyed travel, but the mere thought of him following Tou's trail, hell-bent on revenge, made the doctor's hair stand on end. The rumors that the emperor focused his charity efforts on the blind were reason enough to suspect he was searching for Prince Gomei's body. As a consequence, Tou had no choice but to pump his body with an excessive amount of qi and struggle to pass himself off as an able-bodied man.

In hindsight, my luck ran out the moment I fell for the former emperor's nonsense and made an enemy of that vindictive man. Oh, woe! My life has been nothing but a series of misfortunes.

Clawing at his breast, Tou fell into his usual habit of looking back on his past and feeling sorry for himself.

He was originally born the son of a town doctor. That might sound respectable enough, but his good-for-nothing father was always running himself so ragged for strangers that he could never afford to buy his own son a fancy outfit or two. Tou was thus left to spend his younger years living in envy of the sons of wealthy merchants. His only happy childhood memories were the times his misery had reached its peak and driven him to steal their valuables.

To add insult to injury, despite Tou's status as the eldest son, his father had cited some baffling reason to pass him over and appoint the wily second son his successor. Although his father had offered to find Tou a bride as a consolation, all of his prospective matches turned out to be imbeciles who couldn't comprehend his appeal and weren't appreciative of the opportunity to marry him.

One woman had even gone so far as to claim, "I'd rather bite my tongue and die than become this man's wife." Considering women were only good for taking care of men, he was mystified as to how she planned to get through life without a husband.

The bottom line was that Tou had been forced to live a life of hardship, all because he was surrounded by parents and women who couldn't see what he was worth. And his misfortunes had persisted. While he was wandering aimlessly, struggling to pin down a steady job, he had gotten addicted to gambling and become a target of debt collectors.

Soon after, however, he was given cause for celebration for the first and only time in his life: He had been taken in by a Daoist cultivator and developed a gift for the mystic arts. At the time, cultivators were generally treated as con artists, but a handful of them were actually capable of wielding magic. Tou turned out to be the genuine article.

As he picked up a knack for magic, he had devoted himself to his mentor, mastered spells for everything from swapping bodies to controlling fire, and learned the right things to say to make a good impression on others. At long last, the golden days he deserved were upon him.

But they didn't last long. When he gave a speech in a city square, hoping to make the most of his talents, a local official had shown up to arrest him. The emperor at the time was a coward who feared cultivators staging a coup d'etat, so he had a policy of rooting out talented young individuals like Tou and torturing them. Tou himself was blameless in the matter, of course. All he had done was spread the truth that magic could grant one more exalted status than the emperor himself, yet he had found himself tossed into a dingy cell and beaten. He had only made that attempt on Prince Gomei's life because the emperor had agreed to spare him if he did, yet the man's son Genyou had almost cut him down for it. And now, he was stuck living life on the run in a cumbersome vessel.

Oh, what a wretched life I've led.

Tou gave no thought to the fact that he was infringing upon the innocent Prince Gomei's body or that he had gotten by at the cost of countless people's lives. The only person he pitied was himself, oppressed and pushed to his limits by people who never tried to understand him.

From Tou's perspective, his subsequent life as a fugitive had been almost too depressing to recount. Circumstances had compelled him to steal a body that couldn't see or walk if he didn't actively do something about it. His natural spring of qi wasn't nearly sufficient to emulate those bodily functions, so Tou's body often went into a state of starvation. With no recourse, he was forced to attack nearby people and drain their life force.

During the early days following his escape, he had been able to make do with one person per year. Alas, as his body grew accustomed to having its qi supplemented by outside sources, it began to cut back on its efforts to replenish its own supply, forcing him to siphon more and more. Twenty-five years later, going after twenty people per year was barely enough to cover the cost. The intervals between bouts of starvation were getting shorter and more irregular as well. The situation was inconvenient, to say the least.

Patience. The Day of Ultimate Yin is almost here.

Tou squeezed his eyes shut, fighting to get his ragged breaths under control. This would be the first Day of Ultimate Yin in twenty-five years, an opportunity Tou had been anxiously awaiting.

His current body was Ei Gomei's, not his own, and he couldn't cast large-scale spells like the one to steal another's body while swapped. If he tried to push it, his qi was liable to run out of control and leave him in even direr straits. Thus, Tou had been forced to content himself with his burdensome vessel, going through life like a bug hungrily sucking the juice from fruits still tethered to their trees.

On the day when yin and yang fell out of balance, however, souls were prone to detaching from their bodies. To continue the metaphor, the fruit would drop off the branch and right into his

hands. On the last Day of Ultimate Yin, this had enabled him to seize Prince Gomei's body without even coming into direct contact with the man. Now that his second chance was rolling around, he had resolved to steal himself a younger, more robust vessel.

And then nobles from the capital arrived with perfect timing… Initially, I considered myself lucky.

As the nobility had kept the bloodlines of the five clans pure, their qi was of a far better quality than that of the average commoner. Unfortunately, Tou's fugitive status kept him from going anywhere near the imperial capital, so he had given up on ever crossing paths with a noble; he certainly hadn't expected the opportunity to fall right into his lap. What's more, the Maiden who'd visited Treacherous Tan Peak had possessed a mysterious mix of fire and earth qi—Tou assumed she was born to parents from two different clans—and the military officer who appeared to be her immediate family had boasted an ideal body with pure earth qi.

Elated, Tou had leapt at his chance and sent them the mark of his sacrificial offering. By smearing his own blood on it, he'd given himself a way to sense their presence even if the Day of Ultimate Yin threw his magic off.

And yet, three days ago, that thunderous boom had dropped Tou from the top of the world straight to the pits of despair. He wondered if his best move was to run, but he was reluctant to leave the region with the greatest concentration of yin ahead of the long-awaited day. Unfortunately, as he struggled to make up his mind and grew more and more panicked, he was hit with another bout of starvation. With yin and yang falling out of balance in the lead-up to the big day, he was already struggling to focus his qi efficiently. Not to mention that the Maiden's visit had forced him to use up quite a lot of qi in his desperate efforts to feign sight.

His heart was palpitating at an alarming rate, and his whole body was racked with excruciating pain. Eventually, Tou cracked. Taking the bare minimum of precautions to make sure no one saw him, he had gone to the hut where he'd locked up the brigands and

sucked their life force dry without even bothering to inspect it. As Tou descended upon the ruffians, his hair a disheveled mess and drool spilling from his mouth, he had failed to notice what was happening to his body until his hunger was sated. Only when he was glancing over their lifeless bodies did he realize that their yin energies were abnormally strong and that the qi flowing through his own body was oddly stagnant.

By this point, he had begun to feel a different, more stomach-churning kind of discomfort than the hunger pangs. It was a struggle just to stay on his feet, and he was certainly in no condition to hatch an escape. Patches of discoloration had even formed on his skin, so he had been forced to hole up in a cave near the lake to avoid suspicion and hide from his pursuers.

Oh, blast! I've finally begun to recover, but the pain is still unbearable. I feel rotten. Why on earth were some unremarkable brigands so corrupted? How much do the Heavens insist on making me suffer?

Clutching at his chest, Tou shook his head in self-pity. He would have been better off sticking to his usual strategy of luring the locals into the mountains a few at a time and draining *their* life force. At the very least, siphoning Leanne's energy before escaping into the cave might have diluted the corruption, but the string of adults who popped up around her had stayed his hand. He generally had to be in physical contact with a target to drain their life force, and even with his magic, he doubted he could fight off such a large crowd.

That blunder certainly cost me. I've been too sick to do anything but sleep for nearly two whole days.

No, after that accursed pigeon interrupted his sleep the previous night, even getting proper rest had been a struggle.

With a click of his tongue, Tou once again gazed at the entrance to the cave. Even with his impaired vision, he could faintly perceive the sunlight streaming in through the round opening that

had formed naturally in the rock. Two whole days had passed since he'd taken refuge. That meant the Day of Ultimate Yin was finally upon him, and the solar eclipse was set to begin at noon. Judging by the position of the sun, there was only about an hour remaining until then.

It's too late to flee now. My only option left is to take the plunge and steal someone else's body today.

After loosing a long exhale, Tou groped along the damp walls of the cave. Troops armed with cannons could very well be coming for him, but he didn't have a prayer of escaping in his current vessel. He had waited twenty-five years for this chance to swap bodies, so he had to take a gamble on it no matter how the odds were stacked against him.

I must find my way back to a populated area.

Now that over two days had passed since he'd drained the brigands' life force, the observable symptoms of the corruption were under control. No one would be able to tell something was amiss by looking at him.

Once Tou had limped to the cave entrance, he stopped to catch his breath again. From this point onward, he would have to take care to pass himself off as an able-bodied man.

Well then, where to next?

It wasn't a long way from the cave to the settlement as the crow flies, and he could easily make it back within half an hour if he crossed the frozen lake. However, he preferred not to cast his body-swapping spell in a crowded area.

The ideal would be to find someone out hunting or fishing by themselves.

Tou engaged his dantian—his body's energy center, if you will—and opened the spiritual eyes he used to perceive qi. This allowed him to sense the flow of qi in everything within arm's reach, lending him an approximation of vision. If he channeled even more qi into

the technique, he could detect anything within a half li of where he stood.

Curses! My qi is so corrupted that it's disrupting my spells.

As he was still feeling under the weather, Tou couldn't "see" things as clearly as usual. Nevertheless, he focused harder and scanned the mountain for any dots of qi scattered throughout. His perspective soared upward like a bird's. It was as though heaven and earth had turned upside down, and he was looking down upon a sea of stars made of life energy.

What?!

Though he'd initially intended to check if someone had ventured close to the cave, his attention snapped to a strange movement. A nebulous swarm of qi was making its way toward him.

Am I under siege?! He gulped, but the lack of coordination to their march suggested that they weren't soldiers.

The group hiked up the mountain path, arriving at the shore of the lake near the summit—the same lake Tou's cave faced. They unhurriedly fanned out across the shore before coming to a halt.

What in the world are they doing?

Were they adults or children? Men or women? He would need to get a little closer to make out the specifics of their qi.

But then, after focusing his own qi hard enough to bring sweat beading on his forehead, Tou gasped. *Oh! The owner of that red braid is part of the crowd!*

Among the cluster of hazy lights, a red, ring-shaped qi stood out in sharp relief. It was without a doubt the bracelet dyed with his own blood, the one Tou had ordered that grimy little girl from the settlement to weave and tie around the Maiden's wrist.

Good. Excellent. Ha ha! How fortuitous that the Maiden would wander right into the lion's den. His heart raced with excitement over this stroke of luck.

He only sensed one braid, which meant that either Kou Keikou hadn't come along or he had never put on the bracelet. A shame, but Tou knew it was a blessing just to get his hands on the body of such a young, healthy woman. This also explained why the group had come to the lake. They had probably brought the visiting Maiden to see the sights. Or perhaps they were planning to get in another round of ice fishing.

It was inconvenient to have so many other people around, but Tou had a tool to overcome that disadvantage now: the red bracelet. More specifically, the blood he had worked into it.

By using my own blood as a medium, I can switch our bodies without ever even touching her. All I need to do is get within a few hundred strides of the target, and I should be able to pull it off from a distance!

He could hardly believe how well this had worked out for him. In fact, it was *so* convenient that Tou suddenly grew nervous. He couldn't get the deafening boom of three nights ago out of his head. What if this was all a trap? What if the Maiden's entourage fired arrows at him the instant he went after her? From his current position, it was impossible to tell whether the crowd on the lakeshore was simply lounging around or armed and ready for a fight.

Was he overthinking it? Perhaps, but it was that abundance of caution that had kept him alive for so long.

Would I be better off escaping to the foot of the mountain?

Tou's first instinct was to seek an escape route, and he turned his spiritual eyes toward the mountain base. He didn't sense a horde of soldiers marching in—but he did discover a different kind of surprise.

"Ah!"

An intense aura was marching up the mountain path at a furious pace. Tou jerked his head up in alarm.

The dragon's qi?!

So overwhelming was the presence, it was as if the very sun had been pinned to the earth, emanating an abundance of light. It stood to reason that such a powerful radiance could only belong to a few chosen members of the imperial family.

That isn't Ei Genyou's strong water qi. Does that mean it isn't the emperor…but the crown prince hailed as a throwback to the Great Ancestor?

Despite how long Tou had been away from the imperial capital, even he had heard rumors of the crown prince and the dragon's qi he bore. He had assumed it was all exaggerated, but he couldn't have been more wrong.

What was the prince doing all the way out here? Could he have come to vanquish Tou on his father's orders?

No! The base is no good! Tou pounded a fist against the cave wall, his agitation plain to see.

Daoist magic was little more than an imitation of the dragon's qi. The *true* dragon's qi—the glory of the Great Ancestor—could overwhelm sorcerers with its presence alone. Much like a chasm or a roaring waterfall, it instilled a fear of getting swallowed up, and just having it in the vicinity was enough to make Tou break into a clammy sweat.

I've no idea how the crown prince feels about magic, but I don't want to imagine what will happen if he finds me and takes me into custody! Will I be all right if I stray from the main road and go down another way?

Tou agonized and mussed up his hair, unsure what his best option was. Only one road led from the base of the mountain all the way to the settlement. As long as he didn't take that path, he might be able to escape detection. Still, he couldn't see or walk without the help of qi, and those qi reserves would dry up without warning; he didn't stand a chance of making it down an uncharted path while also taking care to stay out of sight.

If I ran, I wouldn't make it far in this vessel. Whatever I decide to do, I must swap bodies first!

With his back to the wall, Tou became more and more convinced that he couldn't remain in his current body. He had to find a new vessel—and fast.

I will leave this cave and cut across the lake. As soon as the eclipse is upon us, I'll switch bodies with the Maiden who came to admire the lake.

Once he had thrust the Maiden's soul into his current vessel, he could drain her life force under the guise of tending to an old man. It would look like "Tou" had abruptly keeled over and died of unexplained causes, and the new "Shu Keigetsu" could flee the mountain in a pretense of fear. The crown prince would have to settle for bringing home the corpse of "Tou"—or Prince Gomei, as it were.

"Urk…"

Using his sight technique over such a wide range made him dizzy. He cut the spell short and slumped against the stone wall.

At that exact moment, someone piped up, "There you are, Doctor Tou!"

The voice hadn't come from one of the places Tou had focused on, like the lakeshore or the foot of the mountain. A man had called out from right beside him, and Tou's real eyes flew open in shock.

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At long last, it was almost time for the solar eclipse. The sorcerer must have been preparing to make his move, given the way he was dragging himself toward the cave entrance.

Having donned his "Anki" disguise, Akim walked right up to the cave and shouted, "There you are, Doctor Tou!" He affected a brighter voice than his real one, packing it with all the earnestness he could muster.

As soon as that crisp greeting reached his ears, the sorcerer called Tou snapped his head up. His gaze darted about, but it only took a moment before he was looking Akim straight in the eye. "Oh, hello… Could you remind me who you are?"

Aha, thought Akim. No wonder searching for a blind man hadn't yielded much in the way of results.

"Apologies for not introducing myself sooner. I am Anki, one of the Maiden's porters. I accompanied Her Ladyship on her return visit, and we were informed that you had left to pick herbs. The locals seemed quite concerned, so I came looking for you."

"Goodness, I'm amazed you managed to find me all the way out here."

"Ha ha. I got a bit lost, to tell you the truth. It's a relief to have stumbled upon you in the process."

As Akim laughed and scratched at the back of his neck, he discreetly examined the other man. According to Shu Keigetsu, absorbing that corrupted qi should have left him in a weakened state. Akim didn't note any obvious abnormalities, like discoloration of the skin, but a sheen of sweat had indeed formed on the man's brow.

"I see… Apologies for the trouble. I'm sure a youngster like you has better things to do than look everywhere for my old bones."

Tou appeared to be sizing Akim up himself. Was he young? Well built? How were his qi reserves? Akim felt those sightless eyes probing him.

Possibly intent on stealing his life force, Tou casually reached toward Akim, but the spy grabbed a knife dart from his sleeve and chucked it at the ground near Tou's feet to keep him in check. "Watch out, Doctor. I spy a leech."

Thump!

Tou froze with his hand half extended, startled by the dull impact.

"Aw, shucks. Forgive me for drawing a blade without warning. I used to be a soldier, so I'm a bit too quick to reach for a weapon. Bit of an overreaction to a leech, wasn't it?"

As Tou had no training in the martial arts whatsoever, all he could do was laugh uncomfortably. "Ha ha, goodness." For now, at least, he seemed to have given up on messing with this dangerous porter.

Hands off, if you please, Akim quipped in his thoughts, though there wasn't a crack in his pleasant demeanor.

"As luck would have it, the locals brought the Maiden for a tour of this very lake. Today is the Day of Ultimate Yin, so they proposed watching the eclipse and getting in some ice fishing on the side. See them on the shore?" he asked, pointing to the opposite lakeshore, nearly a thousand strides away.

The lake near the summit was ringed by rugged rocks, so there wasn't much room on its actual shore. Of note, one boulder directly ahead of the cave was practically a miniature cliff, and the crowd standing onshore was split up around either side of it.

"I imagine they'd be delighted to have you join them, Doctor."

"Oh, you're right. There they all are."

Stroking his beard, Tou nodded as though he could see them with his physical eyes, but it wasn't the locals clustered on the left side of the shore he was looking at. His eyes were fixed on "Shu Keigetsu," who stood on the right side of the giant protruding rock. At the moment, all he cared about was the bracelet emanating his own qi.

"Hmm… Is that the Maiden I see on the right side?" Tou fished for an excuse to get near her. "Excellent timing. I actually had a matter I wished to discuss with her in priva—"

"Is it the loud noise you heard three nights ago, by chance?" Akim cut him off, dangling the bait he'd saved for just this occasion.

"I might advise you to ask the military officer instead. Look, he's standing on the shore as well."

"You mean Master Kou Keikou? Truly?"

"Yes. See him on the left? Oh, he just stepped forward. He's been looking everywhere for you, actually. You're the one in charge around here, so he hoped to get your opinion on something."

After muttering, "I wonder if he can hear us from here," Akim waved his hand and shouted in the direction of the opposite shore, "Sir! I found Doctor Tou!"

A reply came immediately. "Ooh! It's appreciated! Come on over, Doctor Tou!"

When that faint male voice reached his ears, Tou made a show of contrition. "Oh dear. I can't believe a military officer from the capital went to so much trouble to look for me."

Kou Keikou's body was robust and had a strong affinity for earth. Tou wasn't about to let this opportunity pass him by.

"I mustn't keep him waiting," he said, his lips curving into a grin. He was clearly thinking, *Like a moth to the flame.*

We'll see who the real moth is, Akim thought, maintaining his pleasant composure all the while.

"Let's be off," he told Tou. "We'll cut across the lake to the opposite shore. The ice is quite slippery, so I'll take it upon myself to lead us down the easiest path. Please follow me."

"I appreciate it."

There were no plants or living creatures on the ice to emit qi, so it must have been difficult to maintain his so-called "vision." Tou tagged along after Akim like this offer was a godsend.

"It's nice to have a shortcut, but walking across the ice is quite unnerving. I worry it could break underneath us at any moment."

"Ha ha ha! Let's hope it holds out until we make it across."

The figures standing on the opposite shore still only looked the size of a pinkie finger. As the two men engaged in idle chatter, they began their slow trek across the frozen lake.

"Here they come."

Around the same time, on the opposite end of the lake, Keigetsu stood with Reirin on what would be the right side of the shore as seen from the cave. She watched Tou's steady approach with a gulp.

"All set, Kou Reirin?" she asked.

"Yes." Decked out in her finest clothes, Reirin hugged the item she was cradling closer to her chest. "The locals appear ready to go as well."

She craned forward to peek at the side of the shore past the boulder. All the residents of the settlement were standing there, along with the three Maidens tasked with leading them. In their finery, the trio looked the perfect part of well-to-do ladies, but they were standing quite close to the locals, a sign that they had hit it off the previous day.

The locals had been brought to the lake for the ostensible purpose of ice fishing, but not one of them had set foot onto the frozen surface of the lake. They stayed put on the cramped shore, staring fearfully at the skies. In addition to the song, the Maidens had spent the whole previous day teaching them the old belief that souls would detach from the body during a solar eclipse, so their terror came as little surprise. But that was for the best.

Shing! Shing!

Reirin and Keigetsu caught a flash of light coming from the distant forest and glanced up. What they found was someone standing on a hilltop a fair way from the lake, bouncing light off a mirror—and that someone was Captain Shin-u of the Eagle Eyes. To prevent the sorcerer from detecting him, he'd picked a spot a good

distance away that also gave him a view of the whole mountain. His job was to use the light to send signals from there.

"Twice in a row, I see," remarked Reirin. "It looks like His Highness is well on his way to the lake."

"This is so vexing. If only I could make a flame call, we could update one another without the added delay." Keigetsu chewed her nails in frustration, too used to relying on the Daoist arts.

Reirin attempted to pacify her with a rueful smile. "I'm afraid this was our only option. Our target might notice if we were to use your magic."

"I know, but this plan requires us to operate in smaller groups. It's hard not to worry when we can't see what the others are up to."

Just as Keigetsu had said, their strategy involved splitting up into teams and assigning each a different role. Akim was in charge of finding the sorcerer and guiding him to a certain spot. Gyoumei's job was to thwart Tou's escape by hiking up the mountain from the bottom and putting on the pressure. Shin-u was their liaison, tasked with passing on messages from the men scattered throughout the mountain to Reirin and Keigetsu by the lake. Finally, Reirin and Keigetsu were the commanders, the ones who would coordinate and collaborate with all the moving parts.

Well, a few more people with vital roles were still in hiding, but that was a surprise for later.

"I certainly hope no one falls out of step and alerts the sorcerer to the plan," Keigetsu fretted.

Reirin glanced up at the giant boulder. "The point of the bait is to draw the sorcerer's attention and ensure that doesn't happen."

As she smiled and pressed a hand to her cheek, her sleeve slid down to expose her slender wrist—and the red bracelet wrapped around it.

The sight of that brought a sullen scowl to Keigetsu's face. "Are you sure that isn't going to cause issues?"

"Of course. It's nothing I'm not used to."

"Still, don't you ever do it again. Especially not where I can see," Keigetsu spat.

"Goodness, you look like you just took a whole swig of vinegar." Reirin thrust the object she was cradling before her friend. It was a metal spittoon. "Would you care to spew your frustrations into this?"

"Absolutely not!"

After Keigetsu dismissed her banter with a shrill cry, Reirin cracked a lopsided smile and turned back to the frozen waters of the lake. "Well, you may have a point. Perhaps I didn't need to bother."

Her eyes narrowed as she watched Tou shuffle across the lake. He occasionally waved at a man on the opposite shore and shouted, "I'm on my way now, Master Keikou!"

"It would appear that Doctor Tou's approximation of vision isn't all that accurate."

Little did he know that the man he was waving to was not Kou Keikou at all. It was Kou Keishou affecting his brother's voice.

It was almost time. As Tou made his way across the lake, his heart thrummed in anticipation as a certain presence drew near. The target was moving to meet them partway, so he could finally make out the finer details of their qi. The strong yang indicated that it was a man. He was in good health and possessed a deep affinity for earth. His voice also had a wonderfully youthful ring to it. If Tou could get his hands on that body, decades of a fun and fulfilling life were sure to await him.

At this point, he was about halfway to the other shore. Yin and yang were completely out of balance, and the solar eclipse was about to begin. The yin energy had intensified to the point of bearing down on him, sending a shiver down his spine.

I can finally be free of this accursed vessel.

Oh, how long he had waited for this day. It was inconvenient to have such a large audience, but upon reflection, he realized it would get dark during the eclipse. An ordinary person would have no way of knowing what had happened, so the game would be won as soon as he pulled off the switch.

Plus, he had lucked out in another way: Whether for fear that it would break or for dread of the impending eclipse, the majority of the locals hadn't set a single foot on the ice. Tou was within five hundred strides of the shore, which would give him more than enough room to disguise what had happened and flee under the cover of the eclipse.

It's about time the Heavens chose to favor me.

Once he got his hands on a new body, he could give the crown prince the slip, run anywhere he pleased, and make the most of his youthful vessel. Supposing the next Day of Ultimate Yin came within a few decades, he could even find another body to steal and effectively make himself immortal.

Fwoosh!

"Whoa!"

With how focused Tou was on his prey, he nearly slipped and fell. The flora, the bugs crawling on the ground, and all other living creatures emitted a faint qi, and Tou used the glow of that qi to see by. As there was no such life atop the ice, it was very difficult for him to navigate.

The crowd on the shore buzzed, and some of the children cried out in dismay.

"Doctor Tou?!"

"But why?!"

Either they were surprised to see their leader show up after a few days away, or they were concerned that he had almost taken a tumble over the ice.

Drat. I had best pretend that everything is fine. The last thing I want is for them to rush over here.

Tou glanced at the shore behind the military officer, planning to say something back to the children. He had moved quite a bit closer now, so he could finally make out the characteristics of the crowd's qi.

"Wha…?!"

The moment he strained his spiritual eyes to get a better look, Tou gasped. Something was very strange about the auras he sensed on the shore.

On the left side, amid the dim auras of those he assumed to be the locals, were three owners of remarkably pure wood, water, and metal qi respectively. Their strong yin indicated that they were all women. If the glow of the locals' qi could be likened to third-magnitude stars, these girls had auras eye-catching enough to count as second-magnitude stars.

On the right side, there was the owner of the bracelet, along with someone whose qi was a mysterious blend of fire and earth. While it still paled in comparison to the dragon's qi, this aura was about as radiant a first-magnitude star.

What truly alarmed Tou, however, were the presences standing atop a large divide in the shore, likely a boulder of some sort. He "saw" two auras there. One had a definitively earthen characteristic, and the other had an extremely intense attribute of water. Judging by their strong yang, both people were men.

In short, a man with shockingly pure water qi was looking down on the lake from a rock.

I recognize that aura!

Tou shuddered as an unpleasant memory came flooding back. This qi belonged to the former youngest prince, the man who had once attempted to cut him down.

With a grunt, he immediately turned on his heel and headed back for the shore whence he came.

"Hm? Is something wrong?" the porter Anki called out, a dubious note in his voice. "Let's not keep Master Keikou waiting."

The concerned inquiry put Tou on edge. Was this a trap after all? Was he surrounded by the former youngest prince's forces?

I have no choice but to retreat. I'll turn back and escape into the forest for—

Unfortunately, when he turned his spiritual eyes toward the shore by the cave, he sensed an enormous mass of qi rapidly approaching from the forest beyond. That had to be the dragon's qi.

A pincer attack?! Curses!

He shrank back a few steps, panicked. His head spun, and he tripped over his own feet.

"Forgive me for asking, but are you having trouble walking across the ice? You keep bumping into things, and you look unsteady on your feet. Do you have a bad leg, by chance? Or is it your eyesight that's impaired?"

Anki's increasingly pointed questions had Tou tongue-tied. He ventured a fearful glance at the man standing before him, whom he had taken for nothing but a good-natured porter. What would possess him to ask something like that?

Tou immediately denied the accusation. "No, of course no—"

"Really?" the other man asked mildly. His voice was drowned out as a series of metallic *clacks* rang out all around Tou. "Do you not see what you're standing on?"

"Huh?"

No sooner did a confused murmur leave Tou's lips than an explosion cracked through the air.

Ka-booooom!

Upon hearing that tremendous blast, Tou opened his mouth to scream, “Wha—?!”

The rest never had a chance to take form. By the time he realized the entire sheet of ice around him had exploded and shattered, he was already sinking into its frigid depths.

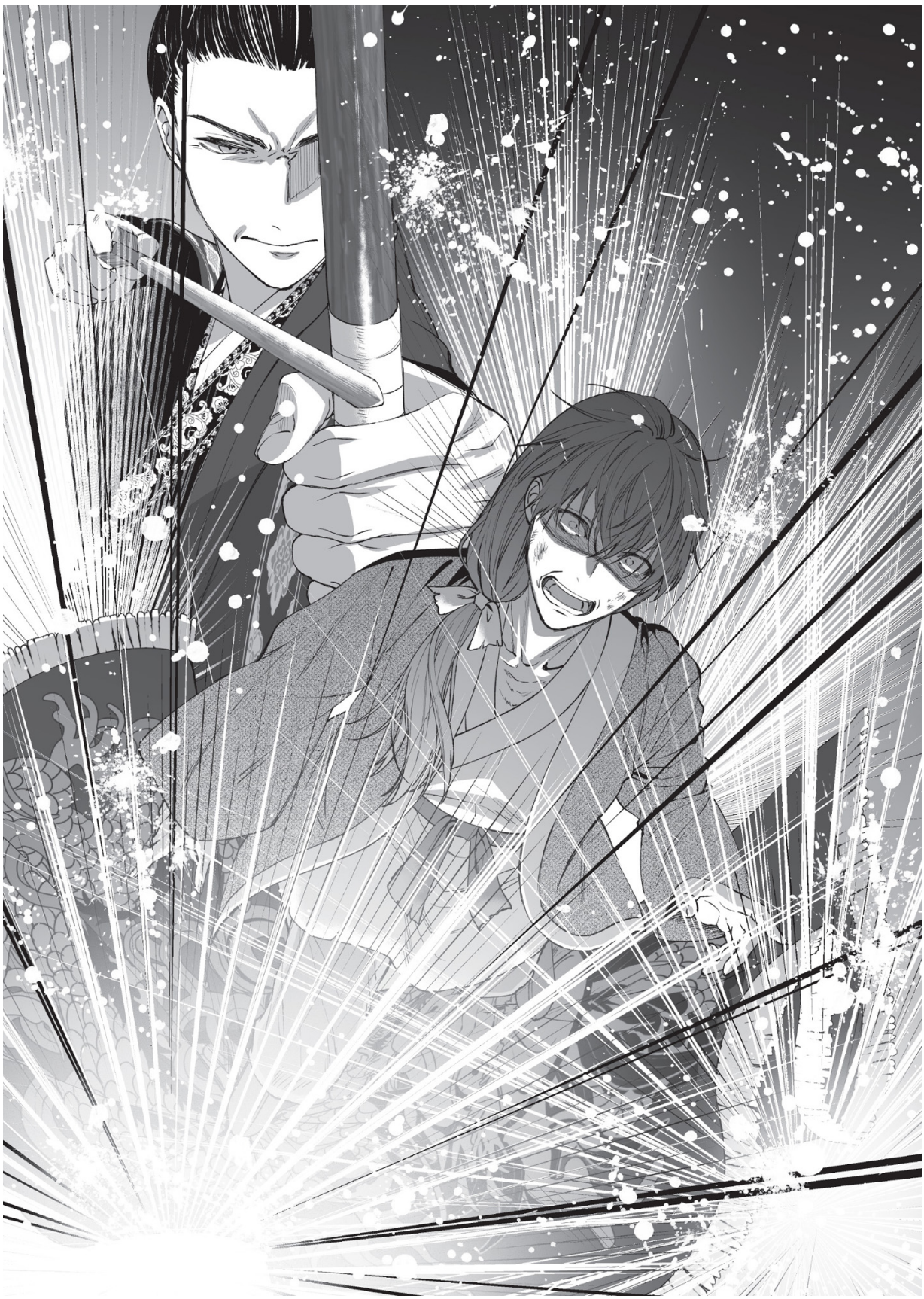
“Goodness. Everyone set off the explosion with perfect timing,” said Reirin as she gazed out over the lake. Observing that the five bombs positioned around Tou had been set off at almost exactly the same time, she let slip a sigh of wonder.

The fuses to the iron kettle bombs were quite short, yet every single archer’s aim had been true, ensuring that all five went off at once. It was a truly impressive feat.

The explosives had been arranged in a pentagon around Tou. Akim had ignited two of them with flaming darts. Keishou, who had been luring Tou in with his “Kou Keikou” act, and the actual Keikou, who was standing atop the boulder, had each set one off with a fire arrow. And as for the last one…

“Ah…”

It was with awe that Reirin stared up at Genyou, who slowly lowered his bow from his spot atop the rock. His given name meant “a radiant string,” and he certainly lived up to it. Despite his reputation as a mild-mannered emperor who loved music, he had plucked sound from the string of a bow in lieu of a qin, unleashing a fire arrow at the farthest explosive with perfect aim.



Genyou watched as the explosives shattered the ice around Tou, sending him plummeting into the waters before he even managed to scream. To the bitter end, the man had never realized that a gigantic flag bearing the five-clawed dragon was spread over the ice beneath his feet.

A five-clawed dragon symbolized the emperor. Even an uneducated commoner would never dare to step on it, yet Tou had trampled the dragon's eye underfoot. It was such a grave insult to the emperor that even the children had cried out in surprise.

"H-help! Someone help me!"

Tou flailed, arms thrashing wildly above the surface, but not one of the locals standing on the shore rushed to the rescue of their beloved leader. Merely touching the flag was a guaranteed death sentence, and this man had walked all over it. A grueling punishment surely awaited anyone who aided such a heretic.

"Stay away from him," came a woman's dignified voice, further dissuading the dismayed crowd from stepping in. "As you're all aware, the brigands died in agony, and ostensible starvation victims have occasionally been discovered in the vicinity. That was all this man's doing."

The crowd broke into whispers, and the cluster of qi backed away from the lake.

If one of the idiot children like Leanne got close enough, Tou had been planning to drain their life force and make a break for it. His plans foiled, he laid his anger bare and shouted, "Excuse me?! How dare you! Why did you think I treated you all so well?! Feeding me is the only thing worthless trash like you lot are good for! You hear me?!"

Tou was fortunate enough to grab hold of an ice floe, but he only managed to get his face and arms above water, the rest of his body too waterlogged to drag onto the ice. Not even using his go-to trick of summoning flames was an option. Forget intimidating his

audience into submission, it would only melt the ice he was clinging to.

"Ugh… *Koff!* It's cold! So cold! Are you going to leave me to freeze?!"

The ominous thought of freezing to death crossed his mind. Did these people really intend to leave him to ice over and perish? Something told him that would be a viable method to eliminate his soul without damaging Prince Gomei's body.

Why must I always suffer so?! Tou thrashed in indignation at the injustice of it all, his sightless eyes bloodshot.

Just then, the world around him grew darker, and he instinctively stopped struggling. Leaving his body to float in the water, he looked up at the sky.

The locals on the lakeshore began to buzz.

"Oh!"

"Look! The sun!"

The sunlight was fading. At long last, the eclipse was upon them.

"Heh… Ha ha ha ha!"

A look of joy overtook Tou's face, a complete departure from his despair of moments ago.

The souls have begun to detach from their bodies!

Alarmed murmurs rippled through the crowd. No doubt they attributed the strange floating sensation they felt to apprehension over the unusual natural phenomenon. In reality, it was because the Day of Ultimate Yin had disrupted the balance of yin and yang, causing their souls to drift away from their vessels. It was less likely to be felt in the imperial capital, where yang was abundant, but Treacherous Tan Peak had amassed an excess of yin energy as a result of both its geography and history. Those with weaker qi might experience symptoms as severe as fainting.

It was worth sticking around where the yin was strongest. This will allow me to drive out anyone's soul and seize their body!

That included the man called Anki, who was looking down at him from the ice a short distance away, and the locals standing on the opposite shore. He could even go after the Maiden—or, hell, the almighty emperor standing atop the boulder!

Oh, you'll all regret this!

Tou sharpened his focus, only to go stock-still when he heard a clear sound emanating from the very rock he was about to target. *Tweeet.* It was soft enough to melt into the surrounding air, as frail and plaintive as a sob.

"O traveler slumbering at journey's end…"

Prompted by the melody, a woman began to sing. More voices joined in, harmonizing with the first, and soon everyone on the shore was singing in rounds.

This cannot be! thought Tou, his mind refusing to wrap itself around this turn of events. The locals shouldn't have known the first thing about the performing arts. How could they possibly form a chorus?

"What visions dance in shuttered sight? Do they blossom in the domain of life?"

Even the porter standing a few steps away did a decent job of joining in. As the song flooded Tou's ears from every corner, he noticed something else happening. Stupefied, he muttered, "Impossible… It's pacifying their souls?!"

As soon as the crowd broke into song, souls sent adrift slowly settled back into their bodies, as if they had regained their proper weight. It was an observable change, the kind that could only be brought about by a proper ritual of repose.

How could these people possibly manage that?!

In the original sense of the term, a Repose of Souls was a ceremony to waylay souls that had detached from their bodies and

coax them back into their vessels. Performing the ritual called for a certain degree of knowledge and formality. How could a group of average commoners pull off such a feat?

"What echoes weave through frosty ears? Do they carry the mirth of those once dear?"

As the choir took the melody from the top with more fervor than ever, Tou came to a shocking realization.

It's the song!

The emperor played the melody from atop the rock, while the locals sang the words. *This* was the process through which the performers were pacifying their own souls.

But how?! The requiem of tribute is supposed to serve no purpose whatsoever!

Tou was a fairly knowledgeable sorcerer, so he knew the requiems often sung for the Repose of Souls Service held no significance from a magical perspective. They were little more than a bit of entertainment, euphonious but otherwise unremarkable melodies paired with literary lyrics.

This song is different.

Though not especially sophisticated, the song the crowd was singing held a strange power. It resonated on an emotional level, which meant it affected qi as well. Its straightforward melody and simple lyrics lent it a familiar ring, and it was easy to memorize after hearing it only once. Adult or child, learned or uneducated, anyone could put their full heart and soul into singing it, as though they had always known the words.

Words were a form of incantation, and songs were a form of ritual. The simple act of singing with a prayer in one's heart was a ceremony in its own right.

"Sleep, sleep, find peace where a warm breeze blows…"

The detached souls were in the process of being tethered back to their bodies. Tou was seized by agitation, struck with the sense

that the whole world had turned its back on him. He had waited twenty-five years for this Day of Ultimate Yin, and now not a single soul was going to take flight.

No, stay calm! he desperately told himself. *The souls of the locals may stay in their bodies, but as long as I don't join in the song, the eclipse will make it easier to project my own soul. At the very least, it should still be easier to switch bodies than under regular circumstances.*

Even if his soul was the only one disembodied, he could dive into the body of another and force the owner out.

Quick! I need a body! Anyone's will do!

His instincts sharpening in the face of danger, Tou spotted a ray of light in the darkness. Something was glowing softly on the lakeshore, directly below the boulder: a red circle of light. It looked as brilliant as the sun—and it was none other than the qi emitted by his own blood.

It's the bracelet! The one I worked my blood into! Tou's entire being was consumed with delight. *That's right! I forgot that was an option!*

Tou let his body go limp. Soon enough, the excessive yin energy of the environment and the eclipse did their work, and he felt his soul float away from its vessel.

Excellent! Now I need only dive into that girl's body and oust her soul!

No longer bound by the constraints of a physical body, he could race through the air as fast as he pleased. Better yet, he had a clear target to aim for.

Tou's disembodied soul soared through the darkness and toward the red ring.

"From the north comes a heavenly sun…"

The song no longer fazed him. He was going to seize a body by force.

"To bathe you in its glow…"

Yes! At long last, I can kiss the wretched darkness goodbye!

That which awaited him was a world full of light, one he would see through healthy eyes.

Whoosh!

Alas, the very next moment, Tou's soul experienced a sensation curious enough to give him pause.

Huh?

It was like he had charged straight at someone, only for his target to vanish into smoke. Like he had swung a punch and missed, grazing nothing but air. He was also baffled to find that the view from his physical eyes wasn't getting any brighter. If anything, it was somehow darker than before.

"Can you hear me, Doctor Tou?" a woman's voice echoed from overhead. "Welcome to the world of the jar."

Clunk!

Following that weighty sound, Tou's vision was shrouded in darkness.

"Are you crazy?! Don't talk to him!" yelled Keigetsu, snatching the lid from the side and slamming it down on the spittoon. She couldn't stand to watch Reirin blithely chatting with the soul sealed inside.

A red braid was looped around the neck of the small jar. This was the *real* bracelet Reirin had previously received from Leanne.

Keigetsu jabbed a finger at the container, newly transformed into a ritual implement to seal the sorcerer's soul. "Get serious! We've turned this spittoon into a magical tool! A curse given form! If the sorcerer's soul gets loose, your body will be stolen for real!"

"M-my apologies!" Chastened, Reirin stood up straighter and scrambled to hold down the lid. "Nothing is more dangerous than a false sense of security. Oh, I have an idea! Shall we weld the lid shut to ensure that he doesn't escape?!"

"I can tell you think that was a brilliant idea, but what you're suggesting is basically torture. It'd be equivalent to roasting the soul inside."

"Oh dear." The Kou Maiden's lack of moderation could give her quite the vicious streak, but you'd never know it from the way she daintily put a hand to her cheek. "I'm sorry. I've never sealed a soul before, so I'm not sure how it works."

A red bracelet was tied around her right wrist, but it was not the same one Tou had tasked Leanne with making.

"Still, it's thanks to your guidance that we managed to seal him without a hitch," she went on, smiling. "We hardly even needed to prepare an extra bracelet as a smoke screen."

"Just checking one more time, but are you *sure* that didn't mess up your hand?" Keigetsu asked, casting her friend's wrist a dubious glance.

Reirin responded with a flick of said wrist. "Oh, not to worry. I've done it plenty of times before."

"No matter how many times you've done it, I'm quite certain people's hands aren't meant to bend that way…" Flashing back to an unpleasant memory, Keigetsu shuddered and rubbed her upper arms. "You really must be out of your mind! Dislocating your joints to slip out of the bracelet so you don't have to cut it?! Who even does that?!"

With how worried Keigetsu had been, Reirin obviously wasn't going to keep the bracelet on. She had removed it two days ago, right after they made up. However, she had made a suggestion first:

"I shall do as you've asked and remove the bracelet. But rather than simply cutting it off, I propose that I dislocate my wrist to

escape."

The butterfly had said it so matter-of-factly that Keigetsu could only gape in response.

When asked why she was so determined to preserve the bracelet, Reirin had replied, *"The sorcerer likely plans to use the bracelet as a guide to steal my form. In that case, why don't we tie the bracelet around something else, force the sorcerer into coming after my body, and guide his soul into that object instead? A jar might do the trick, for instance."*

One of Reirin's biggest concerns had been that assuming they apprehended Tou, they would still have to take care not to treat Prince Gomei's body too roughly.

"If we can entice him to 'swap bodies' with a jar, it will leave Prince Gomei's body empty. This will allow His Majesty to bring home a body that belongs to no one but his brother."

The problem with that plan was that this would all unfold on the Day of Ultimate Yin, the one day that Tou would be free to go after anyone. Keigetsu had argued that he might ignore the supposed owner of the bracelet and steal a different body altogether.

"That won't happen," Reirin had replied with finality. She had then opened the window of the emperor's room and gestured toward the scenery beyond—or, more accurately, toward the music of a flute playing in the distance. *"Everyone present is going to sing a requiem. This requiem will have the power to soothe the mind—or the power to settle the soul back into the body, if you will. Once all the other souls have been coaxed back into their vessels, the sorcerer will panic and go for the defenseless owner of the bracelet."*

According to Reirin, the song Genyou played was sure to have lyrics to go with it, and she turned out to be correct. When they went with Gyoumei and Keishou to convey their strategy to the emperor, Genyou had acknowledged that the piece he'd been playing was written by Gomei and immediately consented to the plan.

In the present, Genyou scrambled down from the rock, all traces of his usual aloofness discarded. “Brother!”

The peak of the eclipse had just passed. As the sun regained its shape, its light began to filter back down.

As if spurred by the first few sunbeams cast upon the earth, the exalted man whipped around, robes aflutter, and dashed across the shore. “Tan! Retrieve his body at once!”

“On it!”

Now that Tou’s soul had vacated it, the sorcerer’s body—no, Gomei’s body—bobbed lifelessly on the water’s surface. Akim hauled the corpse onto the ice in his muscular arms.

“It looks like everything went well,” a smooth voice called out from behind Reirin and Keigetsu.

“Your Highness!”

After galloping up the mountain to entrap the sorcerer, Crown Prince Gyoumei had appeared on the scene with a whinny from his Stalwart Steed. Riding his horse at full speed while cloaking himself in the dragon’s qi must have worn him out, as his forehead was dappled with sweat. Nevertheless, he nimbly dismounted and regarded the spittoon Reirin was cradling with a nod.

“Well done,” he said, then squinted and looked up at the skies. “Look. The eclipse is almost over.”

The shadowed sun was on its way to regaining its proper light, currently filled out to the shape of a crescent moon.

The locals also stared up at the sky with relief.

“Wow!”

“The sun is coming back!”

Some areas of the lakeshore were still dim, others graced with sunshine. The children frolicked back and forth between them, shielding their eyes with their hands as they peered up at the sun.

As they watched the gloom give way to a world filled with light, they cheered, "It's the middle of the day, but it's like morning came all over again!"

Around the time the sun had expanded past the shape of a half-moon, Genyou finally made it to the frozen surface of the lake. His breathing ragged, he set foot on the ice without hesitation. As he laid eyes on Gomei's body for the first time in twenty-five years, he collapsed to his knees, the strength leaving his legs.

"B-Brother," he called out for the first time in years, his voice barely a croak. He timorously reached a hand toward the stone-cold corpse of his half brother, stroking eyelids forever shut with trembling fingers. "I…I apologize for taking so long."

Still kneeling beside his brother, Genyou took the man's lifeless hand in his own. For a while, he did nothing but close his eyes and cradle that palm to his forehead. Only after that could he steady his breathing enough to speak coherently.

"I'm sorry I left you to suffer in the dark for so long. I shall bring you home to Sunlit Bliss Hill at once. You will never want for light again."

The prince's hand was cold as ice, and it would never again retain warmth. But the sun was there to make up for it, casting its warm light on Gomei's cheeks as it returned to its former glory.

"Do you see that, Brother?" Genyou whispered. He recalled what Gomei had once said, his voice still so tranquil in his final moments.

"Look at that. Isn't it almost like a sunrise?"

Genyou's brother had never been without a cheerful grin. For all his younger sibling's insolence, Gomei had never looked upon the boy with anything but warmth.

"I always loved the sight of morning gracing this kingdom."

What did the man see behind eyes eternally closed? A Paradise awash with light?

When the eclipse came to an end and the sun was a perfect circle once more, a single tear trickled down Genyou's cheek.

"The darkness has passed."

With the darkness gone and the light restored to the world, it was like day had broken at last.

"Morning has graced this kingdom."

The boundless blue sky was almost too dazzling to behold. His brother's hand pressed firmly to his forehead, Genyou kept his head bowed for some time.

"Morning has finally come."

Gomei had always secretly yearned for the arrival of dawn. Genyou murmured the same words over and over, praying that these tidings of morning would reach him.

Epilogue

GOMEI'S FUNERAL WAS a quiet and clandestine affair, held on Sunlit Bliss Hill immediately after the group returned to the capital. Genyou chose the brightest spot on the hill to bury the coffin containing the prince's body, then prostrated himself before the bump in the earth for quite some time. No one knew what he was saying to his brother in the privacy of his mind. Still, all those in attendance—Reirin, Keigetsu, Gyoumei, Shin-u, the Kou brothers, and Akim, so nearly everyone involved in the incident—could imagine what he might be feeling.

Mornings on Sunlit Bliss Hill were always awash with ample, radiant light, and that mattered more to Genyou than anything else.

As soon as he was done praying, Genyou rose to his feet and mildly addressed the two Maidens prostrating themselves behind him. "Kou Reirin, Shu Keigetsu, you are free to reverse the switch. I have seen my ambition through. You need not conserve your qi any longer."

The two girls had been worried that wasting Keigetsu's qi on a large-scale spell might cause issues with transporting the spittoon, so they had held off on reversing the switch until they made it back to the capital.

Keigetsu-as-Reirin and Reirin-as-Keigetsu exchanged hesitant glances.

"Er…"

"Right here?" Reirin asked. "Respectfully, I believe that may cause some sort of strange phenomenon in the vicinity."

"I'm not concerned," Genyou replied magnanimously. Now that he had taken his revenge, he had no more reason to scorn magic.

The pair glanced at each other again, then nodded firmly.

One girl wore a stiff expression. "I-I thank you for your generosity, Your Majesty."

The other smiled like a flower bursting into bloom. "I am most pleased to hear that."

The Maidens immediately whispered among themselves, the first elbowing the other in the arm, the second putting a hand to her cheek.

"H-hey, don't you think you're being a little condescending toward the emperor?!"

"What more do you expect me to say to him, Lady Keigetsu? This is only the first step."

Keigetsu cleared her throat, stood up, and held out both hands to Reirin. "Then, without further ado…"

Picking up on her intention, Reirin rose smoothly to her feet and gripped those hands in return. "Go ahead, Lady Keigetsu."

When performing a powerful art like a body swap, it was best to be in physical contact with the target. With how accustomed the girls had grown to the process of trading bodies and switching back, they carried out the steps with fluid ease.

Whoosh!

The moment Keigetsu focused her qi, a giant pillar of fire rose up and surrounded the two girls. The flames whipped their sleeves, tousled their hair, and kicked up heated gusts so fierce that even the audience could feel it, only to shoot straight up into the sky and vanish into thin air.

Slowly, the Maidens' eyes drifted back open. When next they spoke, their souls were back where they belonged.

"Hee hee. It's been a while since I've seen things from this perspective. You're so tall, Lady Keigetsu."

"You're just short. And would you let go of my hands already?"

"Shu Keigetsu," Genyou cut in softly, having stood back and watched as she cast her spell. When the freckled Maiden whipped around in a fluster, he said to her, "Allow me to thank you for everything you've done."

"Huh?!" The most powerful man on the continent had just thanked her directly. Keigetsu was momentarily speechless with shock. "Um, uh, Y-Your Majesty, you need not humble yourself so!"

She hastily attempted to kowtow to him, but Genyou held up a hand to stop her. "No need for formalities. I could not have fulfilled my twenty-five-year-long ambition without your help. I have nothing but respect for your skill in the Daoist arts. You are without a doubt the greatest practitioner of your generation."

"Oh!" Keigetsu was so overwhelmed by this glowing praise that her hands flew to her mouth, all etiquette forgotten.

She had been derided as talentless for so long. For as far back as she could remember, she had undermined herself with insistences that she had nothing to take pride in—that the one talent with which she could assert her dominance would only earn her more loathing were she to reveal it.

How wrong she had been. The most exalted man in the kingdom had just acknowledged her skill.

Her fierce eyes misted over in the blink of an eye, and hot tears streamed down her face. "Th-that is a greater honor than I deserve…"

Reirin smiled at the sight of her friend choking up with emotion. Ideally, she would have liked Genyou to apologize for persecuting this adorable friend of hers, wrongly suspecting her of associating with the sorcerer, and deriding her as a sewer rat, but Keigetsu herself seemed more than satisfied with this outcome, so it wasn't her place to say anything.

Still, she couldn't help thinking, *Are you sure you don't want to apologize? Considering Lady Keigetsu was willing to help you after*

the way you treated her, is that all the praise you have to give her? And you call yourself the supreme ruler of our kingdom?

It must have shown on her face, as Genyou frowned when he caught her looking at him. "Something to say, Kou Reirin?"

Reirin nearly responded with an elegant bow and a polite "Not at all," but after a moment's thought, she instead chose to say, "I don't see any hoes lying around."

"What of it?"

"Just something I have to accept."

The rest of the group hadn't been privy to their conversation on the eve of the showdown, so they had no idea what she was talking about.

Genyou, however, huffed a withering sigh. "You've a lot of cheek, girl." He then cast Keigetsu a frosty glance. "Shu Keigetsu, while I acknowledge your talent for magic, you could stand to choose your friends more wisely. Nothing good will come of associating with a villainess like this. I advise you to cut ties with her before it's too late."

Seeing as Kou Reirin was a model Maiden, the favorite to win the throne of empress, Keigetsu was taken aback to hear Genyou abruptly label her a "villainess." Still, the levity in his voice belied the harshness of the words, so she found herself smiling through her tears.

No, Your Majesty, she thought. *Associating with her has brought me nothing but joy.*

Genyou was the one who had commended her, but her friend was undeniably the one who had made it all possible.

Keeping those thoughts to herself, Keigetsu nodded and said, "Noted, Your Majesty. Though I am inept in my own ways, I shall endeavor not to become a villainess like her."

"Goodness, Lady Keigetsu, you wound me. How am I the least bit villainous?"

"Fair point," said Genyou. "I suppose it might be more accurate to call you a wild boar."

Noting Reirin's growing indignation, Gyoumei stepped in to mediate. "Father, kindly refrain from describing my betrothed as a boar, however true it may be."

Alas, his efforts were for naught. "Excuse me, did you say *true*?" Reirin blurted out, dumbfounded.

"Well, it is. Right, Gyoumei?" Genyou prompted his son.

This was the first time the emperor and crown prince had ever exchanged such lighthearted banter. At long last, the father-son duo was learning to interact like real family.

The hill overlooking the kingdom was bathed in abundant light. Beneath that majestic sun, people laughed, pouted, and flitted through emotions at a truly dizzying pace.

Long after his company had been considerate enough to take their leave, Genyou lingered on Sunlit Bliss Hill. Occasionally, a gentle breeze would sweep through and tickle his sleeves.

Genyou took the flute hanging from his hip and brought it to his lips. Zhi, jue, zhi, jue, gong, yu. Sol, mi, sol, mi, do, la. The melody was like a gentle cycle of ripples and tidal waves—and it belonged to the song Gomei had once carved into the mausoleum. After all these years, it was finally with peace of mind that Genyou could play the requiem that sightless man had loved.

Praying that the notes would melt into the light and reach his brother on the other side, he wove his melody at a leisurely pace.

Tweet…

After playing the last note and savoring its final echoes, Genyou knelt on the spot. He set the flute down upon the bump in the dirt, bloodstained tassel and all.

"You can have this back now, Brother."

"Wouldn't you be better off burying it with him?" came a voice from behind him, prompting Genyou to look up. "Wait, bet you can't dig the hole yourself. Emperors can be so sheltered, I tell you."

Akim was sitting in a tree a short distance away. Apparently, he had been hiding amid the foliage the whole time, having only pretended to leave with Gyoumei and the others.

The spy leaped to the ground as nimbly as a cat, while Genyou shot him a scowl. "Watch your tone."

"Don't think I will. You're not my boss anymore." With a shrug, Akim crouched right next to Genyou. He pulled out a knife dart, effortlessly dug a deep hole, and placed the flute straight inside. "But I'll give you this one free of charge."

Once he had covered the flute with dirt and finished giving it a proper burial, Akim fished around in the breast of his garment. "Congratulations. This closes the book on your own revenge."

He unfolded a piece of scrap paper on which he and Genyou had once written their memorandum. It listed both parties' names, the promised remuneration, the responsibilities of the job, and the following termination clause:

Contract valid until both parties have taken their vengeance.

"I'm astounded that you've kept such good care of that worthless piece of scrap paper."

"What can I say? I'm a former merchant. I like to keep my employment contracts."

Twenty-five years ago, one half of the pair had been an ordinary prince, and the other had been a mere merchant. The morning of the former emperor's murder, they had become the emperor and his spy. Now, decades later, that bond of theirs was coming to an end.

Still crouching, Akim ripped up the memorandum and let the shreds fly away like cherry blossom petals in the wind. As the men

sat side by side, one watching the fluttering scraps of paper and the other staring at the mound of dirt, a long silence fell between them.

Akim was the one to break it, his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. “So, how’re you feeling?”

“Invigorated.”

“Hmm. Hate to tell you this, but that’ll pass in three days.” After dropping that offhand comment, Akim flicked his gaze to the emperor and tacked on a consolation. “Well, you’re pretty obsessive, so maybe you can drag out the good times for three whole months.”

“That hardly helps,” Genyou muttered, disgruntled.

Shoulders shaking with mirth, Akim hooted, “I’m your predecessor in revenge, so trust me on this one!” Once his laughter died down, he said, “Say, after getting into it with the Maidens and their friends, I realized something: Kids these days really know how to get revenge.”

Genyou furrowed his brow and said nothing. Neither did he interrupt, so Akim took that as permission to keep talking.

“How to describe it? They act fast, I guess. If someone hits them, they hit right back. That one Maiden especially. If you dunk her in water, she dunks you back. If you trick her, she tricks you back.” Reminded of how Kou Keikou had taken swift retribution for the murder of his birds, he added, “Well, maybe it’s got more to do with her being a Kou than her age.”

Genyou nodded silently. Gomei had also been of Kou descent, and he had hurled a brush on the spot to punish his younger brother’s arrogance, just as he had unflinchingly ordered the execution of someone who came for his life.

“They give as good as they get, see? But then they move right on to the next thing and make sure they find happiness. When I saw that, I realized they had the right idea.” With a quiet chuckle, Akim recalled how cheerfully the group had left the hill behind. “Kind people love to say, ‘Nothing good ever comes of vengeance.’ Or

sometimes, 'Living well is the best revenge.' I always dismissed that as a bunch of empty platitudes, but I get where they're coming from now. Both of those things are true."

"After all this time, you mean to tell me that revenge is meaningless?"

"No. It's absolutely essential. The two platitudes only become true when you combine 'em. Only once you've taken your vengeance *and* found your own happiness is your revenge truly complete."

Akim had gone a roundabout way of making his point, but his argument made sense. Nothing good could come of vengeance alone. Revenge wouldn't truly count until you lived well. Hence, the correct answer was to strike back against your enemies right away and move along to finding your own happiness.

"By that logic, the revenge I've considered long over is actually only half complete. I may have killed all my enemies, but I never tried to live my own life."

The wind whipped Akim's hair back, exposing the tattoo on his temple. His face changed with every mission, and no one had ever suspected a thing. How could they? He had never let anyone into his life.

"You're probably headed down the same path I've walked," he said.

The same applied to Genyou. He had devoted his whole life to revenge, never opened his heart to anyone, and never even built a relationship with his own son.

Genyou fell silent. Akim observed this with a chuckle, then dusted his robes and rose to his feet.

"On that note, I have a proposal for you." This ceremonious preamble was a callback to their conversation twenty-five years ago. Akim could only wonder if Genyou would make the connection. "Would you care to become my friend?"

"Come again?"

At that, Akim burst out laughing. Genyou's response had clearly been automatic, but it was identical to his own words back then.

"On that note, I have a proposal for you. Would you care to become one of my personal spies?"

"Come again?"

That day, that morning, what did he look like when he asked me to be his spy? Akim wished he could imitate details like the man's expression, the way he'd held out that paper, and his infuriatingly matter-of-fact delivery, but alas, it had all faded from his memory.

But that was fine. The relationship they were about to form didn't call for a contract. It wouldn't suit their future selves to do things the same way they had twenty-five years ago.

"A 'friend,' really? You sound like a child."

"Hey, cut me some slack. I couldn't think of any better ideas. My wife always used to say that making friends is the best way to enjoy life."

"For instance…if you make a friend in the neighborhood, you get to see them all year long. That sounds like a lot of fun to me."

As Fatma's words played back in his head, Akim was relieved to find that he still remembered the bright bounce to her voice. He also took that moment to offer her an unspoken apology. His big sister—his uka—had foreseen how quick he would be to give up on life. After how much she had worried for him, he had spent far too long allowing her fears to come true, never once making an effort to find happiness.

"Ridiculous," said Genyou. "Just look at what our relationship has been. Supposing we start calling each other friends now, what would that even entail?"

"Beats me."

Akim's first response to the criticism was to think, *How should I know?* Upon reflection, however, he realized his wife had given him

the answer to that question as well.

"I bet the people here share drinks just because it's sunny out or whoop for joy just because it's a warm day."

In his mind's eye, familiar dark-brown eyes sparkled with joy.

"Well, we could always share drinks when it's sunny out. Or maybe whoop for joy when it's a warm day?"

"Sounds pointless. Do you think I have that much time on my hands?"

His suggestion dismissed out of hand, Akim cracked a smile at the irony. *"Dhal," he says. I'm afraid this isn't going to work, Fatma. He and I think too much alike.*

Akim had no interest in forcing the matter. He wasn't one to play at friendship to begin with.

"Well, it was just a thought," he muttered before turning to leave.

He would head downhill and depart the imperial capital. Nothing was tying him to this place anymore: no promises to keep and no people to see.

"Akim," Genyou suddenly called out, and it surprised Akim enough to halt his steps.

Upon turning around, Akim found that Genyou had also gotten to his feet. His jet-black Gen eyes were boring straight into his former spy.

For a while, the emperor just stood there, expressionless, until he suddenly raised both hands in the air. He then turned his face skyward to bask in the sun's rays.

"The world is bathed in light today," he said.

The comment wasn't meant as a tribute to Gomei. It was his own way of saying, *It's sunny out.*

Realizing as much, Akim cracked a grin. "Yeah. I'd better bring us some booze to celebrate."

"It's also quite warm."

"Woo-hoo!"

The exchange was as stiff and contrived as could be.

Overcome with mirth, Akim clutched his stomach and doubled over with laughter. "The hell are we doing? We sound like a pair of old geezers!"

"It was your idea."

"Got me there!"

The offended scowl on the overserious man's face only added to the humor of the scene. Akim had to wipe his eyes as he wept from laughing too hard.

"Forget it," Genyou said, whirling away in a huff.

"Wait up, Genyou!" Akim hurriedly called after him.

No one but Gomei had ever been allowed to call Genyou by his given name, especially after he became emperor. But as the man's brazen head spy, longtime partner in revenge, and now friend, Akim had no qualms about using it.

It didn't take long for Akim to catch up to his surly-faced friend, and thus did the pair walk down Sunlit Bliss Hill side by side.

***

"The tea is ready!" Reirin cheerfully called out to the Maidens, who were relaxing together in a Maiden Court room. The last time all five Maidens had hung out was when they were making a mirror in the lead-up to the Rite of Reverence. Back then, it had been so cold that not even keeping a brazier in the room could stop their breaths from turning white, but now they could throw open the windows and let a gentle spring breeze inside.

It had been ten days since the girls had returned to the capital with both the Congee Conferment Rite and Repose of Souls Service behind them. Exhausted after climbing a mountain and making the

long journey home (not to mention that Keigetsu had the added fatigue of casting a large-scale spell), the Maidens had holed up in their respective palaces for several days, but they had finally recuperated enough to sit down for tea together.

Hosting a full-on tea party would've required a lot of work, so this was just an informal gathering between Maidens. Not even their court ladies had been invited to accompany them, and they had formed a table by pushing the five desks they used during their lessons together. The lack of a proper tea table or any flowers to decorate it made the event a complete mess in terms of etiquette, but that lent it the same naughty appeal as chatting during a lecture. To no surprise, this would be Reirin's first time sitting down for tea without a care for propriety.

"Today, I took the liberty of gathering the morning dew to brew us some first flush tea."

When Reirin presented her with a cup of first flush tea—made from buds harvested in early spring—Keigetsu took a curious whiff of its fragrance. "Hmm, so this is first flush tea? It has a very fresh aroma."

"Oh, please," Seika spat, sulking over the fact that she wasn't the first to be served. "If you didn't even notice the smell of chili vinegar before, I highly doubt you could pick out the scent of first flush tea."

Ignoring that comment, Kasui got up from her seat to help out. "Lady Reirin, you needn't go to the trouble of serving us. Allow one of us to handle that."

Meanwhile, Houshun showed off some flower-shaped candies and announced, "Erm, excuse me, everyone! I brought some snacks for us to share."

After spending the entire rehearsal period for the Repose of Souls playing along with Keigetsu's act, the three Maidens had developed an easy rapport.

Seeing them act so natural and relaxed around each other brought a smile to Reirin's face. "I can see you've all opened up to each other quite a bit. I'm delighted for the five of us to have this opportunity to drink tea together." Rising to her feet, she bowed deeply to the seated Maidens. "Allow me to thank you once again for all your help. Had you not aided Lady Keigetsu and myself in covering up the switch, we both would have been executed. Had you not helped teach the locals that song, they might have had their souls leached away by the sorcerer."

The three recipients of her gratitude practically sprang from their chairs.

Seika insisted, "Don't be silly! We helped hide the switch to keep ourselves out of trouble, and we assisted with the singing lessons on His Majesty's orders. There's no reason to humble yourself before us, Lady Reirin!"

"Precisely," Kasui emphatically agreed. "If anything, I was happy to repay even a fraction of what I owe you for the Rite of Reverence."

"It was a memorable experience." That loaded statement was all the cynical Houshun was willing to offer, but she at least didn't demand more thanks.

"Hmph. Aren't you all embarrassingly deferential toward Kou Reirin? You've never had anything but complaints for me," Keigetsu griped with a scowl, propping her chin in her hand. Annoyed, she picked up one of the flower-shaped candies and crushed it between her fingers. "It was always 'You could never act the part of the prince's butterfly' this! 'You can't expect us to cover for you' that!"

"Well, goodness!" Dismayed to be tattled on, Seika hid her mouth behind her fan and shot Keigetsu a glare. "Is it so wrong to speak the truth? We simply pointed out that a talentless, overemotional woman like you might struggle to play a versatile woman of culture like Lady Reirin."

"Excuse me?! Don't pretend you didn't see my brilliant performance. I was the epitome of Kou Reirin! For that matter, getting tricked by a first impression is one thing, but how can you have spent a year and a half with this woman and *still* not realize her true nature?!" Feeling indignant after that blunt dressing-down, Keigetsu slammed her hands on the table and rose from her seat. "It's time to face the facts! She isn't the dainty, ephemeral flower you think she is! If she were a plant, she'd be a shockingly vigorous perilla. If she were an animal, she'd be a boar charging straight off a cliff!"

The very woman Keigetsu kept pointing at only smiled bashfully and said, "From the mint family?! You flatter me!"

In contrast, Seika's eyebrows shot up in disapproval. "What an outlandish metaphor! I'm clearly not the one with a poor understanding of reality here." She then spun toward Reirin with a smile. "Lady Reirin, I have faith that you are like a lotus wet with the morning dew."

Reirin returned the compliment with an elegant nod. "You are far too kind, Lady Seika. That would surely make you the lotus leaf swaying in a lush breeze."

At that, Seika snickered and turned to Keigetsu with a look of triumph. "Do you see now, Lady Keigetsu? That was a reference to an old poem: 'Pure is the heart of a lotus wet with dew, fragrant is the lotus leaf swaying in a lush breeze.' Naturally, Lady Reirin picked right up on this and responded accordingly. That should be proof enough that she is an intellectual, sophisticated lady. *This* is what highbrow conversation is meant to sound like." The Kin Maiden puffed up with pride, delighted beyond measure to have someone who could hold their own in a conversation with her.

In the background, Kasui whispered, "It was actually rather kind of her to provide an explanation," then poured another round of tea.

"How's that?" Seika demanded of Keigetsu. "A person's character shines through in the subtlest of ways, and it takes someone of equal intellect to catch those hints. Can you claim to have that?"

"I don't know about intellect, but your cunning sure is shining through at the moment!"

"That's quite enough out of you!"

Having taken a seat once more, Reirin watched their argument intently, a hand pressed to her cheek. "Lady Keigetsu and Lady Seika truly do seem to get along well…"

The pair in question would probably insist that they couldn't stand each other, but from the outside looking in, they had a great rapport. It was enough to make Reirin jealous.

Look, Lady Keigetsu is even showing off her best glare. Oh, she looks ready to throw a teacup… If only I *were on the receiving end, I could do such a splendid job of catching it in midair.* Reirin nearly pouted at the unfairness of it all, only to furiously shake the thoughts from her head. *Stop that, Reirin! Lady Keigetsu already acknowledged me as her dearest friend of all, so it would be far too greedy of me to monopolize her any further!*

Part of her wanted to shout it from the rooftops that she was Shu Keigetsu's best friend in the whole world, and Keigetsu hadn't made fun of her for feeling that way. Still, the way she was growing more selfish with each passing day was starting to scare her a little. She used to be so much more cognizant of her limitations.

When Keigetsu and Seika finally reached the point of leaning across the table, Houshun started murmuring to Reirin from behind her sleeves. "Ugh, do they ever shut up?" As attuned as she was to words and language, Houshun wasn't a fan of shouting or loud noises. Her face was screwed into a frown. "The best way to deal with someone as overbearing as Lady Seika is to nod along with whatever she says. Things only get to this point because Lady Keigetsu insists on being the resident Kou Reirin authority. Like, she

won’t be satisfied until everyone acknowledges that *she* knows you best.” Sounding thoroughly uninterested, she muttered, “Gosh, this is so tedious.”

Reirin found herself staring back long and hard. “Could you repeat that, Lady Houshun?”

“Pardon?” It was unusual for Reirin to make eye contact with her, so Houshun pulled an incredulous face. “Which part? ‘Gosh, this is so tedious’?”

“Before that.”

“‘Someone as overbearing as Lady Seika’?”

Reirin leaned in with a deadly serious expression, and Houshun pulled back, daunted. She was beginning to worry that someone might overhear her speaking her mind.

“No, the part after that. I’m sure you can guess which one.”

A pause. “‘She won’t be satisfied until everyone acknowledges that she knows you best,’” said Houshun, a sour look crossing her face.

“One more time,” said Reirin, immediately going for a second helping. “Make ‘Lady Keigetsu’ the subject of the sentence and say it again.”

A very, *very* long pause. “Lady Keigetsu won’t be satisfied until everyone acknowledges that she knows you best,” Houshun repeated, surprisingly compliant.

“Perfect!” Overcome with emotion, Reirin had to clutch her cheeks to stop a grin from spreading across her face. “One more time!”

“I refuse!” Houshun shouted before she could stop herself.

Startled by the outburst, the rest of the group whipped around to stare.

“Did something happen?”

“What’s all the fuss about?”

Heedless of the others' reactions, Reirin flushed with joy and gripped Houshun's hands. "I had the wrong idea about you, Lady Houshun! You're a wonderful person!"

In lieu of a response from Houshun, whose face was twitching at this turn of events, the room was filled with Keigetsu's angry yelling. "Say whaaaaat?! What's gotten into you, Kou Reirin?!"

Reirin made her way back from the Maiden Court with a spring in her step. The conversation had gotten so lively that the girls had ended up talking until evening. Their respective head court ladies had come by several times to encourage them to retire, but the Maidens had ignored them each time and continued to giggle and chat away. That was definitely a first.

For that matter, it was the first time the Maidens had gathered in the daytime court without their court ladies, and it was the first they had talked without mentioning a word about their clans. Instead, they'd reminisced over shared memories like, "I felt a chill down my spine when I saw the look on His Majesty's face" and "His Highness looked so dashing when he rode to the scene."

That was fun! So fun, I can hardly believe it!

Reirin slapped her hands over her mouth to stop a giggle from escaping, but a smile spread across her face despite her best efforts.

I ought to suggest having a sleepover at one of our palaces sometime soon. Everyone can bring their own pillows!

For Reirin, beds were associated with memories of illness. Precisely because she had spent so much of her life lying down with no one else for company, she had always longed to sleep next to friends and hurl pillows back and forth.

Next time, I hope we can actually stay up all night chatting. We'll nibble on our favorite snacks when our court ladies aren't looking, roar with laughter over the silliest things, and then…

She counted off all the things she wanted to do on her fingers. Once she made it down the cloister and arrived at the Palace of the

Golden Qilin, she was bound to get an earful from Tousetsu for breaking curfew, but even that thought excited her for a change. Up until ten days ago, she had been too wary of surveillance to so much as consider staying out past curfew. No, as far back as her childhood, she had been too sickly to ever go out much.

Yet here she was now, walking around without anyone to accompany her. The sun was slowly sinking beneath the horizon. The smell of kitchen maids cooking rice wafted over, filling her with a curious mixture of enchantment and impatience to get home.

I truly couldn't be happier.

As the light of the setting sun hit her cheeks, Reirin suddenly felt the urge to cry. Each and every day was so dazzling and full of color. She still found it hard to believe that she could even experience such heart-wrenchingly precious moments as these.

Lately, I've rarely come down sick even in my own body.

Beckoned to a stop by the sunset, Reirin traced its red rays down to her hands. Her porcelain skin was almost translucent, and her wrists were thin and slender. Her body remained as frail as ever, but much to her surprise, she hadn't run a fever or vomited even once since reversing the switch. Although there had been one instance of her tripping and spraining her ankle, even that had healed quickly enough.

I always am *mysteriously healthy the first few days after we switch back.*

She flexed her fingers a few times, opening and closing her hand. This was something she'd been wondering about ever since the first switch: Whenever she swapped bodies with Keigetsu, not only was she able to enjoy good health in her friend's hardy body, but she would remain healthy for a while even after switching back.

Fire produces earth. Does her affinity for fire bolster my earthen properties? Or is it the flames generated by Lady Keigetsu's soul purging the many maladies within me?

Reirin cocked her head to one side, the phenomenon reminding her of slash-and-burn agriculture. She often considered asking Keigetsu for an explanation, but she always put the matter off when she got caught up in some sort of drama; then, before she knew it, the maladies would be back to plaguing her, and she wouldn't have the energy to spare worrying about it.

I've gone ten whole days this time. I believe that's longer than ever before. Perhaps… She clenched the hands she'd been holding up to the sun, thinking the words she always held back from saying aloud. *Perhaps my health really has improved.*

Even in the privacy of her mind, it took her a great deal of courage to hold out hopes like these. All the things she had said to Leanne could apply to herself as well. Hope required more resolve than simply giving up and accepting the way things were. It meant opening herself up to having her expectations betrayed.

But I am *always the picture of health after we swap bodies! Why, as we speak, I'm in such good shape that I might as well still be in Lady Keigetsu's body!*

As she strung words into excuses to herself, Reirin could have sworn she heard another voice somewhere deep within her heart. A tiny murmur that carried a fragile, faltering, nascent wish.

I wish…

Just thinking the words made her heart pound in her chest.

"I wish… Oh, enough shilly-shallying! I am Kou Reirin! A woman of the Kou!"

Fed up with herself for losing her nerve and struggling to come out and say it, Reirin smacked her cheeks and held her head high.

Chin up. Do things with a bang.

The first stars had begun to twinkle in the evening sky. After much ado, Reirin finally made her wish on one of those stars.

O star above, hear my wish. No longer do I desire to relinquish everything and take the easy way out.

"I wish to become healthy—and live," she said, her voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

Ba-dump!

Reirin staggered forward, feeling like someone had squeezed her heart in their hands.

"Ah…"

Her throat seized up. Her ears rang. She was hit with such an intense wave of dizziness that she couldn't stay on her feet. As she crumpled to her knees, Reirin tried to grab hold of the railing, but her arms were too heavy to lift.

No…

Why was this happening? She had been brimming with energy just moments ago. The brilliance of the hope she had nurtured made the despair hit all the harder. She felt all those joyful promises and bright moments slipping through her fingers.

It hurts.

Reirin's eyes watered as a wave of nausea climbed up her throat. She bit her lip hard to force down the emotions and the pain, but it was no use. She couldn't bear it.

It hurts so much.

She was short of breath. A fog settled over her mind, and the threads of her thoughts came unraveled.

As Reirin drifted out of consciousness, she had a dazed thought: *In times like these…what was I supposed to say again?*

She had to make some kind of plea. A request for help. An attempt to reach out to others instead of giving up and keeping everything bottled up inside.

But what do I say?

Right up until the moment she slumped over on the cold floor, she kept trying to think of the right words.

***

The hard *clack* of shoes echoed off the damp stone walls. These weren't the pounding footfalls of a man. They were a woman's footsteps, accompanied by a rustle of skirts a beat later.

The dungeons were sealed off multiple times over. And yet, a woman carrying a burlap sack set foot in the darkest corner of their innermost depths without hesitation.

"Goodness me, this is some tight security."

Atop a red sandalwood pedestal sat an object wrapped in so many chains as to be blocked from view. The woman chuckled at the sight of it, her voice soft and low.



"He's certainly the obsessive type," she said to herself, astounded, before dauntlessly reaching out to unwind the chains.

The last chain came away with a metallic jangle, revealing a spittoon within. The very same one that contained the soul of the sorcerer who had stolen Prince Gomei's body and spent twenty-five years on the run.

Even after retrieving Gomei's body, Emperor Genyou had no intention of absolving the sorcerer responsible for his beloved half brother's death. His plan was supposedly to keep the spittoon in the dungeons and torment the man every night. As evidence of this, an iron pot and charcoal were sitting out next to the jar, presumably for the purpose of burning the soul alive.

"Hrm…"

The woman picked up the spittoon and shook it next to her ear. After closing her eyes, listening carefully, and searching for signs of a presence inside, she cracked her eyelids open once more.

"Fine."

She appeared to have made up her mind about something or other.

"I'm afraid I'll be borrowing this for a while," she announced to no one in particular, then pulled an identical spittoon out of her burlap sack. She swapped the two items, wound the chains back around the replacement jar, and slipped the original into her bag after securing the lid with a cloth.

Once her work was done, she stole another glance at the pedestal. There was something almost reproachful about the jar's silence, but she shrugged that judgment off, joking, "Hey, I did my fair share this time. Don't I deserve a little reward?"

And with that, the woman—Kou Kenshuu, the empress of Ei—strolled off and left the dungeons behind.

Afterword

HELLO! SATSUKI NAKAMURA HERE. Many thanks for picking up Volume 9.

Disaster befalls a certain character at the very end, but at least the revenge drama from the previous volume came to a close. Read the main story to find out who that character is.

Silly me! Looks like I've left myself two whole pages for the afterword of this volume. Well, this is a bit embarrassing, but I might as well take the opportunity to talk about the writing process!

While I had a lot of fun writing Reirin and Keigetsu's miscommunication last volume, I purposely left only half of the underlying issue resolved. Rather than riding the momentum of the moment and hand-waving the conflict away with "adversity strengthens the foundations," I wanted the pair to make the conscious choice to confront each other and talk things out.

Reirin needs to be more cognizant of her lack of regard for her own life, while Keigetsu needs to curb her habit of letting her emotions get the better of her. Of course, these qualities are part of what makes the girls so great, and people don't change overnight, but it's not enough to write them off as personality quirks. It's important that the girls examine themselves, occasionally get scolded by those closest to them, and resolve their misunderstandings through communication and effort, not as a product of chance. I wrote the middle section of the volume with that hope in mind.

Your support is the reason the *Inept Villainess* series has gone on long enough for me to depict this sort of gradual character growth. Thank you so much.

Uh… This is normally where I'd wrap things up with the acknowledgments, but I still have almost a page left to go. What are

authors even supposed to write in the afterword? I always cram the main story so full of content that I've never had to figure it out! What a dilemma!

Wait, I know! Thanks to your support, we've released a special edition of this ninth volume that was informed by the results of the popularity poll.[1] The special edition comes with a bonus story featuring the three top-ranking characters. I agonized over what to write about, but I ultimately settled on a story covering Reirin's and Keigetsu's childhoods and the period immediately following their entry to the court. An episode zero, so to speak. I've wanted to touch on how Keigetsu felt about Reirin when they first met for a while now, so I'm glad I could take this chance to depict her perspective in so much detail.

Next up is the big ten-volume milestone! When I first started writing this story, I never dreamed I would be given the opportunity to extend Reirin's tale this far. As the series progresses, we will steadily unravel the core mysteries, and the next volume will mark the start of a new arc. I hope you'll look forward to it.

Once again, I would like to thank my supervisor for so enthusiastically keeping pace with me from the very start of this journey. I also wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to Kana Yuki-sensei, whose beautiful illustrations are sure to add years to the lives of both me and my readers; to Ohitsuji-sensei, who captivates audiences all over the world with her dramatic manga adaptation; and to my designer, whose playful spirit shines through in the smallest of details. Of course, special thanks go out to all my dear readers!

What kind of story will the next arc turn out to be? I hope to see you there.

—Satsuki Nakamura, October 2024

Footnotes

Afterword

[1] The special edition of Volume 9 is a Japan exclusive.



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