

3

Kureha

Bride
of the
Barrier
Master

Contents

- 1. [Cover](#)
- 2. [Title Page](#)
- 3. [Copyright](#)
- 4. [Table of Contents](#)
- 5. [Prologue](#)
- 6. [Chapter 1](#)
- 7. [Chapter 2](#)
- 8. [Chapter 3](#)
- 9. [Chapter 4](#)
- .0. [Yen Newsletter](#)

Pagebreaks of the print version

[Cover Page](#)

- [i](#)
- [ii](#)
- [iii](#)
- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [3](#)
- [4](#)
- [5](#)
- [6](#)
- [7](#)
- [8](#)

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34

35

36

37

38

39

40

41

42

43

44

45

46

47

48

49

50

51

52

53

54

55

56

57

58

59

60

61

62

63

64

65

66

67

68

69

70

71

72

73

74

75

76

77

78

79

80

81

82

83

84

85

86

87

88

89

90

91

92

93

94

95

96

97

98

99

100

101

102

103

104

105

106

107

108

109

110

111

112

113

114

115

116

117

118

119

120

121

122

123

124

125

126

127

128

129

130

131

132

133

134

135

136

137

138

139

140

141

142

143

144

145

146

147

148

149

150

151

152

153

154

155

156

Bride *of the* Barrier Master



Kureha

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Contents

- Cover
- Title Page
- Copyright
- Prologue
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Yen Newsletter

Prologue

On a mountain deep within Japan's borders—dimly lit despite the sun shining high above—among the scores of trees growing wild, a momentous event was underway: the Association of Practitioners' exam to advance from the Fourth Color rank to the Fifth.

The objective of this exam was to exterminate the shades residing on the mountain.

As befitting the Fifth Color advancement exam, the shades were no small fries.

After several practitioners had tried but failed to destroy them, a barrier had been placed around the mountain to seal the shades in and prevent further casualties. The Fifth Color practitioners were about to be summoned to handle the extermination, but then the exam hopeful had appeared, and thus the mountain had been co-opted as the stage for the exam.

The challenger was Yukizasa Sankourou, a young man with an icy gaze and hair as light as snow. He was slim and tall, with refined facial features like a model. He was only twenty years old, and yet he had already been nominated as the next Sankourou clan lord.

Yukizasa had entered the mountain ages ago.

As a candidate for the Fifth Color, he was far from weak. The fact that the extermination had taken so long was a testament to the formidability of the shades. The practitioners maintaining the barrier saw the trouble he was having and grew concerned about Yukizasa. However, he came down the mountain at regular intervals to report on his progress, so the exam was technically still underway. That said, if he took much longer, he would be unlikely to pass—a fact that he knew very well.

Fifth Color practitioners, the highest ranked in the profession, were the final bastion. Anyone who could not take down shades the level of those on the mountain could not be permitted to assume the prestigious title.

In fact, Fifth Color practitioners often had to face shades far stronger than the ones Yukizasa was fighting. The rank would mean little if it was easily achievable.

As such, Obsidian practitioners were both respected and feared.

Yukizasa fought on, first advancing, then forced to fall back, and at last, he prevailed. He descended the mountain with wounds all over his body.

The practitioners maintaining the barrier welcomed him back, calling out, "Good work."

"I have successfully exterminated the horde," Yukizasa announced.

His proclamation set the crowd buzzing. "That's great news! Congratulations!" one person shouted.

He had banished the shades single-handedly. In other words, he had passed the exam.

One practitioner presented Yukizasa with his reward: an obsidian pendant.

He took it with a confident smile. He removed the lapis one he had been wearing and hung the obsidian one around his neck instead.

The pendant was shiny and jet-black. It settled around his collar as if it had always been there.

"I've finally done it," Yukizasa said. "It may have taken me a little longer than it took Saku, but I've caught up." He failed to fully suppress his satisfied grin.

It was during that moment of triumph that one of the practitioners hesitantly approached him and said, "Sir, while you have been occupied here, Lord Ichinomiya has succeeded the Ichinomiya clan and is now the clan lord."

"What? Are you serious?" Yukizasa asked in shock.

"Yes, sir."

"But he's not married. What does he plan to do about the barrier around the

pillar?”

“It is said that he has already taken a bride and completed the barrier’s transfer.”

“What?” Yukizasa exclaimed, forgetting his exhaustion momentarily. That was how unbelievable the news was. “He’s married? You’ve got to be kidding me. To the daughter of which family exactly?”

After a bit of thinking, his expression brightened with understanding. “Come to think of it, there’s a chick in one of Ichinomiya’s branch families with a human shikigami, isn’t there? The Ichise family. The son is the youngest practitioner to obtain the Lapis rank, and she’s his younger sister. I’ve heard she’s quite accomplished. It must be her.” He nodded, satisfied that he’d solved the mystery.

Loath to contradict him, the other practitioner said awkwardly, “The lady in question is likely not the younger sister you are thinking of, but the other one, I believe.”

Yukizasa furrowed his brow. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Lord Ichinomiya did indeed marry one of the Ichise daughters. However, his wife is not the one widely regarded as exceptional but the one infamous for being her sister’s scraps.”

Not following, Yukizasa tilted his head in puzzlement. “Is that a joke?”

Chapter 1

In the Ichise family's halls, from whence both Hana and Hazuki had gone, their parents remained, sequestered in their room and obviously irritated. The residence's servants—not wishing to become scapegoats for their master and mistress's wrath—had started to avoid the room, and thus, the vicinity was cloaked in silence.

Unbeknownst to the two, word that Hazuki had left the house had already spread; the servants circulated the story in whispers.

“Miss Hazuki has finally flown the coop, it seems.”

“Really? But who could blame her? Should've seen it coming, honestly.”

“What the Master and Mistress put her through was more like abuse than an educational regimen. Of course she would grow to hate it. If only they had doted on her more, instead of pushing her the way they did.”

“Shhh! We'll get in trouble if they overhear.”

Oblivious to the conversations the servants were having, the twins' father was pacing around the master bedroom, unable to sit still. Their mother was biting her nails and trying to regain her composure. When Hana—that ungrateful whelp—had suddenly shown her face at the house, they had assumed she'd been kicked out of the Ichinomiya residence. But instead, she had gone and dragged Hazuki away with her.

Until now, Hazuki had obeyed their wishes—had been a daughter they could be proud of. For her to reject the marriage they had labored to arrange for her... Outrageous! They were incensed over this rebellion by the daughter who had never once gone against them and were adamant that Hana's bad influence was the cause.

It would have been one thing if they were worried for Hazuki, even if only slightly, but there wasn't a shadow of a thought for their daughter in their hearts. They were merely agitated and in disbelief that she had defied them.

Apparently, Hazuki had ended up in the Ichinomiya main residence.

As for how they knew, they had received a call from the Ichinomiya clan lord's mother, Mio, informing them that Hazuki would live in the Ichinomiya residence from that day forward. The matter-of-fact report left no room for refusal. Immediately after stating her business, she had hung up, as if to say the Ichise parents' opinions were unnecessary.

Mio's dismissive attitude further fueled their indignation.

"Hazuki must have been deceived by Hana. That must be it. There is no other reason she would defy us," the Ichise patriarch spat.

"Yes, exactly," the mother agreed.

The two egotistical parents did not yield to anything so trivial as self-reflection. The thought that they could be at fault didn't so much as cross their minds, though it was clear to even the servants why Hazuki had left.

"That wretched Hana! How much more of a nuisance does she intend to be to this family? I knew we should have given her up for adoption. We let her stay since Hazuki was so against it, and this is how she repays us? What a worthless daughter!" the father cursed.

The twins' parents directed their rage at Hana.

"Let us complain to the clan!" the mother suggested. "She is the wife of the clan lord. We can accuse her of abusing her authority. Hazuki belongs to the Ichise family, after all."

"Ah, however..." he mumbled, "this is the main family we are dealing with. We cannot incur their ire..." The zeal he had shown earlier was nowhere to be seen.

Her eyes narrowed with fury. "Darling! You cannot afford to be so spineless. Hazuki will be snatched away from us!"

"I know that!" His ferocious roar reverberated around the room.

“Pardon me,” came a voice from outside.

The speaker was Hana and Hazuki’s older brother, Yanagi. He had been absent from the house for the past several days due to work. He came in and immediately sat down next to the sliding doors.

Talented enough to have become the youngest person to achieve the Lapis rank, Yanagi should have been the shining hope of his parents, who dreamed of restoring their family name to its former glory. However, compared to their fervor toward Hazuki, their treatment of him was frigid.

To be blunt, had they truly wanted to climb the ranks, the best course of action would have been to yield the head of the family position to Yanagi sooner rather than later. It was well-known that the clan lord, Saku, favored him and often relied on him for work.

But the Ichise elder didn’t do that. He was still occupying the seat.

At the moment, he was looking at Yanagi with eyes so cold, it was hard to believe he could be looking at his own child. “Yanagi,” he said dismissively. “We’re busy. Why have you come?”

“It appears that Hazuki has left the house,” Yanagi said.

He merely meant to verify the situation, but his calm demeanor grated on his father’s nerves.

“So what?! Are you saying it’s *my* fault?” his father shouted. He gnashed his teeth in rage.

“...I am only asking to confirm,” Yanagi said.

Suddenly, his father was struck by a realization. “That’s it. Yanagi! You visit the main residence regularly, do you not? You are in good standing with Lord Ichinomiya, as well. Go and persuade Hazuki. Bring her back no matter what!” he demanded.

Yanagi looked at his father, who was fully convinced of his plan’s genius, with placid eyes that showed no confusion nor turbulence. “I cannot.”

“Why not?! That’s an order. You only need to do what I say!”

The haughty declaration could hardly be thought of as words from a father.

Nevertheless, Yanagi was unshaken, tranquil like the deep waters of the ocean. "Hazuki left of her own volition."

"Hana is to blame!"

"Hazuki is no longer a child. Besides, Lord Ichinomiya has now become her guardian. He took her in under her own wishes. What can one insignificant branch family do?"

Insignificant...like the fallen Ichise family was implied.

"You are free to come and go through the main residence. Drag her here by force and be done with it!" his father yelled.

Does he understand how cowardly a move that would be? No. His ignorance is precisely why he can spit such pathetic words.

"Do you mean to anger the main family by doing so? As a servant of the Ichinomiya clan, I must decline. Even if I were not, making an enemy out of the Ichinomiyas would be a foolish decision. I suggest you reconsider," Yanagi said, calmly selecting his words of warning even when faced with his father's open wrath.

However, the words that were meant to prevent his father from giving in to irrational impulses only fanned the flames.

"You have always been like this. Your younger sister is gone, and yet you are as expressionless as ever," his father accused. "Behind your mask, you sneer at us. Mock us! Do you feel superior to have been chosen by your grandfather? But how unfortunate for you. The head of the Ichise family is me! Not Father, not you, but me!"

Finished with his tirade, he panted while glaring daggers at Yanagi.

Yanagi's mother was flustered by the turn of events but made no attempt to rein in her husband. It was no secret to anyone in the household that it was next to impossible to placate him when he was so worked up.

Accomplished though Yanagi might be, he was despised by his father. Or envied, perhaps it was more accurate to say.

Hana's existence had kept such feelings at bay, but before the twins had been

born, Yanagi's father had always watched him with callous eyes. His mother had not intervened then, either.

In his heart, the only things Yanagi felt toward his parents were exhaustion and resignation.

His father was tormented by an inferiority complex to this day.

"It does not matter how you feel about me," Yanagi said. "However, do not interfere with Hazuki and Hana any further."

"Interfere?! I am their father! It is my ri—!" He cut himself off, caving under the pressure of Yanagi's gaze.

Yanagi had not moved from his seat nor done anything in particular, but his daggerlike stare subdued his father. "The girls will decide their own paths. If you intend to disturb them, you will have to go through me."

His father turned bright red, trembling. He opened and closed his mouth several times without a sound. Finally, he managed to spit out the words lodged in his throat, his anger exploding out of him. "Wh-who do you think you are?!"

Yanagi looked at his father with a chilly glare. There was no filial affection to be found in his eyes.

But the same could be said for the father.

"Refrain from dragging those girls into your inferiority complex," Yanagi said.

"What did you say?!" his father shouted.

"Your shikigami is an insect...," Yanagi said, watching his father with a still and focused gaze. His father flinched. The young man stood and said, "I don't need to go on, do I? You know best of all, I'm sure. Neither Hana nor Hazuki are here any longer to feed your speck of pride, so miniscule that a light breeze would blow it away. Best you consider carefully what to do going forward before you act. For the sake of your beloved Ichise name as well."

After saying his piece, he turned to leave.

"D-don't mess with me! Stop right there, Yanagi! Stop!" his father yelled.

He ignored his father and exited the room. Through the closed sliding doors

came a *thud*; his father must have thrown something. Yanagi didn't care.

The time when he concerned himself with his father's moods the way Hazuki did had long passed. Let him be as angry as he liked. It had nothing to do with Yanagi.

There was only one thing he was worried about.

"I hope those two won't pick up his bad habits..." Yanagi said, thinking of his runaway sisters.



Hazuki walked down the hallway of the main Ichinomiya residence, where she would be living from then on. She was unable to settle down.

Her anxiety was perfectly understandable given that the only two times she had previously visited the house were for Saku's succession ceremony and his and Hana's wedding.

"Are you okay, Hazuki?" Hana asked, trying to ease her sister's tension by engaging her in conversation.

"I-I'm fine," Hazuki replied.

"There's no need to be so stiff. You're going to be living here now. If you don't loosen up, you're going to wear yourself out."

Hana, for her part, felt not a single drop of nerves—a while had passed since she had come to live at the residence. Granted, she hadn't been anxious at the beginning, either.

So what if no one in the household wanted her around? That had been her stance. In any case, her impudence was precisely what Saku liked about her and was perhaps why her strength had been acknowledged by the Ichinomiyas faster than she had expected. Crucially, she had won the approval of Mio, who ran the estate when Saku was away.

Were Hana still just a good-for-nothing, she would have been treated very differently around the household, and she probably wouldn't have been able to be as carefree as she was at the moment. Nonetheless, even in such

circumstances, no doubt she would have carried on doing whatever she wanted anyway.

Though the twins had been formed from the same split cell, asking the sensitive Hazuki to behave the way Hana did was a tall order.

Hazuki furrowed her brows in worry. “Don’t say such unreasonable things. Where do you think we are? This is the main residence, you know.”

To Hazuki, it was a sacred place one rarely had the chance to set foot in. Distinguished and revered—the kind of place that made one feel small.

“Not to mention...,” Hazuki continued, looking in front of her timidly.

Her gaze was on Saku, who was striding ahead of the girls with his arms crossed. He exuded a confidence befitting the master of the house.

An excess of confidence, one could say.

“You’re worried about Saku? He won’t be around most of the time because of work, so don’t worry about him,” Hana said. “He acts like a big shot, but his mental age is below ours, for sure. It’ll be fine.”

Hazuki gawked at Hana—who was laughing cheerfully—with eyes as wide as saucers, shocked at her sister’s rude remarks toward the clan head. “H-Hana! He’s going to hear you!” she exclaimed, worried that Hana, who didn’t have a prudent bone in her body, would receive a tongue-lashing from Saku.

Hana was still chuckling, perfectly unbothered.

A vein pulsed on Saku’s temple.

“He can rage all he likes. I’m not afraid,” Hana drawled.

While she was laughing it up, Saku unleashed a karate chop to her head. Bull’s-eye.

He hadn’t put much power into the blow, but the important thing was that he had done it at all.

“What gives?! This is a violence-free zone!” Hana said.

“Violence-free? That’s rich coming from you,” Saku retorted.

Hana regularly let her fists do the talking.

But Saku was no different.

“You’re such a jerk!” she yelled, then pouted.

He grabbed her face in one hand, squeezing her cheeks. Seeing her lips pursed like an octopus, his lips curved in a terrifying grin.

“Who do you think made it possible for your sister to escape that house, huh?” Saku demanded.

“Ip fwas thwanks to my cwoperation, wasn’t ip?” Hana protested incoherently.

“I agreed to be her guardian, but arranging for her to live here was a bonus.”

“Scrooge!”

“Complain if you want. I’ll just throw her out.” He smiled smugly.

Despite Hana’s rude remarks, she was actually grateful he had agreed to take Hazuki in.

However, his taunts grated on her.

She shook off the hand gripping her face and kicked him hard in the shins.

“That hurts!” he howled.

She sniffed haughtily and ignored Saku in favor of grabbing Hazuki’s hand instead. “Come on, Hazuki. Let’s go introduce you to my mother-in-law. She’s much scarier than Saku when she’s angry, so we must not tempt fate.”

“Wha— But...,” Hazuki stuttered.

She looked at Saku worriedly, but Hana was pulling her forward without regard for her concerns. Saku sighed and shook his head in exasperation. Seeing that, Hazuki reluctantly followed Hana.

Their destination was the room where Hana and the family usually ate. It was noon, and Mio was already seated for lunch.

Hana had explained the situation to Mio beforehand and had stated her wish for the Ichinomiyas to bring Hazuki into the fold. Mio had phoned the Ichises, but the details of her conversation were a mystery to Hana. At the time, Mio had only said to her coolly, “One must follow the proper channels.”

Though she had seemed angry on the surface, she was a tsundere, so she might have actually called to keep Hana and Hazuki's parents in line.

Refusing to simply say what one was thinking was classic tsundere.

However, there was no way that Hazuki, who was meeting Mio for the first time, would see through the matriarch's frosty exterior to the softy hiding underneath.

Hana could sense her twin quaking beneath Mio's sharp, appraising gaze. She directed Hazuki to sit in front of Mio and announced, "Mother, this is my elder twin sister, Hazuki. Please look after her from now on."

Pinned by Mio's glare, Hazuki flinched, but everything was business as usual.

"I remember. Originally, I was staunchly against taking in a girl from a branch family—one who is not even a prospective wife—but Saku was adamant, so what is there to do?" Mio said. "If you are to live in the Ichinomiya household, you are to obey the rules and conduct yourself with respectability."

Hazuki stiffly replied, "Y-yes, ma'am. Thank you for your hospitality." She bowed deeply.

Mio's words did not exactly ring of welcome. Hana and Saku, who were aware of her difficult nature, watched her with weary expressions.

Just then, Towa came in with tea and said what the two were thinking. "Miss Mio, you said you were opposed, but were you not the one to take the initiative to arrange a room for Miss Hazuki? Knowing the young lady's situation and finding it appalling, you were quite irate at their parents, I believe."

"Towa!" Mio snapped admonishingly, her face red.

A longtime servant of the household, Towa could be called, in a sense, the shadow don of the Ichinomiya family. She cackled. "Ho-ho-ho. I am merely stating the facts. What was it you said? 'No matter if it is for the family, to disparage the child's own will is unthinkable,' I recall. These ears of mine heard you quite clearly. How outraged you were."

Mio averted her gaze in embarrassment.

Hazuki looked shocked by the exchange, while Hana and Saku stifled their

laughter.

“Saku! Hana! Sit,” Mio commanded, shifting targets to find another outlet for her irritation. “We cannot dine while you stand!”

It was taking all Hana had to stop herself from bursting into laughter. “Yes, ma’am...,” she managed to get out.

Saku, exasperated by his family’s antics, took a seat at the head of the table, and Hana sat next to him.

“Over here, Hazuki,” Hana said, patting the seat next to hers. Hazuki hesitantly obeyed. “We all eat together in this room. That includes you.”

“Wh— Everyone? Lord Ichinomiya, as well?” Hazuki asked.

“When he has time.”

“Is that so...?”

It was only natural that Hazuki was surprised.

In the Ichise house, everyone made excuses to take their meals separately. Their life was far removed from the ideal happy, harmonious family.

Their brother, Yanagi, was often away from the house for work, so they hardly ever saw him. No wonder it came as a shock to Hazuki that Saku, who was surely just as busy, made time for his family.

Hana knew that Hazuki might find it disturbing at first, but she would soon grow used to it. When she did, the food she ate alone would start to taste bland and lackluster.

On another subject, Nozomu had yet to arrive.

“By the way, Saku,” Hana said, “did you tell Nozomu about Hazuki?”

“Nope. Mother told him,” Saku answered.

However, Mio said, “I did not. I assumed Hana would.”

The people gathered all made identical *Oops?* faces.

That was when Nozomu entered the room. His eyes fell on Hazuki sitting smack-dab in front of him, in *his* seat. After a beat, he yelled, “What the hell?!”

pointing a finger straight at her. “Why—*why* is Hazuki here?!”

“I’ll be living here from today onward,” Hazuki answered, somewhat apologetically.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it!” he protested.

Nozomu looked to Saku and Mio, and finally Hana for an explanation. Apparently, all three had thought someone else would inform Nozomu, and in the end, no one had.

Badly shaken, he demanded, “What is going on?!”

Saku tried to pacify him. “Calm down, Nozomu. It’s as Hazuki said. I’m going to be her legal guardian from now on, and she’ll be living with us,” he said. “Hazuki, I’ll leave you to explain the details. I’m sure there are parts of the story you do and don’t want to tell. Besides, you’re already classmates, so you’re the best suited for the job.”

“I understand,” Hazuki replied. She turned back to face Nozomu and smiled. “I’ll tell you everything later. Let’s get along.”

Nozomu blushed fiercely and said, “S-sure.”

He couldn’t look her in the eye, but he kept darting glances at her, unable to help himself. Even after they started eating, he was as meek as a lamb, a drastic difference from his usual attitude toward Hana.

Bothered by his behavior, Hana asked, “Are the two of you close?”

“What?! D-don’t say stupid things out of the blue!” Nozomu said.

“What’re you so worked up about?”

“I’m not!”

But it was clear to everyone that he was extremely agitated.

Hana couldn’t hide her sly grin as she asked again, “Well? Are you close or not?”

“We are,” Hazuki said. “We’ve always been in the same class. He could even be the one I get along with the best. Right?”

She smiled at Nozomu, and he nodded dutifully.

He was usually quick to jump down Hana's throat. Hana and Hazuki had the same face, but there was a wide gulf between his treatment of them...

"That's perfect. The room arranged for Hazuki is close to yours, Nozomu," Mio said.

Nozomu gaped at her. "If I may ask, why? Hana and Hazuki are sisters. Would it not be better for them to be close to each other?"

His tone was courteous. Saku was the same way when he spoke to Mio, which spoke to her importance in the household's hierarchy.

"Hana's room is next to Saku's. Sisters they may be, but allocating a room next to the clan lord and his wife to a branch family member is out of the question. If you are on friendly terms, all the more reason for your rooms to be close, no? It will be more convenient for her to ask you for help."

Besides, even though Hana and Hazuki had lived together before, they had not been, strictly speaking, under the same roof. Hana had been in an annex while Hazuki had been in the main house. To be frank, it would have been difficult for them to suddenly become attached at the hip. In fact, in a contest of who had spent the most time together with Hazuki, the winner might have been Nozomu.

The location of Hazuki's room may have been chosen to illuminate the difference in her and Hana's standing—the former a daughter of a low-ranking branch family and the latter the bride of the clan lord. However, in the end, having her room close to Nozomu worked in her favor.

Hana felt a twinge of sadness that Hazuki seemed to have a closer relationship with Nozomu, but if it benefited Hazuki, she had no right to interfere.

"I appreciate your help," Hazuki said to Mio. "And thanks, Nozomu."

Finally free from the Ichises, she was on cloud nine, and the bright smile that lit her face was like a flower in bloom.

"H-h-h-happy to be of service!" Nozomu stuttered.

Struck by Hazuki's smile up close, his manner veered sharply into suspicious

territory. Their interaction was like that of a dewy-eyed couple who had just started dating.

Even Mio looked like she was nursing some theories about the pair's conversation, but if she was, she kept them to herself.

Hana watched them with a mischievous and unnerving grin.

Saku, with a bowl in one hand, cautioned her calmly, "Don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

"I know, I know. I just want to have a little fun," she said.

"Well, don't."

He, too, looked like he had an inkling about Nozomu's behavior.

The only one who was oblivious was Hazuki.

Hana had learned something new about Hazuki: Her grades were excellent, but she was clueless about love.



It was the first school day since Hazuki had moved into the Ichinomiya residence.

First thing in the morning, they were already fighting.

Well, to be precise, it was Hana and Nozomu.

The reason was insignificant—they were arguing over whose car Hazuki would ride in to go to school—but the two combatants were deadly serious.

"Hazuki is coming with me!" Nozomu shouted.

"What are you talking about? She's *my* sister, so she's coming with me," Hana snapped. Having finally made up with Hazuki, she wanted to make up for lost time and was loath to yield any of their time together.

However, Nozomu gave as good as he got, refusing to back down. "There are things me and Hazuki have to discuss."

"It doesn't have to be right *now*. Your rooms are close anyway. You have

plenty of time to talk.”

“Says the one who’s been camping out in her room since the day she came.”

Nozomu wasn’t wrong. Now that Hana had realized the motives behind Hazuki’s previous behavior, she was feeling apologetic. She had been fussing over her sister, diligently bringing her tea and snacks, visiting her room regularly to check in, and hovering around her anxiously.

Hazuki seemed a little fatigued by Hana’s actions, but whether Hana had noticed was a different story.

Nozomu, for his part, had been unable to relax knowing that he was living under the same roof as Hazuki—next to her room, of all things. When he had gone to pay Hazuki a visit, he had run into Hana, and the situation had quickly gotten out of hand.

Mio had put an end to their fight. She had scolded them both, saying, “Hazuki won’t be able to settle in with you two bothering her!” and had thrown them out of Hazuki’s room.

The day after that incident, Hana and Nozomu were once again fighting over a right they both refused to give up.

“Like you’re one to talk! You tried to sneak back into her room after I left yesterday, didn’t you?” Hana accused. Then, dropping her voice so Hazuki wouldn’t hear, she whispered, “Any wicked thoughts you want to confess?”

“As if! Stupid!!” he yelled.

Hazuki hadn’t heard what Hana said and was startled by Nozomu’s reaction, but Hana was enjoying herself, the way one does when playing with a newfound toy.

“Besides,” Hana continued, “if the two of you show up at school in the morning together, rumors are bound to spread. Ohhh, is that your goal? To have the public decide for you?”

Nozomu became visibly agitated under Hana’s accusatory gaze. “No!” he cried.

“Ew, gross. Did I guess right? I have to warn Hazuki.”

Hana was having the time of her life teasing him. Had Saku been there, he might have stopped her, but alas, he had already left the house.

“I’m telling you, you’re wrong!” Nozomu protested.

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem if Hazuki rides with me.” She turned to her sister and quickly snatched up her hand. “Let’s go, Hazuki.”

Nozomu panicked. “Wait!”

“No way,” Hana said. “Come on, Hazuki. Climb aboard.”

“S-sure,” Hazuki said.

She was bothered by the pair’s fight, but she got into the car as directed. Hana got in as well.

However, immediately after—surprise, surprise—Nozomu opened the back seat door on the opposite side and climbed in without asking.

So even though normally Nozomu staunchly refused to ride in the same car as Hana, all three of them ended up sitting together, with Hazuki sandwiched in the middle.

Nozomu sniffed haughtily and turned away, sitting with his arms crossed and projecting an air of arrogance. However, the tips of his ears were red with embarrassment. Adorable.

“Wow, you want to come with your big sis to school that badly? You spoiled baby,” Hana teased. Of course, she was saying it knowing full well that the one he wanted to ride with was not herself but Hazuki.

Nozomu was shaking, but denying it would be as good as admitting he wanted to be with Hazuki, and he wouldn’t do that.

“Mwah-ha-ha, how delightful,” Hana said and cackled.

“Master, that’s not very nice,” Azuha admonished quietly from her perch in Hana’s hair.

Hazuki twitched and looked at Azuha. “Your butterfly spoke...”

Butterflies and all other insect shikigami were the lowest on the pyramid. They were weak creatures with only the bare minimum power and shouldn’t

have had the ability to understand speech or to communicate their thoughts. No wonder Hazuki was surprised.

Actually, Hazuki should have seen the two speak during the assault on their school. Granted, she wouldn't have had time to waste on such details, and she had probably already forgotten.

"Yeah," Hana said. "This is your first proper meeting, I guess."

The twins knew of each other's shikigami, but because their living situation had drastically changed after their first summoning attempt, they hadn't had the chance to interact with the shikigami in private.

The first and only time Hana had spoken with Hazuki's shikigami, Hiragi, was when he had accompanied Sae to ask Hana to help his master.

That was a testament to the gulf that had existed between them ever since they turned ten years old.

The distance, along with everything else, had been their parents' fault.

"Introduce yourself, Azuha," Hana said.

The butterfly fluttered off Hana's hair and flew to hover in front of Hazuki's eyes. "I'm Azuha," she said in a lisping child's voice.

Hazuki followed suit and said, "I'm Hazuki..."

Hana snickered.

"Has she always been able to talk?" Hazuki asked.

"Nope. My powers awakened when I was fifteen. That was when she became able to speak," explained Hana.

"You have other ones, too, right? Two human shikigami and a dog..."

"Aoi, Miyabi, and Arashi. I'll introduce them to you later."

Azuha was Hana's only companion for the day. The others were house-sitting.

She was accompanied by different shikigami depending on the day. At times, Azuha stayed behind to guard the house. Other times, all her shikigami went with her.

However, unlike Azuha, who was visible all the time, Aoi and Miyabi stayed hidden even when they were at Hana's side. Only practitioners of Saku's level were able to detect them. For that reason, they had been convenient bodyguards, but now that Hana had given up playing the role of a good-for-nothing, it didn't matter who she took.

Incidentally, Arashi, an inugami deity, could make himself invisible, but he often chose to manifest himself. Apparently, it was easier to use his powers that way.

The particulars were an enigma to humans, but as far as Hana was concerned, Arashi could do as he liked. He was a god with a generous heart. He had once become a cursed tatarigami spirit, his altruism warped by others' pain. He would never hurt another without reason. Hana had faith in that.

Their school was not far from the Ichinomiya residence, and they soon arrived. Hana and Nozomu, who were sitting by the doors, got out first. The other students, surprised to see the two come to school together, stared at them wide-eyed. Nonetheless, it was hardly a secret that they lived together, so it was not so big a shock.

However, Hazuki's appearance caused ripples in the crowd. The students whispered among each other.

"What? Why is Hazuki with them?"

"They *are* twins. What's the fuss?"

"But I've never once seen them together before."

"You're right about that."

Hana and Hazuki went to and from school separately. On top of that, they never did anything together in school, either. For the pair of them to come in the same car was unimaginable. Not to mention that Hana was now the wife of the Ichinomiya clan lord, a position which naturally drew people's attention. There wasn't a bigger commotion only because they were, in fact, twins.

Had Nozomu and Hazuki come to school alone together, rumors would have started to fly about their relationship for sure. Hana glared at the featherbrained Nozomu, who had so enjoyed the fact that he got to ride with

Hazuki even if he had needed to force his way in.

Did he properly receive the message she was sending with her eyes?

Nozomu went on ahead into the school, looking somewhat shamefaced.

Hazuki was being interrogated by a group of students that had surrounded her. It was unclear whether they were her friends or groupies.

“Hazuki! Why did you come with them?”

“Even Nozomu was with you.”

“What the hell is going on?”

Hana was pissed at the jerks who were so quick to barge into someone else’s private affairs, but Hazuki smiled and fielded their inquiries with tactful answers.

“Just what you would expect from a star student,” Hana commented in appreciation of Hazuki’s crowd-wrangling skills, and she set off for her own classroom.

There was no point in her sticking with Hazuki since they were in different classes anyway. Hazuki would surely resolve the situation gracefully.

When Hana got to her own class, Suzu immediately came up to her.

“Morning, Hana,” Suzu said. “I heard the news. You came to school with your sister, right? First time, isn’t it? For you two to commute together all chummy.”

“I think this every time, but your information network is fast. Where are you getting your intel from?” Hana questioned.

She had come to the classroom directly without making any pit stops, yet Suzu had already heard the news.

“It’s nothing like that. The newspaper club posted about it,” Suzu said dismissively.

“What are you talking about?” Hana asked.

“You don’t know about their account?”

“Nope.”

“They post on social media about the latest rumors. They wrote about you and your sister arriving together just a minute ago. See?”

Suzu held out her phone for Hana to see.

The newspaper club’s post featured a picture of none other than the two of them standing outside the car with the caption, WHAT’S THE HOT GOSSIP ON THE TWINS?! THE ICHINOMIYA LORD’S WIFE AND HER TWIN GET OUT OF THE SAME CAR!

“They’re practically paparazzi, sneaking around like that. When in the world...?” Rather than being angry that her photo had been taken without her permission, she was more exasperated.

“They post about all the goings-on around the school. I bet most of the students follow them. I’m shocked you didn’t know,” Suzu said.

“...I wonder if I would win if I sued them on the grounds that they infringed on my image rights,” Hana said.

She scrolled through their post history. Was that a post about her and Saku’s wedding? They had even uploaded a photo of Hana dressed as a bride.

Not to mention, the post was from the day of the ceremony.

She had the urge to shake them down and demand where they had gotten the photo.

If even information about her wedding had been leaked so easily, no wonder word had already gotten out about the three of them coming to school together.

Hana remembered the commotion from earlier. She had plenty to say to the newspaper club, but she swallowed her words. For the time being, she decided to follow the account.

The silver lining—if there was one—was that the club had yet to dig up the news that Hazuki had left the Ichise household, but it was only a matter of time...

Whatever happens, happens, she thought, composing herself.

Just then, their teacher walked into the room.

That day, Hana had bigger worries than Hazuki.

The moment she had been anxiously waiting for had finally come.

The teacher announced, “I’m going to hand back your tests.”

Exam season had followed hot on the heels of the Skull of Nirvana incident, and they were finally getting their grades back. Some rejoiced. Some lamented. Every person reacted to the news in their own way, but surely there was no one who was more nervous than Hana. Everything was riding on these results.

“—Next. Hana Ichise... Ah, I mean, Hana Ichinomiya,” the teacher said.

“Here!” she said.

She leaped up to retrieve her exams, too preoccupied to spare a thought for the teacher who *still* couldn’t remember to use her married name.

With her exams in hand, she returned to her seat and took a deep breath before looking at her score.

What she saw had her clutching her hair and chanting desperately under her breath, “Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn.”

The boy in the seat next to her looked creeped out, but she didn’t have the luxury to worry about him. Her grades took over her thoughts. Azuha fluttered around her with worry.

Suzu walked up to Hana’s desk cheerily and peeked at her friend’s answer sheets. Suzu’s face split into a delighted grin. “I knew it. *Fs* across the board. Last-minute cramming won’t do you any good, but at least you tried. There’s always next time.”

Hana didn’t know if Suzu was trying to comfort or insult her, but Suzu seemed to think she was helping and patted Hana on the shoulder kindly.

However, “next time” wouldn’t be good enough.

“...I’m screwed. I can’t show my face after this. How is it possible I didn’t manage to pass at least one or two tests after all that studying?” Hana groused.

“A little bit of studying won’t do you any good. It has to be a habit,” Suzu said.

After hearing Suzu’s very sound advice, Hana made up her mind. “I’ll make

sure this never sees the light of day!”

“How?”

“By burning my tests and destroying the evidence.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“The Ichinomiya grounds are massive. A campfire or two is nothing.”

Hana wasn’t wrong per se, but Suzu frowned, nonetheless. “Be a good girl and apologize to Lord Ichinomiya. Wouldn’t that be best?”

Hana’s face paled. “Do you know what would happen to me if I did that? I get chills just thinking about it...” She balled up her tests and shoved them into her desk. “This is the worst...”

She was wrong. The worst was yet to come. It was lying in wait at the Ichinomiya residence.

That night, Hana, Hazuki, Saku, and Nozomu ate together. Mio would be home later than usual.

Hana had already completely forgotten about her test scores, but over dinner, Saku asked her, “How did you do on your exams?”

Her face instantly stiffened. “H-how do you know about that?” she spluttered, choking on her words.

“Nozomu showed me his results earlier.”

Hana glared at Nozomu.

“Hmph. It’s the first time I’ve done better than Hazuki,” he said, beaming with pride.

His expression rubbed her the wrong way. She stared daggers at him. “Who cares? Bet you lost to Kiriya anyway,” she said.

“Ugh,” he groaned, unable to say anything else. Hana’s words had dealt him a huge blow.

Kiriya, one half of the Nijouin twins, had demonstrated his intelligence soon after transferring, overtaking Hazuki in a heartbeat.

Nozomu had been over the moon at having beaten Hazuki, but given his reaction, he must have scored lower than Kiriya.

Talk about easy to read.

“Shut up!” Nozomu yelled. “Hazuki used to always be number one. Beating her is still an amazing feat!”

“Hazuki is mentally worn out from having to deal with that shitty old man of ours. Gloating over a win against an exhausted girl, aren’t you ashamed to call yourself an Ichinomiya?” Hana sneered.

“.....” Nozomu wilted. He couldn’t argue. “Is it a crime to be a little happy that I did better than Hazuki? I just wanted to show Saku... I didn’t have any other intentions... I didn’t mean to kick her while she was down. Is that what she thinks? Do I seem like an inhuman bastard to her now?” he muttered.

“Nozomu, I don’t mind,” Hazuki said kindly, but Nozomu didn’t seem to have heard.

Hana hadn’t expected to land a critical hit, but that was exactly what she had done.

Saku, sitting beside her, reached over and flicked her hard on the forehead.

“Ow!” she cried, glaring at him.

He smiled and held out his hand. “So? Where are your exam scores?”

Hana clicked her tongue without thinking. She thought she had successfully diverted the conversation onto Nozomu. How persistent.

“You studied so hard. Surely, you must have passed all your exams, right?” Saku said.

This was bad.

Hana tried to laugh it off. “Ha...ha-ha-ha...” She couldn’t meet Saku’s gaze.

Saku’s eyes narrowed and he called out, “Tsubaki.”

A shikigami with dog ears manifested in a heartbeat. “Here, Master!” Tsubaki said brightly.

She was clothed in her usual maid costume, and her hair was in pigtails.

“Go to Hana’s room and find her tests,” he ordered.

“Aye-aye, sir!” she said.

“W-wait. Y-you can’t!” Hana protested.

She leaped up to chase after Tsubaki, but Saku grabbed her arm in a viselike grip.

“Let go, Saku,” she said.

“Give it up.”

“Please, I’m begging you,” she said, yanking her arm desperately.

Her demeanor made it painfully obvious how she had done.

Tsubaki returned shortly. In her hand were Hana’s crumpled exam papers...

Hana’s shoulders slumped. “I’m done for...”

She buried her face in her hands, averting her eyes from her problems and running away from reality.

The papers crackled loudly in the otherwise silent room as Saku smoothed them out. Hana peeked and saw him grimacing.

“Are you kidding me?” he said. It was unclear from his expression whether he was angry or just tired.

Saku let out a long sigh and passed the papers to Nozomu and Hazuki.

“Nooo! What’re you doing?!” Hana cried.

What was he thinking, showing her grades to those two?

As Nozomu and Hazuki leafed through the exams, their eyes grew wider and wider in astonishment. They looked up at Hana with identical expressions. Even Tsubaki was looking at her with pity in her eyes.

“You’re doomed...,” Nozomu said.

“Hana...,” Hazuki said.

Nozomu’s blunt honesty. Hazuki’s compassionate reticence. Both reactions gutted Hana. For a moment, she was struck with regret that she hadn’t studied more diligently, but she regained her peace of mind by heaping the blame on

her parents' terrible child-rearing instead.

"I didn't think your results would be *this* bad," Saku said wearily.

Normally, Hana would be quick to argue, but she couldn't muster the energy.

Then he added, "It is what it is. Nozomu, Hazuki, help her with her studies."

"What?!" she cried, displeased.

At the same time, Nozomu stabbed a finger at Hana and argued back loudly, "I don't have the confidence to teach someone as stupid as her, even if you're the one asking."

Hana was offended. "Aren't you taking it too far?! Sure, my grades aren't anything to celebrate, but I still worked my ass off!"

"Coulda fooled me! Why don't you take a leaf out of Hazuki's book? Are you really twins?!"

"Well, *excuse* me! Being twins has nothing to do with being smart!"

Hazuki watched helplessly as Hana and Nozomu shouted at each other.

Saku karate-chopped them both on the head. He had adjusted the power behind the blow to match the severity of the crime, so it hurt more than usual. Obviously, he saw Hana's test results as a problem.

"Quiet," Saku said. "Nozomu, teaching Hana will be tough, but the Ichinomiyas will become laughingstocks if the lady of the clan is failing all her classes. You're the only one I can count on."

"Me...?" Nozomu muttered.

"Yeah."

No one who idolized their brother the way Nozomu did could be unhappy when said beloved brother came to them for help.

Nozomu's attitude flipped on its head. "Got it." He then declared to Hana, "Me and Hazuki are going to make you work like a dog until you're fit to call yourself Lady Ichinomiya. You better be grateful."

"You gotta be kidding me," Hana whined, displeasure rolling off her in waves.

“Behave and do as you’re told if you don’t want me showing your tests to my mother,” Saku threatened.

“Bully!” she cried.

“Better than my mother finding out, no?”

“Ugh.”

That was true. There was no denying that.

“Have the two of them teach you, all right?” Saku said.

Hana’s shoulders drooped in defeat. “Fine...”

With the conversation closed, they returned to their seats.

Saku changed the topic. He said in a formal tone, “I have news to share with... all of you, but it’s most relevant to you, Hana.”

“What is it?” Hana replied.

“After the Skull of Nirvana assaulted your school, there have been discussions within the Association about whether more effort should be put toward raising the practical skills of the students.”

“Yeah, that was a rough day.”

During the incident, a barrier had been used to seal up the school, and the shades had rampaged in the enclosed space. The majority of the students had panicked when faced with the shades and could do nothing but scream for help. Only a handful of students and teachers had been of any use. The purpose of the school was to train practitioners, but the reality was bleak.

Hazuki and the other Class A students had fought hard, but had Hana not been there, even breaking through the barrier might have been impossible. Hana’s shikigami, Aoi and Miyabi, had saved many students as well. There was no doubt that it was only thanks to Hana that the disaster had been resolved as quickly as it had.

Saku continued his explanation. “Ideally, such an incident will not occur a second time. However, to prepare for such a worst-case scenario, many in the Association are of the opinion that it is necessary to level up the students’

fighting ability. As a result, the curriculum will be revised on the basis that hands-on battle experience is a must.”

“How is it going to change?” Hana asked.

“Up until now, primarily only Class A has been summoned to fight, but going forward, Classes B and C will be asked to participate in normal battles as well in order for them to build experience.”

“No waaay,” she grumbled, her tone thoroughly annoyed.

However, she didn’t complain any more than that. She, too, understood the need for the training.

She sighed involuntarily. “Haaah. I guess there’s no other way.”

Hana thought back on the way her classmates had run around like chickens with their heads cut off, completely abandoning the will to fight. Yes, the attack had come out of the blue, but her classmates had been *too* helpless in front of the shades. She agreed with Saku that it was crucial for everyone to gain real battle experience.

She was unhappy to be dragged into the plan, but there was nothing for her to say.

To be a practitioner meant risking your life. Unlike Class A, Classes B and C had almost no experience on the battlefield. It would benefit them in the future to have their eyes opened to the dangers of the job.

The Association had to plan for what-ifs. Their judgment was sound. Hana was not guaranteed to be around during every emergency, and Association practitioners were not always available to help.

“Will Class A’s curriculum be changing as well?” Hazuki asked.

Her class had plenty of hands-on experience and was often exposed to danger. She must have been worried that her class would be called into even riskier situations.

Nozomu waited for Saku’s answer with a solemn expression, too.

“For the most part, Class A will continue to operate as it has,” Saku replied. “You third-years, in particular, are already fighting in your fair share of battles.

However, you might have more practicals from now on.”

“I see,” Hazuki said. She seemed relieved to hear that Class A wouldn’t change much.

In contrast, this was a dire situation for Hana, who spent most of her classes sleeping. “Maybe I’ll start ditching class,” she mused. “I can sleep in the nurse’s office.”

“Take your classes seriously! This is exactly why you failed your tests!” Nozomu snapped.

“Bwah-ha-ha-ha,” she laughed heartily. “Tsk, ts, ts. I’m much more useful in a fight than a certain someone who was immediately decimated in the fight he picked himself.”

Nozomu had challenged her to a duel right after she had married Saku. They had fought with their shikigami, and Azuha had crushed him.

He instantly caught onto what she was alluding to, and his face flushed with embarrassment. “That was different! I was off my game. There’s no way Guren would lose so easily! I was just going easy on you!”

She cackled. “Heh-heh-heh. If that’s the case, I’m happy to give you a chance to take revenge. Azuha’s going to KO you right away anyway.”

“I *said* I’m different now! I’ll show you!”

“Looks like you’re dying to embarrass yourself in front of Hazuki. Let’s take this outside,” Hana suggested.

“Fine by me!”

The two stomped out of the room. Confused, Hazuki looked over at Saku. He hadn’t moved an inch and was calmly sipping his tea.

“Shouldn’t you stop them?” she asked.

“Leave them be. Hana has perfect control of her power, so it’ll be fine,” he replied.

“You take it for granted she’s going to win.”

Saku smirked. “Of course. She’s the woman I picked as my bride.”

His smile confirmed the deep faith he had in Hana.



The duel held outside in the darkening twilight ended, as predicted, in Hana's overwhelming victory.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha! I hope you now understand how awesome your honored sister is," Hana taunted Nozomu. He was lying collapsed on the ground, frustration pouring off him. "I worked up a sweat. Time for a bath and then straight to bed." She pranced off in a jolly mood to retire for the night.

At school the next day, the teacher made an announcement about the curriculum changes Saku had mentioned.

There were quite a few students in Class C, and the Association wanted them all to gain hands-on experience, too. It would be foolish to throw them straight onto a real battlefield, so instead, they would have mock battles during class. Once the students acclimated to the classes, they would then be dispatched to fight actual shades. That was the goal.

As the Class C students listened to the details of the plan, their expressions clouded over. A few complained openly and loudly.

"Why now?"

"It's impossible for us."

"Yeah, there's no way."

Up until now, the closest they had been to battle was as rear support. It must have been terrifying to suddenly be told that they had to fight.

However, it had been the Association's decision, and as fledgling practitioners, the students weren't allowed to argue. Ultimately, a large portion of the class would end up working for the Association after graduation.

As the final nail in the coffin, to remind the students of their place, the teacher declared that the plan had been approved by the lords of the five clans. Every one of the students was born to low-ranking practitioner families, so they couldn't possibly revolt. Defying the five clan lords meant making an enemy of

the entire country.

The bellyachers suddenly forgot their objections and quietly sat back in their seats. While some students continued to look sullen, no one complained any further.

Hana glanced over at Suzu, who looked anxious more than upset. She smiled bitterly, already worn out by the situation.

Actually, Hana was better at practical classes than lectures, and getting to move around was a good thing, not that she didn't have any desire to play hooky. However, when she remembered the assault on the school, she thought that she should take the classes seriously, no matter how confident she was that she could handle the shades. At the very least, she wanted to be strong enough to protect her best friend, who was dead set on becoming a rear support practitioner after graduation...

Hana used to think of a practitioner's job as not her problem, but after marrying Saku, she had been tossed into the deep end, and she had experienced over and over how dangerous the practitioner's world was.

Suzu was not a strong practitioner.

Hana could no longer say that Suzu would be safe in the rear with any confidence, not after the school—which was supposed to be secure—had been attacked.

The prospect of Suzu being injured shattered Hana's devil-may-care attitude. If Suzu were hurt, it would be too late for regrets. So if Suzu was attending the classes, Hana was going to be right by her side.

Hana had been wondering when the new curriculum would go into effect. Apparently, the answer was "immediately." The first session was going to be that very day.

The class was held on the PE field. The students' task was to conjure a barrier to extinguish a shade. That was as basic as it got.

In fact, that much was no different from what Class C already practiced during their usual classes. The difference was that they would be facing *real* shades.

Previously, it had been deemed too dangerous to let the Class C washouts face actual shades, so the students had never undertaken such a trial before. Thus, when their teacher summoned a mob of shades bound in barriers as if it was the most natural thing in the world, pandemonium ensued.

To Hana, the shades were the smallest of small fries, worthless vermin she could destroy instantly. They were nothing to shriek about. The racket her classmates were making demonstrated as clear as day how weak they were. Her mixed emotions could be read on her face.

Suzu was one of the screamers. She squealed as she clung to Hana's arm.

Hana had decided she would stick around until Suzu could hold her own, but faced with the long road ahead of her, she suddenly wanted to renege on her vow.

As Hana stared into the abyss that was her future, the teacher explained the directions. "Quiet. Settle down. Today, you will each be trapping one shade in a barrier and exterminating it."

Grumbles along the lines of "No freaking way" and "I don't want to" could be heard from the crowd.

But the teacher showed no mercy. He grabbed one boy and threw him into a dome-like barrier with one of the freed shades.

The boy was half in tears as he banged on the barrier from the inside, screaming, "*Gyaaah!* Let me out!" However, he was trapped.

"That barrier was created with a Nijouin-crafted talisman. Once it's up, you're stuck inside until the shade is destroyed," boasted a girl with a bob haircut styled in loose waves.

It was Kikyou. She was a candidate to be the next-generation head of the Nijouin clan, but she often gave the impression of being meek and anxious.

Her twin, Kiriya, was standing next to her. They had similar facial features, but he had short black hair and a clean, refreshing image.

Why were the two Class A students present? Well, no one could deny that Class C didn't have enough experience. Therefore, for the exercise, they had

been paired together with Class A, who were seasoned junior practitioners.

“I have a question,” Hana said.

“What is it?” Kikyou asked.

“The two of you transferred here to take back the talismans that the Skull of Nirvana stole, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Then why are you still here?”

Kikyou flinched. “What an awful thing to ask! Are you saying I’m a bother?! Aren’t we best friends now?!”

For a moment, Hana wanted to applaud Kikyou’s ability to summon tears at the drop of a hat, but if she were to do so, the other girl might *actually* start crying.

“But I mean, there’s no reason for you to be here, right? Why not go back?” Hana asked.

Kikyou grabbed Hana’s arm and squeezed it tightly. “How can you say that? Of course I have a reason! I want to be with my best friend! You! After everything we’ve been through to become friends, there’s no way I would let you go,” she said beseechingly.

Suzu, who was clinging onto Hana’s other arm, was pissed off by Kikyou’s rant. “Hana’s best friend is me and only me. Don’t go calling yourself her best friend without permission!”

“It won’t kill you to share once in a while!” Kikyou yelled.

“I refuse.”

Hana wished they wouldn’t fight while she was stuck in between them. “*Ha-ha...*,” she laughed dryly. That was the best she could do.

She turned to Kiriya instead. “I get why Kikyou’s still around, but are you okay with being here? Didn’t you have friends back on the other campus?”

The twins went around together like they were a set. Even so, there was no need for Kiriya to put up with Kikyou’s selfishness to this extent. He didn’t need

to attend the same school as her.

However, Kiriya replied, "...Nah, I don't care. There's no one I'm particularly close to back at our old school, and Kikyou looks like she's enjoying herself here."

That in and of itself was upsetting to hear.

What kind of school life did the twins have in Obsidian High School Campus Two?

Kiriya had said before that their classmates had avoided Kikyou because she was next in line to lead the Nijouin clan. Maybe it had been the same for Kiriya.

Best not to pry.

While their group stood around, talking and arguing, the male student who had been tossed into the barrier earlier managed to kill the shade and escape the barrier. He was covered in wounds. The moment he was out, he sat down heavily on the ground.

Class C showered him with praise for his valiant fighting. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the students in Class A were muttering things like "You can't be serious..." and "Killing a weakling like that is nothing. What're they getting so excited about?" They had been stunned by the battle and, needless to say, not in a good way. They were shocked by how weak Class C was. The difference between the two classes was glaringly obvious.

Now that one person had successfully dealt with a shade, another student from Class C was suddenly raring to go and volunteered to be next.

Given how motivated he was despite his fear, Hana started to think there might be some hope for her classmates after all.

That lasted only until he opened his mouth. "I will be your opponent, shade." He followed it up with his barrier incantation. "Seal my enemy who intends me harm."

Hana was dumbstruck. Sure, he had created a barrier and trapped the shade, but his incantation was too convoluted.

Who exactly are you ordering to seal the shade? Hana wanted to ask. *You're*

the one putting the barrier up.

He passed the baton to the next student, who said...

“The time has come to free my left eye from its bonds. Suffer thee my arcane technique!”

Another long-winded and completely incomprehensible incantation.

Class A gaped in disbelief.

For the first time, Hana felt embarrassed to be in Class C. She didn’t want to be grouped with those guys.

“Um, Class C’s incantations are rather...unique, don’t you think, Hana?” Kikyousaid, picking her words carefully.

Hana would have preferred if she just said what she was thinking.

“They’re victims of a deadly illness. Do them a favor and don’t say anything,” Hana said.

Yes, they were victims of Cringey Tween Syndrome.

When Hana paid closer attention, she realized that the classmates waiting for their turn were already practicing their incantations.

Unlike the short and easy-to-say phrases picked by the Class A students, the incantations thrown around by Class C were all lengthy tongue twisters, further proof that the illness was in its late stages.

The incantations used differed from person to person. Practitioners chose words that helped them picture the intended effect. Needlessly long phrases only ate up time, so most practitioners picked punchy phrases.

In which case, what was the deal with these overly complex and cryptic chants?

The incantations smacked of indifference. It seemed like they had been selected with no intention of using them in an actual fight. Even the teacher seemed to despair.

The students would be attacked long before they managed to finish speaking. All they were doing was giving the shades an opening. The bottom-feeder

shades used in class were one thing, but shades that were any stronger would be major problems.

Hana's group watched the other students, Suzu and Kikyou arguing all the while, and then Suzu's turn rolled around.

She stepped up to the stage and yelled, "Pancake! Pancake! Red bean and jelly!"

The words she had picked were certainly short and memorable. The tension drained from Hana's body at the very Suzu-like incantation.

Hana, for her part, had taken hers straight from the textbook with zero deviations.

Suzu often whined at her, saying, "Your incantation is borrrrring," but being interesting was not a requirement. Simple was best.

Her incantation was used by many practitioners in modern times. It had been proven to be effective and easy to use. It should have been irreproachable, but it was unsatisfactory in Suzu's eyes.

Hana was called up after Suzu, and she defeated her shade in the blink of an eye. In contrast, even such low-ranking shades proved to be high hurdles for her classmates, and it took a long time for everyone to take their turn.

After Class C finished, Hazuki stepped up to demonstrate her technique as one of the top scorers in Class A. She took on the remaining shades all at once and eliminated them instantly.

As she watched her classmates cheer for Hazuki, it once again dawned on Hana that they had a long road ahead of them.



Hana, Kikyou, Kiriya, and Suzu ended up eating lunch together.

They sat at an open table in the cafeteria, setting down the lunches they had ordered (Hana had picked the fried chicken lunch set).

Suzu propped her head on one hand and poked at a carrot in her curry with

her spoon. “Ugh. We have to duel with our shikigami in the afternoon. What a drag,” she said with a bleak look in her eyes.

The squirrel shikigami riding on her shoulder looked equally sullen. Like master, like shikigami. The two were exactly alike in personality.

“No use complaining, not after that attack on the school,” Hana said. “We need to learn to protect ourselves. There’s no guarantee there won’t be a next time. It was a miracle no one died last time.”

A blunder could end up costing more than one or two lives. Both the students and teachers understood the potential consequences. That was precisely why everyone was going along with the curriculum change.

Suzu was as aware of the dangers as anyone else. Her expression darkened. “I know, I know,” she said.

She had been in their classroom when the school had been invaded. She had been fine thanks to Hana dispatching Aoi to help, but the hallways had swarmed with shades, and she remembered how terrifying it had been.

Hana observed Suzu’s reaction as she said sternly, “Suzu, working for the Association of Practitioners means putting yourself in harm’s way. Being in the rear doesn’t mean you’ll be safe. If you can’t fight shades, you shouldn’t join the Association.”

“...Yeah,” Suzu muttered.

Had Hana’s warning found its mark? It was obvious to anyone Suzu was dejected.

Suzu started eating quietly, and Hana turned to Kikyou and Kiriya instead. “How have your classes changed?”

“It’s hard to say they’ve changed, per se,” Kikyou replied. “Since we’re the most trained, we’re going to be having joint classes with Classes B and C and the other grades and demonstrating the right way to do things. On top of that, apparently we’ll be fighting outside the school even more than we are already.” She let out an annoyed sigh. “We have a battle outside today, too, so we have to stay behind after classes are over...”

“That’s rough,” Hana said. She was grateful from the bottom of her heart that she wasn’t in Class A.

“See here—me and Kiriya are Nijouins! Our clan specializes in crafting talismans to use against shades, not fighting,” Kikyou protested loudly.

Kiriya tried to rein her in. “There, there. Calm down.”

But that wasn’t enough to soothe her, and she demanded, “Don’t you agree with me?!”

“Ummm... I don’t care either way...,” he said. “I like getting to move around.”

“Traitor! I thought you were my ally!”

“But it’s the truth.”

Kikyou’s face was filled with rage. On the other hand, Kiriya’s poker face made it impossible to tell what he was thinking. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the two were close.

Deep down, Hana used to be envious of their relationship, but ever since she reconciled with Hazuki, whenever she saw the two of them together, she felt all warm inside.

Chapter 2

Hana returned to the Ichinomiya residence to find Nozomu waiting for her, legs planted firmly and arms crossed. Hazuki was with him.

“You’re late,” he said. “Get ready for Hazuki and me to fill up that empty brain of yours.”

Hana instinctively turned to flee, but sadly, she was apprehended and dragged to supplementary study hell.

“Come ooon,” Hana whined. “Didn’t you have to stay after school? That’s what Kikyou said.”

For that reason, she had assumed Hazuki and Nozomu wouldn’t be home yet.

“Not everyone. We were put into groups. We’ll be accompanying the Association practitioners while they work, but only a few of us at a time,” Hazuki answered.

Hana’s eyes widened. “What? Isn’t that dangerous?”

Class A had been in real battles before, but they were only summoned when the shades were too weak to dispatch professionals to deal with.

To shadow a practitioner meant that the students would be exposed to jobs with actual risk involved.

“Practitioners have to deal with low-ranking shades, too, you know,” Hazuki replied. “I can’t say it’ll be perfectly safe, but we’ll have pros with us, so I think it should be fine. However, they won’t be able to watch all of us at the same time, hence the groups.”

“I see.”

Strictly speaking, the third-years would be graduating in less than a year, and

more than half of the class would join the Association as practitioners anyway. You could say they were just getting a head start.

Newbies didn't jump immediately into active duty. They first underwent a training period where they shadowed veterans and learned on the job. That was exactly what Class A would be doing.

"Looks like the Association is taking that incident seriously," Hana remarked.

Nozomu sniffed and said arrogantly, "Of course. It's the first time Obsidian High has been exposed to such a threat."

Their school was composed of five campuses. It had been established to cultivate the next generation of practitioners, so naturally, it was a tempting target for anyone with a grudge against the five clans. Accordingly, the campuses were all heavily guarded—though not to the degree of the Association headquarters—and in the past, the school's rigid security had repelled enemies several times over.

The difference was, while the school had been attacked before, the situation had never escalated to the point where lives had been at risk, so the Association and the clans were currently in a frenzy.

"You have more urgent things to worry about, like failing your classes! Get a move on," Nozomu ordered.

"Seriouslyyy?" Hana moaned.

As Hana was dragged through the house by Nozomu, Arashi padded alongside her. He was as enchantingly fluffy as always, and she wanted nothing more than to dive face-first into his fur. Behind him were Aoi and Miyabi. Perhaps they had come to welcome her home.

"You're back, Hana," Arashi said.

"Arashiii. Help meee," she begged.

"What's wrong?"

Azuha flew off her perch on Hana's head and fluttered over to Arashi. "Master's grades were very bad, so they're going to study together. Master doesn't want to. That's why she's trying to run away."

Arashi thought for a moment before falling into line behind Hana. “In that case, I will lend a hand and supervise as well.”

This should have been where he listened to his master’s wishes and helped her escape, but Arashi was a straitlaced and gentle god, so he chose the option that would best serve her in the future.

They went to the room where they normally ate. Hana sat down to start her remedial session, flanked by Nozomu and Hazuki on either side.

“Ughhh... Maaan,” she moaned as Nozomu placed a worksheet in front of her, one that he had written himself, no less.

Undoubtedly, the fact that his beloved older brother had asked him for help had fired Nozomu up, and the result of his mania was this worksheet.

As she started to answer the questions, Hana complained mentally, *Way to go overboard.*

Every time she finished a question, she would hear Hazuki murmur “Wait” or “What?” and Nozomu sigh tiredly. Their reactions chipped away at her motivation.

“If I got something wrong, just tell me,” she whined.

Nozomu gawked at her. “I knew you were stupid, but not *this* stupid,” he yelled.

“That’s taking it too far. Give me a break. These questions cover more than the stuff we learn at school. There are ones about the five clans and practitioners, too,” Hana argued.

“That’s exactly what’s wrong with you. The answers should be obvious to anyone raised in a practitioner household, not to mention it’s all information that should have been beaten into any Obsidian High student. What have you been doing in class?!”

“Sleeping.” She shamelessly gave him a thumbs-up as if to say, *What else?*

“You dumbass.”

She pursed her lips sullenly. “Says *you*.”

He rolled up his workbook and smacked her on the head. It made a satisfying *thwap*.

“If you’re not stupid, who is? You know the names of the clans at least—thank god—but you don’t know anything about their backgrounds.”

“I get along perfectly fine without that info. I’m gonna join a normal company instead of working my butt off as a practitioner, so all this studying is useless to me.”

Hana had hardly any knowledge of what was considered standard for a practitioner child to know, which went to show how badly she wanted to distance herself from that world.

“But, Hana, aren’t there things you should know now that you’re the lady of the Ichinomiya clan?” Hazuki argued. “You have to learn all of this so that people won’t make fun of you.”

That was where their opinions differed.

Hana rebutted, “Saku and I are gonna get divorced sooner or later anyway, so it’s moot.”

Saku had threatened her about her ignorance using Mio’s name, but if they were going to get divorced, she didn’t need to know anything.

If she were to mention the divorce, however, he would flatly refuse, and it would put him in a bad mood, so she usually kept that train of thought to herself. The point was, she didn’t see any reason to study.

Hazuki was stunned. “What? What are you talking about? You’re going to get divorced?”

“Are you insane?! What could you possibly not like about my brother?!” Nozomu demanded.

At school, Hana and Saku’s relationship was seen as the romance of the century. Since she wasn’t allowed to reveal the details, she could neither confirm nor deny the rumors. However, this was Hazuki and Nozomu she was talking to. As long as she didn’t say anything about the pillars, she should be able to get away with explaining the situation.

“It’s a contractual arrangement,” Hana said.

The other two looked at her with blank faces.

She explained further. “Ummm, I can’t say anything specific, but Saku needed a bride who’s as strong as he is for the sake of the family. I wanted to get away from the Ichise house and for the Ichinomiyas to cover for me after I revealed my powers. Our interests aligned, so we got hitched.”

“That’s wrong,” Azuha cut in. “Master was told she would get one billion yen and a house. She was blinded by greed.”

“Shhh. You can’t say that, Big Sis. You have to keep it a secret,” Miyabi said, raising her index finger to her lips.

But Miyabi cut in too late. Not to mention she hadn’t said anything helpful, either. If anything, she had made it worse.

Hana could feel Nozomu’s gaze digging into her.

“You’re telling me, you’re married to my perfect brother, to a man without a single flaw, in name only? Does our mother know?” Nozomu asked.

“She’s the former lady of the clan. She must’ve guessed once she found out how strong I actually am. I’m positive she knows it wasn’t out of love,” Hana replied.

Love had no place in a clan lord’s marriage. Mio, who was the former Lady Ichinomiya and knew the secret of the pillar, should be well aware of that fact.

It was a wonder that she treated Hana as if she was her real daughter.

“Then you’ll be divorcing Lord Ichinomiya? When?” Hazuki asked.

The question stumped Hana. “...About that. Saku won’t agree. That’s why I’m still here.”

“Why not?” Hazuki was genuinely curious.

Hana was too embarrassed to admit that Saku liked her.

“I mean, you know, this and that.” She desperately hoped her vague answer would be enough.

“I see. It all makes sense now, I think. I was shocked when Lord Ichinomiya

came and declared he was marrying you given that you had hardly ever talked. Now I understand why,” Hazuki said.

“And here you were the one telling me to hand him over,” Hana teased with a smile.

Hazuki looked abashed. “Erase that from your memory.”

Nozomu interrupted them, shouting, “If our mother knew, why didn’t I know?!” He was furious, but at the same time, it looked like he was about to cry. “It must be because I’m too weak...”

Hana’s lips quirked up with amusement. Nozomu was stubborn but surprisingly fragile. What a problem child.

“No such thing,” she said. “Our arrangement concerns info only the heads of the clans are privy to, and since my mother-in-law has sharp instincts, I figured she would have guessed. That’s all. I haven’t told her anything myself, and I didn’t plan to leave you out. If you’re upset that you don’t know the clan’s secrets, knock Saku down from the throne. Then I’ll tell you.” She paused. “Actually, at that point, we’d be doomed if you didn’t know.”

By “we,” she meant the entire country, protected as it was by the pillars.

Only the Ichinomiya clan heads and their spouses knew that the pillar was located beneath the grounds of the residence.

It was difficult for her to judge how much she could say. Maybe she could get away with telling them that both yin and yang energy—female and male energy—were needed to repair the brittle barrier. She decided to leave the rest to Saku.

“Saku will answer any questions you have. He’ll tell you what he can. Go and ask him later,” Hana said.

“...Fine,” Nozomu said.

She was relieved that he seemed to be satisfied with that answer, if begrudgingly.

“In conclusion, there’s no reason for me to study, right? I’m not going to join the Association,” Hana said.

“Given how strong you are, I think the Association will scout you,” Hazuki said. “They’ve already approached me.”

Hana had assumed that the Association wouldn’t overlook a student as excellent as Hazuki, and she had been right. Apparently, they had already contacted her sister.

But she had absolutely no intention of joining.

“Nope, no way. Not interested. All I want is to enter an ordinary company like a normal person and grind until I can retire.”

She wanted nothing to do with the Association.

“Won’t that be tough if you don’t do well in your classes?” Hazuki rebutted. “You failed the tests for the standard academic classes, too.”

“...” Hana didn’t respond. She had no comeback.

“The companies under the Ichinomiya umbrella all require you to pass an entrance exam, too,” Nozomu muttered.

Hana wanted to cry. “Oh my god, Hazuki, what am I going to do?”

All of a sudden, Hazuki found her arms full of a sobbing Hana. Her expression troubled, Hazuki said, “Study hard.”

“I don’t want tooooo,” Hana whined.

While Hana was throwing her tantrum, in the background, the shikigami were getting to know each other.

“I’m Azuha.”

“Miyabi.”

“Aoi.”

Opposite them was Hazuki’s shikigami, Hiragi, quietly sitting on his knees in *seiza*. “I’m Hiragi. Hazuki and I will be in your care.” He bowed low to the ground.

Arashi, who had been watching him with warm eyes, nuzzled his bowed head. “I’m Arashi. I am but a novice shikigami, but I hope you will treat me as the others all the same.”

“All right. I’ll remember your names. It’s nice to meet you,” Hiragi said.

He looked like a child at first glance, but he seemed much more mature than Aoi.

In fact, Hazuki had manifested him on the same day Hana had manifested Azuha, her first shikigami, so he had lived far longer than Aoi and Miyabi. He could be considered their older brother.

Of course, none of them could hold a candle to Arashi, an actual god.

They were a unique bunch, but they were getting along just fine.



While Hana and the gang were having their fun, over in the sitting room, Saku was in a meeting with Hana and Hazuki’s older brother, Yanagi. The twins knew nothing about his visit.

Hazuki was aware that he often dropped by the Ichinomiya residence for work. Hana had rarely ever seen Yanagi, so she hadn’t even known that much until Hazuki had told her. However, he actually visited the residence far more frequently than Hazuki assumed.

His visits had continued after Hana had gotten married and, unbeknownst to Hana, they had almost bumped into each other several times.

The near misses had been *misses* not in small part because Yanagi had purposefully steered away from her before she had seen him.

He wasn’t avoiding her out of dislike. If anything, he actually...

“Thank you for protecting Hana and Hazuki. I hope you will continue to take care of them going forward,” Yanagi said to Saku, bowing deeply.

His expression showed not indifference, but rather the heartfelt concern of an older brother for his sisters.

Saku scanned him with an appraising gaze. “...You knew that Hana was hiding a great power, and you kept it a secret on purpose?”

“Yes,” Yanagi said.

Saku raised an eyebrow at his nonchalant answer. "As I suspected. I thought it was strange that you of all people hadn't noticed. After all, you do hold the record for the youngest practitioner to reach the Lapis rank. Why didn't you inform me? I'm sure you were aware that I was seeking a powerful woman."

"I merely weighed my priorities: my younger sister versus my lord."

There was a dignity to Yanagi's calm demeanor in front of Saku.

"You chose your sister over me?" Saku asked.

"If you wish to interpret it as such."

"When did you realize?"

"When I visited her to check on her condition the day after her fifteenth birthday," Yanagi replied. "I sensed an enormous power pouring out of her. She had yet to learn to conceal it entirely, so it was immediately obvious."

Saku sighed tiredly. "You mean to say you knew from the start. Why didn't you tell Hana?"

"It didn't seem like she wanted anyone to know."

Yanagi's simple replies exasperated Saku. He knew from the start that the other man wasn't a skilled conversationalist, but even so, Yanagi was a man of *too* few words. That was surely why he was misunderstood by the younger sisters he cherished. Suddenly, Saku felt pity for him.

"Haven't I told you that your replies are too brief?" Saku said.

"I apologize."

"Instead of apologizing, tell me why you didn't say anything to Hana."

Yanagi was reluctant to explain, but Saku refused to let him off the hook. He opened his mouth slowly and with little enthusiasm. "...Hana has been repeatedly exploited by our parents. She exhausted herself for them only to be betrayed. If she would rather hide her strength than reveal it to our parents, then I wanted to honor her decision. Given the way our parents are, I knew they would drain her dry without a second thought."

"In that case, you should have protected her. Shielded her from your

parents,” Saku said. “Her and Hazuki both.”

“That was impossible for me. My involvement would only have further incensed our parents...our father, in particular. As a result, he might have treated Hana and Hazuki even more horribly. I couldn’t risk it.”

As Yanagi spoke, his hands gradually balled into fists, frustration bleeding out of him. Seeing him like that, Saku didn’t have the heart to reprimand him further.

Saku sighed deeply. “Christ. You siblings are all cut from the same cloth. You act so cold even though you cherish each other more than anything.”

When Hana had asked Saku to become Hazuki’s guardian, he had replied, “Fascinating.” What had motivated such a response was the man in front of him.

In fact, before Hana had talked to him, Yanagi had requested of him the same exact thing: Help Hazuki and temporarily take her into the Ichiniomiya family. The two siblings had come to him for the same favor around the same time.

Normally, Yanagi showed no interest in his parents or his sisters and stayed away from his house as much as possible, but despite his outward behavior, he actually loved Hana and Hazuki deeply.

“Don’t think I don’t know about your notebook,” Saku said. “The one in your inner pocket, with a picture of your sisters inside.”

Yanagi raised his hand reflexively to his chest. He looked at Saku with suspicion.

Saku grinned mischievously. “I’m not the only one. Other people have noticed you looking fondly of that photo of the two little girls.”

Yanagi turned away in embarrassment.

“There are rumors you have a Lolita complex, but that’s not it, right? The girls are Hana and Hazuki when they were young.”

“You’ve seen it?” asked Yanagi.

“Once. I remember because they looked identical. That’s why I figured they’re your sisters. Am I wrong?”

“No, that’s right,” Yanagi said. “It’s a photo from when they were just innocent little kids, before they learned anything about the world.”

He pulled the notebook from his pocket and took out the picture sandwiched in its pages.

A young Hana and Hazuki stared out at them from the photo. Yanagi was behind them, his arms around them. The twins didn’t know, but it was the only photo the three of them had taken together.

The girls posed in the middle with ear-to-ear grins. Yanagi was smiling softly and kindly as well.

It was the sole photo of them from the past and Yanagi’s cherished treasure; he always kept it on his person.

“I wanted to protect their smiles, but I wasn’t strong enough. They became sacrifices to our parents’ obsession with restoring our family’s standing,” Yanagi said. “The only thing I can do for them is to stay away...”

“You are so dense,” Saku snapped.

Yanagi wasn’t cold and unfeeling. Surely, he was the one who cared for Hana and Hazuki the most in the world. However, since he didn’t show his affection on the surface, it went unnoticed by them.

He may have been their brother, but to them, he was but a remote existence. It was too pitiful.

However, the essence that made Yanagi who he was—the blend of compassion, diligence, and stubbornness—was what made Saku trust him and keep him close.

The gods willing, the day would come when Yanagi’s feelings would reach his younger sisters. The two would no doubt be surprised to know that he not only carried their photo with him but did so with the utmost devotion.

“...They’re an eyesore,” Saku mumbled.

“Pardon?”

“Your parents. They can’t be allowed to carry on as they are, don’t you agree?” A wicked, crooked smile spread over Saku’s face.

Yanagi replied, "Of course. I will give them a final warning and have them retire from the stage."

"I'll lend you a hand," Saku promised, the malicious grin still on his face. "It's for the sake of my beloved Hana after all."

And in the hopes of seeing the three Ichises laugh together as they did in the photo.

"I appreciate it," Yanagi said and bowed.



After being thoroughly chewed out by Nozomu and Hazuki about the importance of her studies, especially if she wanted to work for an ordinary company, Hana returned to her room exhausted.

When Saku dropped by to see her, she was lying spread-eagle on the floor.

"Hey, welcome back," she said.

He gazed down at her with fascination. "Welcome back? I've been in the house the whole time."

"Oh yeah? This place is too massive to know who's here and who's not."

"This *is* the main clan residence we're talking about. It's only natural that it gets a lot of foot traffic."

Although the living quarters and visiting quarters were under the same roof, they were separate from one another. No strangers had ever come as far as Hana's room.

The grounds were big enough to fit a baseball field with ease, which gave rise to the problem that it was impossible to tell who was on the premises. Granted, the visitors were rigorously logged, so there should be no need to worry on that front, and indeed, numerous practitioners came in and out of the residence every day.

Saku was usually on the premises so that he could direct the practitioners serving the clan. Not only was he the current head of the clan, but he was also

an Obsidian-rank practitioner, after all.

He did leave the grounds when his expertise was required, and there was no shortage of high-risk cases that necessitated the skills of an Obsidian practitioner.

He regularly risked his life in his line of work, but because of his composure and aloofness, most people didn't realize.

He bore responsibilities that were unimaginable for someone who was only twenty-four, but he didn't show a hint of the pressure he was under.

That was part of what made him so incredible.

If it were Hana, she would have made it widely known exactly how much she was sacrificing to help others, but Saku performed his duties without fanfare.

She knew such stoicism was beyond her, which was why, even though they argued like cats and dogs, she respected him.

"...Thanks, Saku," Hana said, still lying on the floor.

Saku smiled softly and sat down next to her. "What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"You helped Hazuki," she said. "You became her guardian and let her live here. Seriously, thank you. I never imagined that we would be able to talk like regular sisters again."

Hana and Hazuki had both worked hard to pretend they didn't care about each other. She hadn't tried to speak to Hazuki, nor had Hazuki spoken to her. They had merely been two strangers living in the same house. All along, she had assumed that even once she moved away from the Ichise house, the distance would never shrink.

However, her marriage to Saku had brought major changes to their relationship.

She had never imagined that Saku would consent to becoming Hazuki's legal guardian, sister or not, and the ease with which he had agreed had shocked her.

He had stepped up to bat for Hazuki. By doing so, he had not only salvaged Hana and Hazuki's relationship, but he had given Hazuki her future back when

the Ichises had bled her dry.

“I can’t thank you enough,” Hana said.

“You don’t say?”

“Yeah. I owe it all to you. I wasn’t strong enough to free Hazuki from that house myself.”

“...In that case, I should receive an appropriate reward.”

“Huh?”

Saku smirked suggestively. The wicked expression set off alarms in her head, but before she could escape, he caught her and pinned her down.

Hana broke into a cold sweat. This was an extremely dangerous position.

“Wh-wh-what do you think you’re doing?!” she demanded.

“Can’t you tell by looking? I’m showing my love for my darling wife.”

“Thanks, but no thanks! Get off me already!”

“I. Don’t. Wanna. Don’t you think it’s about time for us to become a *real* couple? I know you’re thinking it,” he purred.

She shook her head fiercely. “Not even a little!”

But his hand was on her cheek, and she couldn’t get away.

“Hana...,” he murmured, way too seductively.

Hana’s head went blank with panic. She couldn’t run, but she wasn’t mentally prepared to take that next step, either. She wished more than anything she could just faint right here and now.

No. She sensed that blacking out here would only put her in more danger.

As Hana tried to push away Saku’s lips, which were rapidly nearing her face, the door to her room slid open.

“Hana, I put together some problems for you to...,” Hazuki said as she walked in.

She froze when she saw Hana with Saku hovering over her.

Hana went as still as a stone, too.

A strange tension filled the room.

Hazuki snapped out of her daze. Looking uncomfortable, she started to close the door. "Sorry to bother you. Please continue with what you were doing..."

"Nooo, hold on a sec, Hazuki!" Hana cried. "You've got it all wrong."

"Does she? She said we should continue, so don't mind her, Hana," Saku said.

"Zip it, you!" she snapped.

Having recovered her spirit, Hana kicked Saku off her and scrambled to grab Hazuki as she backed out of the room.

"It's a misunderstanding. I'm serious!"

"It's hard to believe what you say given what I saw a second ago," Hazuki said. "What happened to 'contractual arrangement'? Didn't you say you were going to get divorced?"

Hana opened her mouth to argue that they *were* married by contract, but Saku interrupted her. "It might have been a formality at first, but it's different now. Hana and I are in love. Divorce is out of the question," he declared with a smug look.

Hazuki threw a dubious look at Hana. It was like she suspected *Hana* of lying.

She read the room, and it was clear that Hana was at a disadvantage.

"Hazuki, can you step out for a moment? I need to speak with Saku," Hana said.

"Sure," Hazuki agreed, and she rushed out of the room like she couldn't wait to be gone.

Once they were alone again, Hana turned a glare on Saku and growled, "Saku Ichinomiya."

Her tone made it immensely clear that she was furious. She stomped up to him and grabbed him by the collar.

"What nonsense are you spouting to Hazuki?! You're going to give her the wrong idea!"

“How is it wrong? It’s the truth. I have no intention of divorcing you.”

“Stop that. I don’t want to hear it...”

She was worn out having the same old argument again and again.

“Then let me ask you.” He fixed her with a solemn stare. “Are you really fine with leaving me?”

She flinched at the intensity of his gaze.

“You could really divorce me without any regrets?”

“I—I...” She couldn’t bring herself to continue. “...”

Saku reached his hand toward the silent Hana. “I don’t intend to take anyone else but you as my bride.”

“—...”

A flush rose to her cheeks. He shed his serious mask for a devilish grin. In the next moment, he drew her face toward him and touched his lips to hers.

The kiss was fleeting, but it was enough to throw her off balance.

Saku chuckled. “Heh-heh, only a little longer now.”

“U-until what?!”

“Until you’re head over heels for me.”

“Nope, nuh-uh! Never gonna happen! I’m gonna be a normal office worker and live out my golden years in peace.”

“You seriously still intend to find work outside the clan?” Saku said, a trace of astonishment in his voice.

“Of course!”

There were no other options open to her.

“Why not join the Association right after you graduate? They’ve been nudging me about you. Obsidian rank is not a pipe dream for you, and I’m not just saying that to flatter you.”

“No. Way.” Being a practitioner was out of the question. “Spare me. I want to live a life free of shades and grow old in the countryside somewhere.”

“The countryside... How lovely. Shall I purchase a nice plot of land? There are the shikigami to consider, too, so it’ll have to be suitably spacious.”

“Why does it sound like you’re planning to come with me? Or am I just imagining it?”

“What are you talking about? Of course I’m going with you. I’m your husband.”

“Please, no. I’m begging you,” Hana moaned.

Saku sidled up to her with a wide grin on his face. “What? Do you want another kiss?”

“No thank you,” she refused.

Shot down point-blank, he clicked his tongue rudely at her, but facing his irritation was a small price to pay.

Saku’s kisses made her brain overload, and she ended up unable to think of anything else but him...

However, Hana sensed that admitting as much would put her in a dicey position, so she was determined to keep it a secret.



Over the weekend, with no need to go to class, Hana had plans to go out with Suzu and Kikyou as a change of pace.

Hazuki saw Hana dolled up more than usual and asked, “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah. I’m hanging out with Suzu and Kikyou,” Hana answered.

“...That’s nice,” she said, her reply brief. Her expression was wistful.

“Do you want to come?”

Hazuki brightened. “Really? Can I?”

Hana had extended the invitation without thinking much about it, so she was surprised by Hazuki’s delighted reaction. She blinked in astonishment before

saying, “Uh, yeah. If you’re cool with it.”

“Of course! I would love to! It’s the first time I’ve hung out with anyone.”

Hana couldn’t ignore what she had just heard. “What?!” she said in outrage. “You’ve never gone out with friends before?”

“No. I never had the time...”

Hazuki’s dispirited demeanor reminded Hana of something she had wiped from her mind.

Their parents had dictated Hazuki’s schedule down to the minute, from the time she spent in school to what she did at home and even on her days off. “Free time” wasn’t a concept that had existed for her, and she wouldn’t have had the time to hang out with friends the way normal teenagers did.

Fury boiled up inside Hana.

“Those piece-of-shit parents—” she cursed.

She should have punched them once or twice when she left that house. The next time she saw them, she resolved to do just that without hesitating.

However, Hana was guilty, as well, for being apathetic toward Hazuki.

She would jump at the opportunity to turn back time if only it were possible.

Now there was only one thing she could do to atone.

“Let’s go, Hazuki!” Hana declared. “Don’t worry. Suzu and Kikyou are both good people. We’re going to have so much fun, you won’t know what hit you.”

“Okay.”

Hana waited while her sister went to her room to get ready, and the two of them set off together.

Suzu and Kikyou were already at the meeting place by the time they arrived.

It may have been the first time Hana had ever seen Kikyou without Kiriya at her side. Hana had initially been worried whether Kikyou would be able to find the place without her brother, but it seemed that she had managed.

“Morning, Hana!” Suzu said.

“Good morning,” Kikyou said.

Then the two of them spotted Hazuki standing next to Hana, and they made identical expressions of surprise...

“You brought your sister with you,” Suzu remarked, genuinely pleased. There was no hidden meaning behind her words.

Kikyou, on the other hand, looked bewildered. “Why is she here?”

“Didn’t I mention? She’s living in the Ichinomiya residence now,” Hana said.

Suzu’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“I see. That’s why she’s been coming to school with you and Nozomu,” Kikyou said, satisfied by Hana’s explanation.

“That’s right. The newspaper club hasn’t caught wind of it yet.”

At least, they hadn’t posted anything about it. The club was slower on the uptake than Hana had thought.

But Hazuki contradicted Hana. “Not exactly. They know about it, but Lord Ichinomiya has issued a gag order.”

“Oh yeah?”

“He told me to keep quiet about my living situation as well. I wonder if he’s planning something.”

“Hmmm. I haven’t heard anything,” Hana mused. “Hold on. He should’ve told me sooner, before I blew the secret to these two.”

If he had a plan to combat their parents, she wished he would loop her in on it. He couldn’t imagine she would spill the beans, could he? She would be irritated if that was his impression of her.

“Not even the newspaper club can defy an order straight from Lord Ichinomiya,” Suzu said. “Oh, and don’t worry about me. I’m known for having tight lips!”

So Suzu boasted, but she was normally one to hop right on the gossip train. Hana was worried how long she could count on her friend to remain silent.

“I won’t say anything outside this group, either, so please rest assured,”

Kikyou promised.

Hana was pretty sure she could rely on Kikyou. *Suzu would be mad if she knew*, Hana thought to herself.

"I trust you," Hana said. "Anyway, shall we get going?"

Their plan had been to stroll around the town and pop into any store that caught their eye, but that was before Hazuki had joined them.

Hana directed her gaze at her sister. The other two naturally followed suit as well.

"Do you have anywhere you want to go?" asked Hana.

"I have to decide?" Hazuki replied, bewildered.

"Didn't you say this was your first time hanging out with friends? Isn't there anything you want to do?"

"What?! Your first time ever?" Suzu asked.

"Yes. Oh, and please call me Hazuki."

"Okey dokey, Hazuki."

It was rare for anyone to address Hazuki so familiarly, and she seemed bashful but happy.

As the top student in their school and the master of a human shikigami, she was often treated as different from the other students. It was quite possible that she had no one around her willing to speak to her as a friend. Suzu's easygoing personality was a boon.

"Where to, then?" Suzu asked Hazuki.

"Um, I...", Hazuki said hesitantly. Judging by the way she was fidgeting, it seemed like she had a place in mind. Eventually, she admitted, "I want to go to an arcade."

"Is that a first for you, too?" Suzu asked.

Hazuki nodded self-consciously. Hana mentally smacked her parents several times over.

“Sounds great. Let’s go,” Hana said.

Suzu, who was always game for anything, pumped her fist in the air. “Aye, aye!”

The four girls found an arcade. When they entered the store with its blaring machines, Hazuki’s eyes widened into saucers, and she gazed around with fascination. She was venturing into the unknown.

“Let’s go try the claw machines, Hazuki,” Hana suggested. “They’re geared toward beginners, so you shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Okay,” Hazuki said.

After a bit of indecision, she picked a prize to target.

“Put your coins in here,” Hana instructed.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she was struck by a realization.

If Hazuki had never spent time with friends before, had she received any allowance from their parents?

There was a real possibility that they hadn’t given her a cent, deeming it unnecessary.

Back when Hana had lived in the Ichise house, she hadn’t worked a part-time job. Their parents had left her to her own devices, and she had received the money for her living expenses through Sae.

Their parents must have thought that as long as they gave her money, they were fulfilling their parental obligations.

However, it hadn’t been rare for them to forget, and Sae had ended up scrambling to requisition the funds from them.

Presently, Hana received a fixed allowance from Saku. It was a relief not to have to worry about money anymore.

Hazuki, on the other hand, was basically a freeloader in the Ichinomiya household. It was hard to imagine she would go begging to Saku for pocket change.

If Hazuki didn’t have any money, Hana might have just shamed her by

accident.

She fumbled for her own wallet. "It's on me!"

But Hazuki stopped her. "It's okay. You don't have to do that. I have enough to pay for myself."

"What? You have money? Dumb and dumber gave you an allowance?"

Hazuki wouldn't have had time for a job, so any money she had must have come from their parents, Hana assumed. But...

"That's not it." Hazuki let out a disappointed sigh. "You really don't care at all about practitioners or your classes, do you?"

She wasn't the only one. Kikyou was wearing an identical tired expression. "There's a lot Hana doesn't know."

"If she's not skipping class, she's sleeping," Suzu added.

Both Kikyou and Suzu had just casually dissed Hana, but they weren't wrong, so she couldn't argue.

"Class A is given a bit of compensation whenever we're dispatched to deal with shades. Since we're tied up fighting until late at night for these so-called field classes, it's hard for most of us to find any part-time work. Apparently, that's why we're paid," Hazuki explained. "I didn't have any use for the money before now, so I have more saved than you're probably imagining. Don't worry about me."

Hana was relieved. "Good. I was going to ask Saku for money if you needed it, but it looks like I won't have to."

"They've already taken me into their home. I couldn't possibly ask Lord Ichinomiya for money on top of that."

"It's fine. He's the *lord* of the *Ichinomiya* clan. He has money in spades. Even Kikyou is well-off enough to have offered me three billion yen to break up with Saku."

Hana's revelation sent Kikyou into a tizzy. Hana snickered.

Reminiscing, she found herself lamenting the choice she had made. Had Saku

not stopped her right as she had been about to sign the papers, she would have gotten her hands on three billion yen.

“Did you really?” Hazuki asked Kikyou with surprise in her eyes.

“Don’t tell them that, Hanaaa,” Kikyou whined. “I’m sorry for what I did.”

“Nothing for you to be sorry about. I’m happy to sign the divorce papers right here and now if you’ll give me the three billion,” Hana said, teasing.

Kikyou’s expression turned serious. “I think it would be better for you to stop joking about that.”

“Why?”

“If you hand divorce papers to Lord Ichinomiya, he won’t hesitate to use the entire might of the clan to shackle you. You shouldn’t give up your life of freedom so lightly!” Kikyou seized Hana’s shoulder and shook her roughly. “It’s suicide to make him your enemy.”

“Not even Saku would stoop so low.”

“You’re wrong! You’re underestimating him! Believe me! He’ll take you by force before you can declare a divorce!” Kikyou shouted. She delivered the terrifying threat without a trace of humor in her tone.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Hana protested.

“Yes,” Kikyou said. “You’re too naive. Such a feat would be trivial for Lord Ichinomiya. If only you could see the way he looks at you. It’s as if he’s holding on to the last thread of his reason. He’s dangerous! Kiriya said as much, too, that he worries about you.”

How like Kiriya to say that.

“I don’t want you to pity me behind my back...,” Hana mumbled.

“He said watching the two of you is like watching a rabbit being hunted by a wolf.”

Hana didn’t know how to respond.

Hazuki added insult to injury, saying, “Lord Ichinomiya did say that he refused to get divorced. When I walked in, he had you pinned underneath him, too...”

“Not you, too, Hazuki...”

“*Eek!* You’re already falling prey to his advances! Watch out, Hana. The moment you’re separated from your shikigami, you’re going to be gobbled up in an instant.”

Oddly, it seemed that Kikyou was panicking more than Hana herself.

“Especially never let your inugami leave your side,” Kikyou advised. “Not even Saku would dare to confront a god. Understood?!”

“Y-yeah. I got it...,” Hana mumbled, buckling under the immense pressure Kikyou was exerting.

“As your best friend, I’ll protect your chastity!”

“Nuh-uh, that won’t be needed...,” Hana said.

Kikyou had worked herself up into a frenzy, but that was when a new challenger stepped into the ring.

“What are you talking about?!” Suzu cried, stabbing a finger at Kikyou. “Hana and Lord Ichinomiya found their way to each other despite opposition from their families. They’re Romeo and Juliet! As her *real* best friend, I won’t let you interfere with their love!”

It seemed that Suzu was still laboring under a few misunderstandings.

“Do you even hear yourself? He may look like a gentleman, but he’s got ulterior motives written all over him!”

“That’s the mark of love.”

“You’re way off.”

Hana stood beside her bickering friends, flabbergasted. “This is chaos...”

The two seemed content to amuse themselves without Hana.

“Hazuki, let’s go see what’s over there,” she suggested.

“They won’t mind if we leave them?”

“They’re fine. They do this all the time.”

Suzu and Kikyou argued day in and day out. It was unclear if they were

enemies or amazing friends. In any case, their fights had never turned into anything dangerous.

Hana used to try breaking up their arguments, but they seemed to enjoy their quarrels, so recently, she had started leaving them alone.

While she was showing Hazuki her favorite arcade machines, she asked, “Are you going to join the Association after we graduate?”

“It’ll probably end up that way. Like I said before, they’ve already approached me, and I’ll be able to make the best use of Hiragi if I become a practitioner,” Hazuki replied. “Besides, it seems like it would be difficult for me to live in ordinary society.”

Hazuki had been made to walk the path of practitioners from the start. She didn’t know anything about what was considered ordinary. No one had ever taught her. It would require immense courage to leap into a completely unfamiliar world.

In any case, there was no way the Association would ignore a practitioner with a human shikigami like Hazuki, so the answer was obvious from the get-go.

“I thought they would have tried to persuade you to join, too,” Hazuki said. “You played a crucial role in resolving the attack on our school, you have two human shikigami—not to mention your inugami turned shikigami—so I was positive they would try to headhunt you.”

“Not yet, they haven’t. Anyway, as part of the deal I made with Saku, I requested to work at a regular company. He might be helping me keep them away.”

Otherwise, considering the way Hana had brandished her power during the incident, there was no way she hadn’t attracted the Association’s attention. The Class A teacher had even tried to persuade her to join his class. In fact, it was downright bizarre that the Association had left her alone all this time. The natural conclusion was that someone was pulling strings in the background.

“I don’t want to deal with them. It sounds like a pain. Do you think Saku will handle it for me if I ask?”

“You’re really *that* staunchly against joining?”

“It’ll happen when hell freezes over.”

“But you’re so strong.”

What a waste, she seemed to want to say.

But it didn’t matter what Hazuki said. Hana was determined to become a run-of-the-mill office drone. Perhaps it was time she reminded Saku of that fact. She wanted the Association to stay far away from her.

As Hana and Hazuki were talking, a man appeared in front of them out of nowhere. “Hey, you two,” he called to them.

Hana looked at him with suspicion. “Us?”

The man had white hair and a face like a model. He wore a long coat that complemented his figure. With his earrings and jewelry, he looked a bit like a playboy, but his gaze was humorless and intense.

For a stranger, the way he was staring at them was downright rude.

His eyes darted between Hana and Hazuki. He lifted a hand to his chin as if he were mulling something over.

Then he asked, “Which of you is married to Saku?”

Hana was the first to respond to his question. “What?” She glared at him with distrust. What an outrageous thing to ask before even introducing himself. “Who the hell are you?” she demanded.

He turned to her and his eyes flicked up to where Azuha was resting on her hair. Struck by a thought, he snatched Azuha from her head.

Hana was greatly disturbed seeing her precious Azuha ripped violently away from her. “Stop! What are you doing?!” she yelled.

She reached out a hand to take the shikigami back, but the difference in their height was too large, so she couldn’t reach.

He scoffed as if to incense her further.

Hana was quivering with rage. “Dammit. Give her back!”

“And if I refuse?” he drawled.

She gnashed her teeth in frustration. He was clearly making fun of her.

That was when Azuha released the restraints on her abilities and blasted the man with her full power.

“Shit!” he cried, shielding his eyes from the piercing light Azuha was emitting.

The shikigami took advantage of the opening to flit away, returning safely to Hana’s side.

“Are you okay, Azuha?” Hana asked.

“Yes.”

Relieved, Hana turned a furious glower on the rude interloper.

“Aaah. Judging from that display, you must be Saku’s bride,” he remarked. “The younger of the twins was rumored to be a washout, but I suppose that info is outdated?”

“It’s none of your business!” Hana exploded.

Next to Hana, Hazuki found her eyes drawn to the man’s chest where a familiar pendant was dangling from a cord around his neck. She grabbed Hana’s arm in a panic. “Wait a minute, Hana. He has an obsidian pendant.”

“Your other half seems much more composed,” the man said scornfully, holding the pendant aloft as if to say, *Take a good look*. “I’m Yukizasa Sankourou. I obtained the Obsidian rank just recently.”

Hazuki reacted to the name with shock. “What?!”

Hana, on the other hand, couldn’t have cared less, consumed as she was by anger at the man in front of them.

Azuha was special to Hana, and she could not forgive him for treating her little one with such violence.

While she was debating how to best exact revenge, the man said, “How about you break up with Saku?”

She immediately snapped, “No one in their right mind would agree to a request like that from a stranger. Are you stupid?” She repaid his earlier mockery in kind.

A vein on his temple throbbed. “Who do you think you’re mouthing off to? Bravery and recklessness aren’t the same, you know. Consider your audience and pick your words accordingly.”

He fixed Hana with a piercing gaze. His expression had frosted over in an instant. His eyes were cold enough to make hardened men quake.

Hazuki swallowed heavily and took a step back, but Hana advanced instead, ready to fight. She refused to be the first to look away.

“Cheeky brat,” the man murmured and grabbed her arm.

She tried to shake off his hand right away, but his grip was too strong. “Let go,” she growled, scowling.

The threat in her tone had no effect on her opponent.

Still, she kept her eyes locked on his, sensing that the one to avert their eyes would lose their duel. Her thoughts were ruled by her anger. Driven by her refusal to lose, she stood her ground.

A piercing “Hey!” interrupted their staring contest.

It was Kikyou. Apparently, her argument with Suzu had finished. It had taken longer than usual.

“Is that you, Yukizasa?! What are you doing to Hana?!” Kikyou cried.

The two contestants finally disengaged from their duel and turned to look at Kikyou.

Yukizasa made a face like he had just bitten into a lemon. “Here comes the crybaby. Where’s your partner today?”

Kikyou flinched, and her brows drew downward. Unlike when she was fighting with Suzu, she looked afraid.

“N-none of your business. Wh-wh-what about your exam? Aren’t you supposed to be in the middle of your Obsidian-rank trial? Did you skip again? I’m going to report this to your mother! Hurry up and get your hands off Hana,” she shouted.

However, maybe out of fear, she was keeping her distance, so she did not

make for an effective rescuer.

Nevertheless, she managed to temper Yukizasa's anger. All the motivation visibly drained from his body, and he flung Hana's arm away.

"I'm sick of this."

Hana's arm wasn't broken, but the pain from his viselike grip still lingered. She didn't want to show any weakness in front of him, so she put everything she had into pretending her arm didn't bother her.

She glowered at him, threatening him with a world of pain if he tried to come near her again.

Yukizasa turned away and disappeared into the crowd without another word.

Once he was gone, Hana rolled up her sleeves to find that his hand had left a significant bruise.

"I should have slugged him," she grumbled, her hatred of losing rearing its head.

Suzu and Hazuki approached her with worried faces.

"Hana, are you okay?" Suzu asked. Her eyes landed on Hana's arm, and she winced. "Oh my god. That's one heck of a bruise."

"Does it hurt?" Hazuki asked.

"I'm fine," Hana replied curtly. "More importantly, do you know that jerk, Kikyou?"

However, the one to answer was Suzu. "You're probably the only one here who doesn't know him."

"What? Seriously?" Hana turned to her sister. "You know him, too?"

Hazuki nodded. "I didn't recognize his face, but I realized right away after hearing his name."

"You too, Suzu?"

"Of course. I'm a Mitsui. My family falls under the Sankourou clan. I've never talked to him, but I know what he looks like at least."

“You’re kidding.”

In the end, Hana was the only one still in the dark.

“Please explain, Kikyou,” Hana asked.

“That was Yukizasa Sankourou. As you can tell by his name, he’s from one of the five great clans, the Sankourou clan. He’s the son of the current clan head, and the one who has been nominated as the successor.”

“So he’s in the same position as you and Kiriya, then.”

“No. We are merely candidates, whereas he is the confirmed successor,” she said. “As long as nothing goes wrong, at least.”

A man like *him* was going to be the clan lord? That seemed like poor judgment.

Hana wanted to file a complaint with whoever had made that ridiculous decision.

“The Sankourou clan specializes in defense,” Hazuki added in simple terms for Hana’s understanding.

Kikyou picked up the conversational thread. “Like Hazuki said, the clan excels at creating robust barriers, and a nomination by the current clan head means that Yukizasa’s skills are the real deal. He was originally a Lapis-rank practitioner, and I had heard that he would be undergoing the promotion exam to claim the Obsidian rank, but that’s all I know...”

Hazuki said, “Earlier, he was wearing an obsidian pendant.”

Kikyou looked surprised. “That must mean he passed... I see. He must have heard about Lord Ichinomiya’s marriage after returning from the testing grounds and come to see for himself who the spouse is. This is a disaster, Hana.”

Kikyou’s pitying gaze irritated Hana. “Is he related to Saku somehow?” she asked.

“Yes, they’re old friends, though it feels a little one-sided on Yukizasa’s end. He’s fixated on Lord Ichinomiya. I’m sure he was dying to know who he married. Geez. Talk about having too much time on your hands.”

“Yet another troublemaker crawls out of the woodwork.” Hana stared meaningfully at Kikyou and sighed deeply.

“Why are you sighing while looking at me?!” Kikyou demanded, tears springing to her eyes.

Hana wanted to point to her reaction and tell her, *Exhibit A*.



Because of the chaos caused by the unexpected Sankourou run-in, the girls called it a day early.

After Hana returned home, Aoi found out she had been injured and flew into a rage. He pulled his sword, having every intention of running out of the house to find that Yukizasa guy and cut him down. Miyabi calmly stepped in and quieted him with a swing of her giant squeaky hammer. Then she brought out the first aid kit, saying that taking care of Hana came first.

“Master, are you really okay?” Aoi asked.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“So you say, but I can’t forgive him for marring your beautiful skin,” Miyabi said.

“See?! You agree with me. Then let’s go pay him a visit and show our *thanks*,” Aoi said.

“You have a point.” Miyabi’s lips curved into a grim smile—her eyes weren’t laughing. From her expression, it was clear that she was equally outraged by the bruise on Hana’s arm.

“I told you already— No,” Hana said.

“But whyyy?” Aoi whined in displeasure.

“Yukizasa is the successor of the Sankourou clan, so he must be very strong—strong enough to capture Azuha without breaking a sweat,” she said. “He’s on a different level. If you pick a fight with him blindly, you might end up hurt, and that would make me sad. So no, you can’t go.”

Of course, the one who had stood up to such a dangerous person and openly glared at him as if to say *Come at me anytime!* was none other than Hana herself. If Hazuki hadn't been by her side, she undoubtedly would have thrown at least one punch at him.

But in hindsight, thinking about it logically, her opponent had been the next head of the Sankourou clan. As the wife of the Ichinomiya clan lord, her actions might have sown the seeds of discord between the clans. It was a good thing she hadn't laid a hand on him.

Not that he had shown her the same courtesy, given the bruise on her arm... She wondered if her injury was grounds enough for her to complain to the Sankourou clan, but she decided to defer to Saku's judgment.

"Let's take care of your wound first, Master," Miyabi said.

"I'll deal with it. You may all leave," Hana said.

"But..."

"I can treat myself."

She couldn't bear for her shikigami to see the bruise, which had gradually turned a horrifying color. She didn't want to worry them.

"Go on already. Bring me a snack and tea," Hana requested. "We were going to eat lunch together, but thanks to that a-hole, we missed our meal. Oh, and bring some to Hazuki, too."

Miyabi stared solemnly at Hana for a while, but then she sighed in defeat. "I understand. We'll prepare something, so please treat yourself properly."

Hana laughed softly. "I got it already."

Miyabi and Aoi cast her one last concerned glance, then left the room. Azuha followed them.

Once she was alone, Hana sighed deeply.

"Ugh, geez, he did a number on me. Monster," she grumbled as she opened the first aid kit and started to treat her bruise.

The throbbing pain seemed to have only gotten worse as time had passed.

She had put on a brave face in front of her shikigami, but it seriously hurt. No one could blame her for the dark mutterings that came pouring from her mouth.

She let out a steady stream of complaints as she cleaned her wound, but since she was limited to using one hand, she wasn't having as much success as she would have liked, and the inconvenience only fueled her irritation.

"I should have just let Miyabi do it," she muttered.

However, Hana knew that Miyabi, despite looking as beautiful and gentle as a goddess, actually had a shorter fuse than Aoi, and she hadn't been able to ask that of the shikigami.

While Hana was wrestling with the kit, Saku entered the room.

The moment she saw his face, she started airing her grievances. "Sakuuu. What's with your friends?"

"I heard. That's my bad."

"Why are you the one apologizing? It's not *your* fault."

"Because mainly, I was the reason he did it..." Then, unable to watch her struggle with the attempted treatment any longer, he said, "Give that here," and offered to take over.

Hana obeyed and handed Saku the kit, and he started to tend to her injury.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

"Badly."

In front of Miyabi, she had been able to play it cool and say she was fine, so why had she told Saku the truth?

She didn't have to put on airs around him and could say what she was thinking without holding back. He was older than her, but they faced each other as equals.

The more she thought about it, the more curious their relationship seemed.

"Sorry," Saku said.

"Seriously, why are you apologizing?"

“Yukizasa recently found out I married and has been hounding me to get divorced. I refused, obviously. He was being extremely annoying, so I started rejecting his calls, and it seems like that only piqued his interest more.”

“How does he have the gall to tell someone else to divorce?”

“He’s a my-way-or-the-highway kind of guy, and he thinks you’re not suitable for me. He believes we only married for the sake of the barrier. On top of that, he’s irritated that I didn’t tell him beforehand. But how was I supposed to contact a guy in the middle of the Obsidian-rank exam?”

Saku gently stroked Hana’s bruised arm apologetically. His usual fire was nowhere to be seen.

“Anyway, it’s my fault for letting him off his leash,” he added.

Hana was overcome by an urge to pet his head. She withdrew her arm in alarm.

“You’re friends?” she asked.

“I guess you could say that...”

“Huh? That’s vague.”

“He’s a buddy from my rebel days.”

“Rebel? Who? You?”

Considering that Saku was now the exemplary lord of the Ichinomiya clan, Hana couldn’t picture him as a teenage rebel in the slightest.

“I was pretty wild in my student days.”

She looked at him with surprise. “Really?”

“Shocked?”

“Yup,” she replied without hesitation.

Saku chuckled. “I hated everyone and everything back then. I saw the whole world as my enemy.” He sighed and paused. “Those aren’t days I like remembering...”

Hana watched Saku as he told her about his past, but his eyes were focused

somewhere far away.

“You said before that you understand how Nozomu feels, but I empathize with Hazuki,” he admitted. “I faced expectations and pressure from everyone around me. To answer them, I pushed myself to the brink, and as a result, I broke down. For a time, not even my mother could deal with me.”

His tone was light, but his words were anything but.

“Not to copy what you said, but why does everyone and their mother feel the need to compare...?”

In his expression was a trace of loneliness—and pain.

Saku was a tyrant and a narcissist. He was strong and had walked the path of a practitioner all his life without straying. That was what Hana had thought.

But he had his own woes.

It felt like this was the first time she had seen his vulnerable side.

Without thinking, Hana embraced Saku.

His eyes widened in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“You did the same for me before. Now it’s my turn.”

His lips curved in a tender smile, and his eyes slipped shut. He gathered her in his arms.

“...That was when I met Yukizasa. Back then, he was just one of the candidates to succeed the clan, but he was also the most powerful. We shared the same worries and frustrations, so it was easier to breathe when I was with him. That’s why I say our relationship is a little different than friends.”

“I see. He seemed really concerned about who you married.”

“There’s a part of him that still can’t let go of the past. That’s why he’s still fixated on me to some extent. But it’s impossible for us to stay the same as we were back then.” Saku snickered. “What a little punk he is.”

Their gazes locked.

Saku’s eyes showed his usual unwavering strength of will.

His hand came up around her head, and he drew slowly closer. She could have dodged if she had wanted to, but she stayed where she was.

Their lips touched. They felt each other's warmth through the kiss.

"...People say if pushing doesn't work, try pulling," Saku said.

Where had his fragility from earlier gone?

He smirked. The usual cocky despot was back.

Hana gaped.

"When Yukizasa pressed you to divorce me, unlike the time with Kikyou, you shot him down flat, or so I heard."

"Y-you heard wrong."

"I don't think so," Saku said. "You're always going on about getting divorced. I never imagined you actually loved me so much. I'm thrilled."

"No! I just said that because he was pissing me off!" Hana protested.

Her fluster and desperate excuses only made him happier.

Delighted by her reaction, he laughed. "Ha-ha-ha. Don't be embarrassed."

Hana shot him a glare. "Dumbass!"

She had been genuinely worried about him, and he had cruelly tricked her. She hammered him with her fists, but he only seemed more pleased than before.

"Stop that. You're a patient. You're going to hurt yourself," he said.

"It already hurts! Whose fault is that?"

Saku cradled her injured arm and continued the treatment. He finished off by binding the wound securely.

"Aren't you overdoing it a bit?" Hana said.

"Just in case. Go to the hospital if it gets worse."

"Sure, sure."

Saku had finished treating her injury, but he still wouldn't let her go.

She looked at him, wondering what was up.

He leaned over and dropped a kiss on top of the bandages.

His touch was tender as if he were handling something broken.

Hana was suddenly at a loss for words. Her mouth opened and closed.

With his lips still pressed to her arm, Saku peered up at her.

She was paralyzed by his solemn gaze.

His lips slowly lifted away.

“I will warn Yukizasa off. If the same thing happens again, come to me for help right away,” he said.

“...Okay.”

“Good girl.”

Saku stroked her hair gently one last time before leaving her room.

Alone, Hana blushed fiercely and hid her face with both hands.

“What the hell...?”

She thought back on the range of emotions Saku had shown her. She knew she had been played by him, but she couldn't fight the feelings blooming inside her.

Chapter 3

Several days passed after Hana's encounter with Yukizasa.

Thankfully, the pain in her arm had receded, and the bruise had faded to the point where it was largely unnoticeable.

She had intended to hit him if she ever ran into him again, but apparently, Saku had gone to talk to him in person and had punched him in her stead. Out of consideration for Saku, she figured she would let this one go.

However, she wouldn't forgive that guy a second time.

She had steeled herself to be ready to take him on at any time, but realistically, it wasn't every day one could lay eyes on the Sankourou successor, and the days passed by peacefully.

Then over lunch period one day, Hana was paged through the PA system.

"Ooooh, they want you in the principal's office. What did you do?" Suzu asked teasingly.

But Hana drew a blank. "Nothing. I don't think I did anything, at least."

She was on her best behavior in school, relatively speaking.

Her grades weren't stellar. That was a sore spot for her.

"They're not gonna chew me out for failing all my classes, right?" Hana said.

"Well, it's not a great look for the wife of the Ichinomiya lord."

Suzu didn't deny it, so the possibility wasn't zero.

"Saku already gave me an earful. I don't want to hear it from the teachers, too. Maybe I should pretend I didn't hear it."

"You can't. If you don't go, you're giving them more to scold you about."

It seemed that in Suzu's mind, Hana being chastised was an inevitability.

Hana wanted to go less and less.

However, Suzu was right. She wanted to avoid a longer lecture, so she went to the principal's office obediently.

When she got there, she knocked on the door. She didn't have to wait long before she heard someone say, "Come in." She opened the door and nervously walked in, her mind racing to find excuses for her poor grades.

Her gaze was drawn to the two people sitting on the sofa, and her eyes widened.

Opposite the principal sat Hana's parents.

Seeing the two faces she never wanted to lay eyes on again, her brows furrowed automatically.

"Why are *you* here?" Hana demanded in a low voice, her anger simmering.

The principal stood and said, "Calm down. I don't know what misunderstandings you have had, but you shouldn't worry your parents. I'll excuse myself here, so please make up."

"Come again?" She scowled, not following what he was talking about.

He left the room with a smile.

Most likely, her parents had fed the principal a pack of lies. After he disappeared, laboring under whatever false impression he had been given, the smiles vanished off her parents' faces, replaced with glowers filled with loathing, as if she was their enemy.

Theirs weren't expressions one would give to their own daughter.

Granted, the same could be said of Hana. She glared at the two with an irritated face unbecoming a child seeing her parents.

Behind her stood Aoi and Miyabi, invisible but on guard. Unlike Saku, her parents showed no sign that they had noticed the shikigami.

Ah, but it was too pitiful to compare them to an Obsidian practitioner like Saku, so she revised her thinking.

The two people Hana had never wanted to see again.

It would be easy for her to ignore them and leave. She could just as easily have Saku wield his authority as the clan lord and order them not to come near her. However, they had purposefully come all the way to her school, and she wanted to know their intentions.

If she ran, next time, they might summon Hazuki instead, and that was just not okay. She decided to hear them out and sat down on the sofa across from them, throwing one leg over the other.

Her father instantly reacted to her arrogant gesture. “How dare you take that attitude with your parents?!”

His rage failed to move Hana. She projected an air of *What’re you gonna do ‘bout it?* and didn’t change her demeanor one bit.

“I don’t consider you my parents, so it makes no difference,” she said dismissively. “So? What is so important that you got the principal involved?”

“Isn’t it obvious?! Go talk to Lord Ichinomiya and win his favor for the family. We have given you ample time, and yet you have done nothing. If you call yourself an Ichise, you should work for the sake of your family!”

Hana’s heart froze over in an instant.

She was disappointed.

She was surprised she could still be let down by her parents at all, but miniscule though it might have been, she had held a flicker of hope.

Hazuki, whom they had cherished so dearly, had fled the house. Might they be worried for her?

Hana thought nothing of herself. She had given up long ago in that regard.

But Hazuki wasn’t the same as her, right? Or so she wanted to ask her parents.

Yet their concern wasn’t for the child they had raised, but for the family name.

Had they said a single word of worry for Hazuki, Hana might have revised her

opinion of them.

However, reality was cruel.

There was no sign they were going to mention Hazuki at all.

Hana had crossed beyond anger to utter apathy.

“I shouldn’t have to explain something as basic as this!” her father yelled. “Now that you’re the clan lord’s wife, entice him and promote the Ichise name! You’re so useless!”

He showed no trace of regard for Hana.

The complete lack of respect for her feelings was shocking.

Who did he think he was, blaming her like this?

What optimism to believe that she would act on behalf of the Ichise name though he had never treated her like part of the family.

The gaze Hana trained on her parents was horribly cold.

“Are you stupid?” she sneered.

“What did you say?” her father demanded.

“Why should I have to seduce Saku for your sake? There’s no way I could do something so outrageous. Just because *you* are shameless doesn’t mean that I am.”

“Who are you calling shameless?!”

“Who else but the two of you?” Hana said sternly. “You treated me as an outsider all my life, and now you come slithering to me as if you’ve changed your tune. That’s what I mean by shameless. Get it, birdbrain?”

She dumbed down her insults so that fools as thickheaded and cowardly as they would understand.

Her father gaped in shock. Then his face flushed red with indignation.

Hana hoped he would burst a blood vessel and pass out then and there. She no longer had the slightest hint of affection for her parents.

“You are an Ichise! It is only right that you sacrifice for the family!” he

shouted.

“Hmm, but when I went back to pick up Hazuki, didn’t you say I had no place in the house anymore?” Hana drawled. “In other words, I’m not an Ichise. Besides, I’m married to Saku now, so my family name is different.”

Ichise, schmichise. Go to hell.

She wouldn’t give a damn if the family were to fall to ruin.

“You plan to throw away the family?!” he demanded.

“What do you want me to say? Would you be satisfied if I said *yes*? If so, I’ll say it as many times as you want. I don’t need this sham of a family!”

“H-how dare you!”

Hana’s father swung his hand back in a broad arc. Needless to say, he was aiming for her. He was going to slap her.

However, Hana didn’t try to dodge, but merely glared back steadily at her father. Aoi and Miyabi leaped into action.

A split second before his hand struck Hana, the door burst open.

The intruder was someone unexpected. It was Yanagi, her older brother.

“Stop right there, Father,” he said.

“Yanagi... Why are you here?!”

“I have told you time and time again, Hana is Lord Ichinomiya’s wife. She is the lady of the main family whom we are obliged to serve. How dare you presume to raise a hand against her?”

“N-no! This is... It’s discipline! I am merely disciplining a child who refuses to obey her parents.”

“Lord Ichinomiya knows that you were scheming to contact Hana,” Yanagi said. “If you don’t want to anger him any further, leave immediately.”

“Whose side are you on?!”

“Leave.”

Their father was cowed by Yanagi’s tone, which brooked no argument.

Their mother grabbed his arm worriedly. "Dear. Let's end it here for today."

"Shit!" he cursed.

He shot Hana one more sharp glare before exiting the room.

Once they were gone, Hana let out an exhausted sigh. Yanagi walked up to her. She watched him approach warily. The invisible Aoi and Miyabi had their guards up as well.

"Sorry, Hana. Are you okay?" Yanagi asked.

"Uh, y-yeah...", Hana said, shaken by the concern he was showing her.

It might have been the first time he had said a kind word to her.

Yanagi scanned her over to see if she was telling the truth.

It was rare for the two of them to be so close, for them to make eye contact at all, at least in Hana's memory.

"I didn't expect them to come all the way here. I'm sorry I didn't stop them," he apologized.

Hana was shocked by his show of remorse. "It, uh, it was nothing. I'm fine..." She could only muster trite words in response.

"I have been summoned by Lord Ichinomiya, so be careful on your way home. If possible, go together with Hazuki."

"S-sure..."

After hearing her reply, Yanagi spun on his heel and left.

Hana found herself speechless for a moment. Out of concern for her, Aoi and Miyabi manifested themselves.

"You okay, Master?" Aoi asked.

"Master?" Miyabi chimed in.

"I'm okay. Just a little surprised."

To think Yanagi, who she had hardly ever spoken to, would be worried about her.

Their conversation had been almost like that of regular siblings.

She had thought that Yanagi considered her a stranger—as she did him—but just then, he had seemed genuinely anxious.

There were truths Hana had yet to discover. About Hazuki. About Yanagi.

In various ways, she may have been blind until now.

She had lost sight of what was true and what was false.



Hana did as Yanagi instructed and went home with Hazuki.

In the car on their way back, she told her sister that their parents had come to see her.

Hazuki was horribly shaken. “Don’t tell me they came to take me home.”

“If that had been the case, I would have given them a little bit of credit as parents,” Hana said. “Actually, not a single syllable of your name came out of their mouths. The only thing they’re concerned about is the Ichise name.”

Hazuki’s face clouded over. “Oh...”

Unlike Hana, who had thrown away any affection she had had for their parents long ago, for Hazuki, it had only been a few days since she had left the Ichise household, and her feelings toward their parents might not match Hana’s.

“You still have expectations for them?” asked Hana.

“...”

Hazuki neither confirmed nor denied the statement. Perhaps it wasn’t that she didn’t, but that she *couldn’t*.

“They might be planning to get a hold of you, too. Don’t let yourself get swept up in their scheming,” Hana warned.

Hazuki had always followed their parents’ commands. It was impossible for her to combat them all of a sudden.

She had only been able to say her piece when she had run away because

momentum had been on her side.

“They might try to butter you up, but it doesn’t matter how kind their words are; they haven’t changed one bit. Your feelings won’t ever get through to them. I’m sure of it,” Hana said.

She couldn’t imagine their parents saying anything nice, but she threw in the warning just in case.

“...Yeah,” Hazuki mumbled.

It wasn’t clear whether she truly understood what Hana was saying or if her emotions had yet to catch up.

She hadn’t thrown away their parents completely the way Hana had.

Well, that was hardly unusual.

It had taken Hana a long time to abandon all her feelings for their parents.

Demanding Hazuki cut off all ties immediately would be too harsh.

“Shitty bastards,” Hana grumbled in a small, small voice.

They would harass her to the ends of the earth, until the end of time. Sometimes, the bonds of blood proved to be nothing but a burden.

The twins returned to the Ichinomiya residence without incident, and Towa came to greet them.

“Madam, Miss Hazuki, dear Junior has called for you. He says to come to the sitting room upon your return,” she relayed.

“There you go again with the ‘Junior,’” Hana said. “Saku’s going to be angry.”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho.” Towa merely laughed, showing no inclination to change her ways.

Saku was surely doomed to be “Junior” forever. The thought made Hana want to giggle.

It was even more funny because of his usual pretentious attitude.

“Pfft...” Hana snickered.

“This is no time to laugh,” Hazuki chided. “We have to go. We can’t keep Lord

Ichinomiya waiting.”

“Let him wait,” she said, still nursing a grudge from the teasing Saku had subjected her to a few days before.

“We mustn’t.”

Hazuki dragged Hana to the sitting room and found not only Saku but Yanagi waiting for them. Both the twins were equally surprised.

“What? Why...?” Hana said.

She had heard from Hazuki that Yanagi stopped by the Ichinomiya residence on occasion, but she hadn’t known he would be here.

“You’re back. Come on in,” Saku said.

The two of them approached, their expressions bewildered.

“Never mind Yanagi for now. More importantly, I heard your parents visited you, Hana. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, no problems there. I was more worried about Aoi and Miyabi going ballistic.”

Suddenly, it occurred to Hana that she might as well have had the two of them manifest and threaten her parents a little bit.

“Good. Just to make sure, what did they want?”

“Something along the lines of convincing you to favor the Ichise family,” Hana said. “I refused, of course.”

Who in their right mind would help such an awful family? Not her.

She wasn’t so soft as to obey orders from people who had mistreated her horribly.

If she had been asked to help destroy the family, on the other hand, she would have happily cooperated.

“Water under the bridge and all that. So what’s he doing here?” Hana asked. It was obvious to anyone she was talking about Yanagi even without her saying his name. “He didn’t come to take Hazuki back, did he?”

Hazuki twitched in surprise.

“If that’s the case, I won’t hand her over without a fight. Even if it’s you asking, Saku,” she added.

Hana had no intention of giving Hazuki back to the Ichises. She could predict how their parents would treat Hazuki if she were to return.

“Relax. It’s not about that,” Saku said.

Hana was relieved, but that didn’t explain why Yanagi had come.

“I’ve thought this from the start, but you all need to talk to each other more!” Saku yelled, raising his voice suddenly. “Especially *you*!” He stabbed a finger at Yanagi.

Yanagi’s expression didn’t change one bit.

“The two of you, come sit,” Saku ordered.

“Huh? What do you want?” Hana asked.

“Don’t sweat the details. Sit across from us.”

His tone left no room for refusal.

Hana and Hazuki exchanged a look. Hana could feel her sister’s confusion, but they took a seat facing Yanagi.

“Wh-what now, Saku?”

It wasn’t as if anything would change if they talked.

“It’s a problem that you three don’t communicate, this affair with Hazuki being a prime example,” he said. “In fact, Hazuki, if you had confided in Hana from the beginning, you could have avoided several years’ worth of misunderstandings, right? You keep too much bottled up.” He turned to Hana. “That applies to you, too, Hana. Giving up immediately is a bad habit of yours.”

“Easy for you to say, but... You know. Right, Hazuki?” Hana said.

“...Yeah.”

Sure, her relationship with Hazuki might not have soured had they spoken openly with each other, but their household environment had made such

communication impossible.

“It’s true that your parents did the most harm. However, the way I see it, you each created whatever excuse was convenient for you and didn’t try to look any further,” Saku said.

“Hmm...”

Hana couldn’t refute what he was saying, but she was reluctant to accept it, too.

“It was wrong of you, Hazuki, to keep everything to yourself to the point where you self-destructed, but Hana, you’re also at fault for being indifferent!”

“I don’t get what you’re trying to say,” Hana said.

“Stop interrupting. Let me finish. The two of you were wrong, but the one who kept quiet all this time is also to blame. I mean you, Yanagi!”

Yanagi looked down at the floor.

Saku continued. “If you had paid more attention, your sisters wouldn’t have drifted apart, don’t you agree? Hazuki’s problem could have been resolved earlier, right?”

“I apologize. I have no excuses,” Yanagi said.

“*Sorry* isn’t going to cut it! I know you treasure your sisters. Yet I haven’t heard them utter a single syllable of your name since they came to live here! Are you fine with that?”

“As long as they are happy...”

“I told you to stop trying to solve everything on your own!” Saku shouted. “Your sisters have a right to know the truth. It’s wrong of you to shoulder everything alone. You’re siblings.”

Hana and Hazuki listened to the conversation with bewilderment.

“Saku?” Hana said.

Saku turned toward the two of them and asked, his tone equal parts angry and exasperated, “Don’t you find it strange at all? Despite Yanagi being the youngest practitioner to rise to the Lapis rank, he is ignored by your parents in

favor of Hazuki. He may not have a human shikigami, but with a brilliant practitioner like him in the family, the Ichises' future should be secured, no? There should be no reason to hound Hazuki to study."

"That's...true," Hana said.

She hadn't realized until he had explained it. Yanagi was already an established Lapis practitioner working in the field. To have such an accomplished heir should have been the greatest blessing for the Ichise family.

However, their parents' expectations were placed not on Yanagi, but on Hazuki.

Why?

"If you don't know the answer, ask *him*. That's all I have to say," Saku concluded.

For a moment, no one spoke, and silence filled the room.

"Ask," Saku had said, but neither Hana nor Hazuki knew what to say. They looked at each other with troubled expressions, glancing at Saku and Yanagi in turn.

Then Yanagi abruptly bowed his head.

"I'm sorry," he said, to Hana and Hazuki's surprise. He straightened up again and looked at them with solemn eyes. "Let's talk. I'll tell you the story behind our family. It has to do with you, too."

They nodded, confusion still written on their faces.

Yanagi began his tale—a tale neither Hana nor Hazuki knew about the Ichise family and about their parents.

"It starts before you were born. At the time, the previous family head—our grandfather—was still alive. He was an upright man, but ambitious, too. After I was born, he was overjoyed to see my talents as a practitioner bloom at an early age. He favored me, and our father couldn't forgive that."

Their grandfather had passed away while Hana and Hazuki were still infants. They only knew him from photos.

Needless to say, they had no clue what his relationship with their father had been like.

“Why?” Hana asked.

“To our grandfather, our father was inferior. He had concerns about passing the head seat of the family down to our father, so he considered passing over Father and making me his heir instead.

“Inferior... Is that shitty old man of ours that weak? Did you know anything about that, Hazuki?”

“Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him use his powers,” Hazuki said. “What about you, Hana?”

Hana hadn’t, either. She shook her head.

Their father had derided her constantly for being good-for-nothing. Looking back, she couldn’t remember seeing him work as a practitioner.

The same could be said for Yanagi, but he was known to be a Lapis practitioner, so she didn’t need to see it to believe it.

“Do you know what our father’s shikigami is?” Yanagi asked.

“Huh. I don’t think I’ve seen it,” Hana said.

“Me neither,” Hazuki agreed.

His expression bitter, Yanagi revealed, “It’s a dragonfly. His shikigami is an insect.”

“...Are you kidding me?!” Hana snapped without thinking.

Her voice was loud and angry, and no wonder. She had been constantly derided after she had summoned Azuha, a butterfly.

Hazuki was stunned into silence.

“That bastard. Who is he to call me worthless when his shikigami is a bug, too?!”

“Exactly,” Yanagi said.

“I can’t believe it...,” she muttered.

She was so amazed that she was at a loss for words. Their father had pitted her against Hazuki and had oppressed her mercilessly, and yet he, too, was a washout.

“Normally, wouldn’t you think he’d treat me with more kindness?”

They were comrades in arms, both having insect shikigami. He should have empathized with her.

“His shikigami is the root of his inferiority complex,” Yanagi said. “He saw his own weakness reflected in Hana, and he couldn’t bear it.”

How impossibly selfish...

For such a petty reason, he had hurt Hana so deeply.

“That’s why, when he saw the way our grandfather doted on me, he felt I was trying to snatch the Ichise inheritance away from him. He has treated me harshly since long ago, even more so than he does you, Hana.”

“No way...”

She was surprised to hear it, having never witnessed their father behave cruelly toward Yanagi herself.

That said, she couldn’t recall seeing the two of them having a pleasant chat, either.

Part of the reason was that Yanagi was usually away from the house for work, so it was rare to see him and their father together in the first place.

“Well, there’s no point in comparing or asking which of us is more pitiful,” Yanagi said.

“...Right.”

Hana and Yanagi were in agreement on that front. She didn’t know anything about how he had been treated, so she couldn’t compare them anyway.

“Our grandfather wanted me to succeed the family line, but he passed away before it could happen. He wrote it in his will, but it was impossible for a minor to inherit, and our father became the head of the family instead. Nevertheless, that wasn’t enough to erase his feeling of inferiority.”

“Did something else happen?” Hazuki asked nervously.

To be honest, Hana had already heard enough, but she, too, was curious.

“The shikigami you two summoned were another trigger. One, an insect shikigami like his own and the other, a human shikigami even I hadn’t managed to create. Your shikigami further fueled his inferiority complex. On the one hand, Hana’s insect shikigami was like a blow to his bruised ego, and on the other, through Hazuki’s human shikigami, he had his first taste of superiority. Keeping Hazuki, who has more talent than me, by his side was his way of restraining me.”

“Ugh... How pathetic.”

Hana felt disgusted that she and Hazuki had been used for such a worthless purpose, and she heaved a deep sigh.

“The reason why our father is obsessed with the family name is because he wants recognition from his peers that he is superior to me. His feelings toward our grandfather whose approval he never received have completely warped...”

Yanagi paused, his expression dark.

An unpleasant hush filled the room.

Hana’s voice cut through the tension. “...Hazuki and I are nothing but convenient tools to him.”

Their father had rejuvenated himself by abusing Hana. He had gratified his desires by treating Hazuki favorably.

She didn’t know what Saku had wanted them to talk about, but what she had realized through their conversation was that their father was a piece of garbage through and through.

Of all the shitty parents she knew, he was the king.

“So? What’s your point? What do you expect us to do after hearing this story?” Hana asked Yanagi, pinning him with a direct gaze.

“I want you to think about what happiness means to you,” he answered.

“That’s no business of yours. It’s not like you care what happens to us. I can

count on one hand the number of times we've talked. It's all the same to you if we live or die, right?"

"That's...right."

She had only stated the facts, but Yanagi looked upset. If she couldn't figure out the reason behind his gloomy expression, then...

Saku had been staying quiet, but he cut in and said, "I don't know about you two, but Yanagi cares a lot for you."

"What...?" Hana said.

Saku stood and dug through the inner pocket of Yanagi's suit jacket.

"W-wait, Lord Ichinomiya!" Yanagi protested, flustered.

He desperately tried to hold Saku off, but Saku called out, "Tsubaki," and bade her to pin Yanagi's arms behind him.

Saku ignored Yanagi's glare, snatched the other man's notebook from the jacket pocket, and flipped through its pages.

"You should know when to give up," he said to Yanagi. "If you don't express the important things in words, no one's going to get it!" He took out something sandwiched in between the pages and handed it to Hana. "Look."

It was a photo. Pictured were Hana and Hazuki when they were little. Yanagi was with them as well.

"What...?" Hana muttered.

"Yanagi always keeps this picture of you three on him. He wouldn't carry around a photo of people he cared nothing about or treasure it as he does. He cherishes you as his younger sisters in his own way."

The sudden revelation was hard to believe.

Hazuki looked at Yanagi doubtfully. Her eyes seemed to say, *We're talking about Yanagi, right?*

"Then why did you act so coldly all this time?" Hana asked. "You didn't try to help me or Hazuki. If you had at least tried to mediate, Hazuki wouldn't have nearly been forced into marrying against her will."

She wasn't angry so much as resentful.

Frankly, she couldn't care less about herself. She had already cut off all ties with their parents, and Saku had come to her rescue.

But Hazuki hadn't had such assistance.

Left behind in the Ichise house, maybe she wouldn't have had to suffer had Yanagi been her ally.

"I thought that my interference would make things worse..." Yanagi said.

"Why worse?"

"Like I said earlier, Father's inferiority complex causes him to see me as a rival. Hypothetically, let's say I tried to arbitrate. He's a man who doesn't listen to a word anyone says. My intercession would only anger him more. Who do you think would end up bearing the brunt of his anger? Undoubtedly, he would lash out at the two of you. The more I cherish something, the more he'll try to trample over it. All I could do was feign indifference and stay away from you."

Yanagi was hunched over as he spoke. Hana had never seen him like this. She looked over at Hazuki, who was making a complicated expression. She thought she must surely look the same way, and she didn't know how to respond.

That showed how remote of an existence Yanagi was to her.

Even knowing that there had been a reason for his apathy, Hana found it hard to accept it the way she had with Hazuki. Her confusion showed on her face. She looked like a child who had lost her way.

Hazuki grabbed Hana's hand. Judging from the steely look in her eyes, it appeared that she had made up her mind.

"Thank you for sharing that. I didn't know you felt that way about me and Hana. I'm genuinely happy. There is a part of me that has always looked up to you as a Lapis practitioner."

Yanagi looked at Hazuki as if he couldn't believe his ears. "Hazuki..."

"But that was a lot of information, and both Hana and I need time to process it. Please give us a while to organize our thoughts."

Seeing Hazuki's reaction, Hana thought that her sister was much more put together than herself, twins though they may be. She may be a mess inside, but Hazuki had given Yanagi a proper response.

"Lord Ichinomiya, do we have your consent as well?" Hazuki asked.

"Yes," Saku said. "You really are more levelheaded than Hana." He turned to Yanagi. "Don't you feel better now that you got that off your chest?"

"Against my will, but yes," Yanagi said. Then he faced Hana and Hazuki with a bitter expression. "Hazuki, did you hear that *those two* contacted Hana today?"

"Yes."

"I doubt they'll give up after one try. I have heard rumors that they are surreptitiously starting to act. Be careful just in case," he warned the two of them. "Don't be alone."

Hana clicked her tongue reflexively.

"I knew I should have had Miyabi knock them upside the head with her squeaky hammer."

If they want to come, then come, she thought and vowed to herself that when the time came, she would beat them up without a second thought.

"Saku, I'm counting on you for the cleanup," Hana said.

"Hey, what are you planning?!" he snapped back. "But anyway...if they'll do us the favor of firing the first shot, it'll be a golden opportunity."

A sinister smile rose to Saku's face. Hana felt a chill run down her spine.

"Yanagi," Saku said, "if those two slip up, we can use their blunder as an excuse to have them surrender their position. You'll succeed the Ichise family in their stead. That will tie up everything neatly."

"Will it go that smoothly?" Yanagi asked.

"Making sure things go according to plan is the fun part."

Saku's wicked expression made Hana feel a twinge of sympathy for her parents.

However, they were only getting what they had asked for.



Hana was lazing about in her own room after their discussion. Her thoughts were occupied by Yanagi's confession.

She hadn't imagined their family had been embroiled in such a struggle before she had been born. She now knew that there was a reason for her father's animosity toward her.

That said, knowing was hardly enough to make her suddenly warm up to her parents.

If anything, she only felt more anger toward her father, and it was growing stronger as time passed. She didn't know where to release her pent-up rage.

"I won't feel better until I punch him," she said.

But alongside her anger was disbelief.

"Who would have thought he has an insect shikigami, too?" she muttered to herself.

In that case, had he also been ridiculed for being a good-for-nothing like she had been?

After the birth of his talented son, had he suffered from the comparisons?

Question after question popped into her head.

"What's with this feeling...?"

She felt an inexplicable unrest swirling in her heart.

That was when Saku came into her room.

Hana sat up from her prone position on the floor.

"You okay?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" she replied.

It wasn't as if anything had been done to her.

She had merely listened to Yanagi's story.

Granted, just remembering what he had talked about was enough to make

her feel nauseated.

“Did you know?” Hana asked. “About the Ichises’ situation?”

“I found out recently. I judged that it was too heavy a burden for Yanagi to bear alone, so I created an opportunity for him to talk to you and Hazuki. Did I stick my nose in where it didn’t belong?”

“Yes, but maybe it was for the best.” She paused. There was an air of sadness around her when she began to speak again. “I never knew... I never knew why my parents—my father in particular—hated me so much. True, I was a failure compared to Hazuki, but now that I think about it, there are plenty of people with insects as shikigami, right?”

“Yeah.”

Practitioners summoned their shikigami for the first time when they turned ten.

However, since they were still children, yet to mature fully, many of the produced shikigami were insects.

Over time, their powers strengthened, and they created new shikigami.

Just like Hana. Once she had awoken to her powers, she had summoned Aoi and Miyabi. Human shikigami were the rarest of the rare, but on the other hand, an insect shikigami was hardly proof that a practitioner was talentless.

Of course, it was undeniable that practitioners with insect shikigami were looked down upon. However, it had been premature to jump to conclusions just because she had summoned a butterfly.

There were even practitioners who used the bare minimum power during the process in order to create an insect shikigami on purpose because they were easier to control.

In Hana’s case, because Hazuki had been next to her and had summoned a human shikigami, and because she herself had shown no signs of growth, she had been called worthless and her sister’s scraps. However, a weak insect shikigami did not equate to having no skill as a practitioner.

But her parents had treated Hana as the villain.

“I understand his feelings of inferiority, but to me, he is a failure as a father and as the head of the house,” Hana said.

“I agree.”

As the master of an insect shikigami—just like Hana—he should have understood her feelings and extended a helping hand instead of turning his back on her...

She might have been able to breathe easier in the Ichise house.

She might have gotten along with her brother.

Hana couldn't stop thinking about the what-ifs.

She hugged her knees to her chest and buried her face in them.

Saku came closer to her and stroked her hair gently.

She couldn't remember her parents petting her head even once, but Saku did it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Are you feeling down?” he asked.

“It's not that, but I feel restless,” she admitted. She felt antsy when she thought about Yanagi, too.

Hana was glad they had talked. She had never known the reason her parents hated her and had blamed herself for being a failure. She used to pour her heart into her studies, working herself to the bone in the hopes that her parents would look her way.

Not realizing it was wasted effort.

Saku was right. The Ichise siblings needed to use their words more.

“I have you to thank...,” Hana said.

She finally knew the reason behind her mistreatment in the Ichise house.

If Saku hadn't stepped in, Yanagi would likely have kept the knowledge a secret.

Saku was still stroking her hair. He pulled her head toward his chest. She felt like she could already hear his heartbeat.

Normally, Hana would have resisted, but just this once, she couldn't muster the will. She let her head be guided to rest on his chest.

She soaked in his pleasant warmth.

Saku chuckled. "This isn't like you. You usually fight me tooth and nail."

"Don't talk about me like I'm some sort of vicious brute," she said sulkily.

He laughed. "There's your usual bite. If you have something to say, say it. Sticking together in tough times, that's what it means to be husband and wife."

He continued petting her head, which leaned against his chest. His hand was gentle and soothed the turmoil in Hana's heart.

When had Saku become a place of repose for her?

The one who was most surprised to notice the truth was Hana herself.

Hana abruptly tilted her head up and locked eyes with Saku.

"I...might like you."

The confession slipped out of her mouth without any prompting.

Once the words were out of her mouth, she found herself badly embarrassed and hid her face from Saku.

However, she immediately became anxious to see his reaction and peeked up at him.

He did not seem about to tease her and was watching her with gentle and fond eyes.

"You've finally caught on to my charms," he said.

Hana was amazed that, even in a situation like this, he was such an egomaniac. She grabbed his face.

"That hurts," he complained.

"Where do you get your bottomless confidence from?"

She was peeved that she was the only one who seemed to be nervous. She had expected a bigger reaction from him, but he was acting surprisingly normal.

But this was par for the course for the two of them.

“What can I say? I was born extraordinary,” Saku bragged.

Hana stared at him coolly. “Aren’t you embarrassed to say that about yourself?”

He was unaffected by the scorn in her gaze.

Saku’s bluster and arrogance drove away the indescribable unrest she had been feeling.

“Whenever I talk to you, everything else starts to feel trivial,” Hana said.

“That’s good. Worrying alone won’t solve anything. At times like this, you should come to a genius like me for help.”

“Stop making fun of me! I’m way smarter than you.”

“Says the one failing all her courses. Even in my rebel days, I never had a red mark.”

Nestled against each other, Hana and Saku continued to argue.

Their equilibrium had been restored.

Even as they shrieked at each other, their expressions were soft.



Around the same time, a visitor came to the Ichise house, one with no prior relation to the family.

The visitor was Yukizasa Sankourou.

Hana’s father had been shocked when he received Yukizasa’s request for an audience.

Since the Ichises were but a humble branch family of the Ichinomiya clan, he could not refuse the Sankourou successor, and even if he could, he would not have.

Hana’s father, ambitious as he was, welcomed Yukizasa with open arms, thinking that this might prove the turning point he had been looking for.

When Yukizasa came calling, the Ichise parents greeted him at the door. “W-

welcome to our humble abode!” they exclaimed, unable to hide their excitement.

The servants were visibly nervous as well.

After all, the visitor belonged to the Sankourou clan. A man nominated by the current clan lord as heir. A distinguished individual.

It was hardly every day that someone of such rank dropped by the Ichise house. There was no higher honor.

The Ichise parents bowed and scraped to Yukizasa as they invited him in. The holier-than-thou attitude they took with Hana was nowhere to be seen.

Yukizasa was smiling as he was led through the halls, but anyone looking would have felt a shiver of fear.

They ended up in the sitting room, and the Ichise patriarch ordered everyone else to leave. Yukizasa had demanded that their conversation stay between them.

Hana’s father was so eager to do as he’d been bid that it made it easy to forget that the Ichises were part of the Ichinomiya clan, not the Sankourou.

The Ichise parents sat down across from Yukizasa.

Hana’s father hesitantly asked, “I have cleared the room... May I inquire as to what business brings you to our home?”

“I despise talking in circles, so I’ll get straight to the point,” Yukizasa said. “Haven’t you any desire to take back your daughter? To get revenge?”

“O-our daughter, you say?” Hana’s father asked. He hadn’t expected to hear such a suggestion and did not follow.

“Yes. The elder twin. The talented one. Hazuki, I believe her name is?”

“Yes, Hazuki is her name. How is it that you know of our daughter, Master Sankourou? In addition, what do you mean by ‘revenge’?”

“You know that the older twin was the top candidate to be the bride of the Ichinomiya clan lord, yes?” Yukizasa said.

“Excuse me?”

Hana's parents were shocked.

"You didn't know? She had the endorsement of Mio, Lord Ichinomiya's mother."

"We hadn't..."

"If all had gone accordingly, she would have married Lord Ichinomiya, and the Ichise family would have received great boons from the clan. What a shame," Yukizasa said. "If only the younger sister hadn't meddled and stolen the seat."

The corners of Yukizasa's lips drew upward in a sharp smile.

Hana's father didn't notice. He was trembling with rage. "That wench!" he cursed.

"Yes, her. If it weren't for her...", Yukizasa said wistfully.

"Yes. She ruined everything. If only that good-for-nothing hadn't been born. We should have thrown a pest like her into an orphanage a long time ago!" Hana's father slammed his fist down on the table.

"She's now living happily in the Ichinomiya residence, unconcerned about her parents' struggles."

"Damn it—..."

Imagining the picture of Hana's life Yukizasa had painted, Hana's father clenched his fist in frustration, so tightly it seemed like blood would come gushing out. The enormity of his rage was obvious to anyone watching.

"It's not too late," Yukizasa murmured, his words as sweet as honey. The Ichise parents looked at him. "If the older twin, Hazuki, returns to this family, all will be resolved, no?"

That was right. If only they had Hazuki...

Hana's mother grabbed hold of her husband, her eyes expectant. "Darling, Master Sankourou is correct. Lord Ichinomiya would surely prefer Hazuki to that disappointment."

"However, would we not incur Lord Ichinomiya's wrath by following through with this plan?"

A step before the precipice, and Hana's father was still hesitant.

Yukizasa gave him one last push. "What can you do for the sake of the Ichise name? Who is fit to lead this family? The answers are obvious, right?"

"Y-yes. It is as you say. I am the head of this family. I won't yield the position to anyone," Hana's father said.

"Exactly, darling!" Hana's mother cried.

"Let's fetch Hazuki back," he resolved. "I'm certain that two-bit wench, Hana, will interfere. What should we do...?"

"There's no need to worry. I will lend you my aid," Yukizasa said. From his words shined the light of hope.

"Thank you kindly, Master Sankourou!" Hana's father said.

"We will not forget this debt!" her mother added.

They bowed their heads low as if they were prostrating before him.

Yukizasa chuckled with delight.

The Ichise parents had leaped at the opportunity Yukizasa had presented them without wondering for a second why he was helping them.

They didn't know they were making a deal with the devil.

Chapter 4

Hana started going to and from school with Hazuki, since there was no guarantee that their parents wouldn't try to contact them again.

If they came for Hana, she would send them flying before they could say a word, but Hazuki wasn't one for violence. Therefore, staying together was the most reassuring option for them both.

Without fail, Nozomu would tag along as well. He had heard from his beloved brother that Hazuki might be hassled by their parents and was gung ho to help.

Considering Hana was the more powerful one, she had low expectations, but Nozomu did directly descend from the Ichinomiya bloodline when all was said and done. His birthright could provide a sturdy shield against their parents who folded easily in the face of social status.

"I'll protect you while I'm at it, since you're Saku's wife and all," Nozomu said to Hana bashfully.

He was definitely a softy beneath his bluff and bluster.

It was rare for him to act sweet toward her. She was amused, but since he was genuinely trying to help for once, she didn't try to tease him.

So far, they hadn't encountered any trouble. Perhaps they had Nozomu's overattentiveness to thank for that.

Yanagi had warned them that their parents were scheming something behind the scenes, so Hana had her guard up, but it might all have been a waste of effort.

That said, until they could be absolutely positive their parents had given up, they couldn't afford to relax.

Hana figured they should be safe on school grounds, but she still asked Kikyou and Kiriya for their cooperation.

“—Basically, our trash parents might be planning to trap Hazuki. I can’t be by her side since I’m in Class C, and Nozomu can’t cover for her all the time, right? That’s why I’m asking you two to keep an eye on her when you have time. Will you help?”

Hana told the twins about their toxic parents and explained the general situation. Kikyou responded to her request with frightening enthusiasm. “Understood. Your sister is my sister! It’s my job as your best friend to come running when you’re in a pinch!”

“That’s going a little too far...,” Hana said.

“I’ll rain punishment down on any pests that come buzzing! Think of me as a gigantic lifeboat. You can count on me, your BFF!”

Not only was Kikyou not listening to Hana, she was also hyperfixated on being Hana’s “best friend.”

Hana was suddenly worried about whether she could rely on the other girl at all.

Was this so-called lifeboat made of mud, or was she just imagining it?

“Please, Kiriya. Make sure Kikyou doesn’t run wild, and look out for Hazuki for me,” Hana said.

“Sure. Kikyou’s always like this. I’ll think of something. It’ll be okay. Don’t worry.” Kiriya gave her a thumbs-up while staying perfectly expressionless.

He and Kikyou might have been twins, but his words sounded much more trustworthy.

With Nozomu and the twins watching over Hazuki at school, Hana could relax and spend her time in Class C. The regular reports the twins texted her gave her further peace of mind.

Incidentally, unlike Kikyou’s impassioned reports, Kiriya’s were logical, easy to read, and explained the current situation. They were a lifesaver.

From Kikyou, she received nothing but emotional texts along the lines of,

“Hazuki’s followers were bad-mouthing you! How dare they insult my best friend,” and “Nozomu acts like a shy girl when he talks with Hazuki. It’s creepy.”

There was too much extraneous information. Hana only wanted news about Hazuki.

Her replies to Kikyō’s messages were perfunctory, but she read Kiriya’s carefully.

Previously, Hazuki had played the part of the perfect honor student. Now that she had dropped the act, the sycophants were keeping their distance. On the other hand, she was starting to make friends she could actually talk with.

Hana had given some thought to the problem of Hazuki’s followers, who did nothing but flatter her, so it was a blessing that they had distanced themselves of their own accord.

Nozomu was constantly attentive toward Hazuki and treated her kindly, so there were whispers that there was something going on between the two.

In any case, the two of them had been close from the start. There had always been rumors here and there that they were dating. They had merely increased.

It was a golden opportunity for Nozomu. Unfortunately for the poor boy, Hazuki had not even a flea-size inkling that he had feelings for her. Even Kiriya pitied him.

Nevertheless, Nozomu ardently protected Hazuki day after day. Such nobility could inspire one to shed a few tears, but for Hana’s part, she didn’t intend to help him one bit.

Hana kept up with Hazuki’s situation via the twins’ reports. Meanwhile, she was having a tough time of her own.

As a result of the assault on their school, their curriculum had changed, and Hana’s class bore the brunt of the changes.

The number of lecture-based classes had been reduced to the point where she no longer had the time to nap, and the number of practicals had increased.

Practicals were classes for practitioners.

The ones who had been most freaked-out by the incident were none other

than the teachers who were responsible for the students.

They were frenzied in their mission to teach the students to protect themselves, and their desperation influenced the classes. Every day, the students were subjected to such hot-blooded instruction.

Hana had already had more than enough, but to her consternation, her teachers, having found out about her powers, were determined to put her to use.

One time, the teacher had her erect a barrier, which her classmates all attacked at once.

Another time, they had a shikigami battle where it was Aoi versus everyone else.

So Hana was made to participate.

She felt taken advantage of to some extent, but when she saw the enthusiastic faces of her classmates, it was hard for her to say no.

At first, when the extent of her powers had been revealed to the public, there had been some who questioned why a master of two human shikigami was in Class C. However, that only lasted until she became infamous for failing her exams across the board. Afterward, the consensus became that, given her awful grades, her placement was understandable.

Magically powerful but intellectually weak. This was the scenario she had wanted to avoid the most.

The compassionate way Arashi—the softy—looked at her hurt. She would rather he have laughed at her outright.

She should have been happy to be accepted into the fold, but the day she had been told, *“Don’t be too hard on yourself,”* she had felt her eyes grow hot.

The busy days continued, until one day, a rumor swept through the school that a short-term instructor was going to come.

“Did you hear, Hana? About the new teacher?” Suzu asked Hana with interest.

“Yeah.”

“Apparently, they were hired for our sake.”

“I guess our class is even weaker than our teachers gave us credit for,” Hana joked.

They might have been vaguely aware of Class C’s incompetence, but now the reality they had been avoiding was staring them right in the face, especially given how little hands-on experience the class had.

The students’ performance was so atrocious that even their teachers were throwing in the towel.

That was where the short-term instructor came in.

“Apparently, they’re an active-duty practitioner, and an accomplished one at that,” Suzu said. “Do you think they could be an Obsidian-rank practitioner?”

“No way,” Hana said. “Obsidian practitioners are like protected species. That’s how rare they are, and therefore, they’re busy. They wouldn’t come just to teach washouts like us.”

She could say that with confidence because she knew how busy Saku was.

Admittedly, Saku also had his duties as the clan lord to contend with.

“I guess you’re right. I had my fingers crossed. That’s too bad,” Suzu said.

“You said ‘active-duty,’ but realistically, isn’t a third rank on the cusp of retirement the best we can expect?”

“That’s still amazing.”

Their teachers all belonged to the Association, too, but they were all first or second rank.

Low-ranking practitioners were rarely ever deployed to the front lines.

A third rank might not be the elite of the elite, but they would still have real experience fighting on the front lines. Their teachings would no doubt greatly impact the students’ growth.

After such a discussion, who should come but a practitioner newly promoted to the fifth rank, Yukizasa Sankourou.

“Hello. I’m Yukizasa Sankourou. I’ll be your instructor temporarily. It’s nice to

meet you all. I'm an Obsidian practitioner, though I achieved the rank only recently. I plan to very *nicely* and *thoroughly* work you to the bone, so be prepared."

Yukizasa introduced himself, oozing with an overconfidence that rivaled Saku's.

Hana was shocked by the turn of events.

What surprised her wasn't that their teacher came from the cream of the crop, but that it was someone she knew.

Hana was stunned into silence, but around her, her classmates were shrieking and clamoring.

They were abuzz over the fact that a fifth-rank practitioner had come and that they were going to be taught by him.

Not to mention that he was the successor to the Sankourou clan.

The triple whammy had the students whooping in joy.

"I can't believe it. This is awesome!"

"We're going to be taught by an Obsidian practitioner? Talk about extravagant."

"Not to mention that he's hot!"

"Do you think he has a girlfriend?"

But unlike her overjoyed classmates, Hana was in turmoil.

"Master, are you okay?" Azuha asked, her voice only audible to Hana in the din filling the classroom.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

The bruise Yukizasa had left on her had faded long ago.

However, that didn't mean that her anger was gone as well. Hana glowered at Yukizasa.

When break time rolled around, Kikyou came running to Class C. "Hana, are you all right?!" She was very worked up.

Kiriya trailed behind her, laid-back as always.

“I came here as fast as I could after hearing Yukizasa is the special instructor for your class! He hasn’t done anything to you, has he?!” Kikyou cried.

“I’m okay. He hasn’t tried anything,” Hana replied levelly in order to calm down her hysterical friend.

Kikyou knew that Yukizasa had hurt her last time and had wasted no time coming to check on Hana.

Kikyou’s fervor finally cooled. Kiriya, having arrived a second later, took his place beside her.

“Neither of you knew anything?” Hana asked.

“Not at all,” Kikyou replied. “The request probably went through the Association. Students like us who have no affiliation with the Association wouldn’t be told anything. Especially since we’re not from the same clan.

“Makes sense.”

“Anyway, it’s unprecedented for an Obsidian practitioner to be an instructor. Sure, he only passed his trial recently, but it’s amazing that the Association agreed to this. The same could be said of him taking on the assignment.”

“...Do you think he had another reason for coming?” Hana asked.

Considering the awful way they had met, she couldn’t help but be suspicious.

She hoped she was just reading too much into it, but her intuition said that he had an ulterior motive.

“I can go investigate, Master. What do you think?” Azuha suggested, fluttering in front of Hana.

Hana looked at her shikigami. That was certainly an option, but Yukizasa’s rough handling of Azuha was still fresh in her mind. She didn’t want Azuha anywhere near him.

“No. I’ll wait to see what he does. Thanks,” Hana said.

“Mmkay.” Azuha flew back to perch on Hana’s hair.

Hana had been wary of Yukizasa ever since her run-in with him and had been

taking precautions to avoid him.

Yukizasa looked the part of a regular ladies' man, and he looked pleased by the excited shrieks of the female students. The guys were watching him with an air of respect because of his rank, too.

To Hana, the smile that had been plastered on his face since the beginning seemed fishy for some reason. Was it because she remembered his icy gaze from their first meeting? The Yukizasa she knew was an entirely different person.

Yukizasa had been Saku's friend in the latter's days as a teenage rebel, but you wouldn't know from his appearance that he had a wild past. In addition, he treated Hana's classmates with kindness and courtesy.

However, because of the dark memory of their first encounter, Hana made sure that she never had to interact with him. Nonetheless, she couldn't run forever, and one day...

"Hana Ichise," Yukizasa called to her from behind.

Hana automatically grimaced. She adjusted her expression as she turned around.

He was wearing a shady smile.

Hana put everything she had into keeping her features still and placid. "Do you have business with me?"

"Your tone sounds barbed, or am I imagining it?"

"Who's to say?"

There was no way she could keep the venom completely out of her tone, but it was surprising that he had picked up on it.

She glared at him with eyes full of wariness.

"You don't have to be so cautious of me. I won't do anything," he said.

"You want me to believe you? After what you did when we first met? With no apology, either," she sneered viciously, making her distaste for him clear. She was still holding a grudge.

Yukizasa shrugged as if he couldn't be bothered. He squared himself to face Hana and bowed without any prelude. He apologized while Hana was in shock. "I was wrong. I'm sorry."

They were in the middle of the hallway. The students streaming past gawked at the spectacle.

The one bothered by the stares was Hana, who had demanded Yukizasa apologize in the first place.

"W-wait a second!" she stammered.

"I won't do it again. Please forgive me," he added without raising his head.

Hana was greatly agitated. "Stop it!"

"I will if you forgive me."

"I do. I forgive you!" she shouted, unable to bear the icy looks from onlookers.

Yukizasa straightened, a wide grin on his face. His expression was exactly the same as Saku's when he had fun at her expense.

Hana's eyes narrowed. "I think I understand why Saku used to get along with you."

"Hold up. It's not 'used to.' We still get along," Yukizasa retorted.

"If you say so. Hope it's not just your delusion," she said coldly. She turned to flee, but he grabbed her arm.

The way he had manhandled her last time was still fresh in her memories, and she shook off his hand violently. This time, he let go immediately, but that did not make her feel any better.

"Will you stop pawing me whenever you please? You already have a previous offense on your record."

Yukizasa raised his hands in surrender. "My bad," he apologized with a grimace.

He was acting sincere, but Hana was still watching him with suspicion.

He squirmed under her unflinching gaze.

“You’re acting like a completely different person. Did you eat something weird?”

“Saku tore me a new one after the last time I saw you. He told me not to mess with you again.”

“Oh, really? I’ll have to praise him when I see him at home.”

“You don’t understand. He was terrifying. My stomach still hurts from his punch.” He rubbed his abdomen gingerly.

Apparently, Saku had sucker punched him in the gut.

“You get what you deserve.” She snorted disparagingly.

“You have an awful personality.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m leagues better than some guy who would hurt a girl he just met. Be grateful I’m holding back from giving you another punch to the stomach while you’re still hurting.”

Hana made to leave again, but he blocked her way.

His repeated attempts to thwart her escape pissed her off, and she glared up at him in irritation. “What? What do you want?”

“I apologized, right? Make sure you report that to Saku.”

Her fed up gaze stabbed into him.

“I thought you actually felt bad for what you did to me, but it turns out, you’re just afraid of Saku. Pathetic.”

“He’s terrifying when he snaps, you know.”

“Who? Saku?” Hana tilted her head in puzzlement.

What was he talking about? She had never once felt scared of Saku. Yukizasa’s words were incomprehensible to her.

“Have you never seen him blow his top?”

“It’s a little different, but I’ve seen him angry before,” she said. “He’s so expressive, it’s a piece of cake to tell when he’s happy, sad, angry, what have you.”

“What?!” he burst out, shock painted across his features.

“What?” she asked.

“Full of expressions? Easy to read? Are you serious? Poker-faced robots like him are one in a million.”

“I should be the one asking if you’re serious. Poker-faced? That doesn’t describe Saku in the slightest. Who are you mistaking him for?”

“You’re—...” Yukizasa suddenly cut off and looked at Hana fixedly.

“What?” His eyes were boring holes into her, and she grew uncomfortable.

“Right, okay. I see. I get it.” He nodded to himself like he had figured something out and tousled her hair roughly.

“Hey!” she protested, brushing her hair back into place.

Their eyes met. His eyes were solemn.

“I can’t wait to see what you’ll do,” he said. His lips curved in a smile cold enough to give one chills.

Hana was startled by his sudden change in expression. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll understand soon enough.” He turned away. “Make sure you tell Saku I apologized,” he said and left.

She watched him walk away. *Maybe he’s not such a bad guy after all*, she thought, revising her opinion of him.

Perhaps she had been a little excessively cautious because they had gotten off to a bad start. He seemed to have reflected on his actions, too.

Hana decided there was no reason for her to purposefully avoid him anymore.

The thought that she would be betrayed didn’t cross her mind.



After school, Suzu was still in the classroom after everyone else had gone home because she had been asked to stay behind.

Across from her stood the person who had been animatedly chatting up Hana

earlier: Yukizasa.

“Um, I don’t understand. Why?” Suzu asked in consternation.

“You don’t need to know,” Yukizasa said. His frosty, cold gaze scared her. “Just do as I say and bring your best friend, Hana Ichise, to the abandoned factory north of the school.”

“Why do I have to take her there? Plus, the Association forbids entry to that place...,” she said timidly.

The words were hardly out of her mouth before a loud *crash* rang through the room. Yukizasa had kicked a desk and chair and sent them flying.

Suzu flinched at the noise.

Yukizasa’s smile was reflected in her pupils.

“The only answers you are permitted are *yes* and *of course*.”

The words were neither angry nor loud, but his quiet, threatening tone was terrifying.

Suzu looked as if she were ready to burst into tears. She clenched her shaking hands and said, “N-no way...” She forced the words out of her mouth, her voice a high and tight whisper.

But they were erased by Yukizasa’s menacing “What?!” He went on to say, “My bad. I didn’t hear you. Say that again?”

They were inches apart. There was no other sound in the classroom. There was no way he hadn’t heard, and yet he was asking her to repeat herself.

Pressured by his threat, Suzu bit her lip. Then, determined, she declared in a louder voice than before, “No way! I won’t bring Hana to such a dangerous place!”

She looked down at her feet, afraid of Yukizasa’s reaction. When she looked up again, she found his face, smooth and cold like ice, much closer than she had expected. She gulped.

“Who do you think you are, huh?” he growled.

“Uh...um...”

“Your family belongs under the Sankourou clan. You’re not going to listen to a request made by the next clan lord? You’re going to disobey me?”

Suzu was quaking. “I won’t do it... I don’t know what you’re planning to do to Hana, but I won’t put her at risk...”

“You’re picking your friend over your loyalty to the head family? That’s courageous, in a manner of speaking.”

“P-please excuse me!”

She couldn’t stay there.

Sensing the dangerous position she was in, she scrambled out of the classroom.

Suzu ran and ran and ran until she was finally away from the school grounds. She looked back to make sure Yukizasa hadn’t followed her and sighed in relief.

That was when...

“Are you Suzu Mitsui?”

She flinched in surprise and turned toward the voice to see a middle-aged man and woman she didn’t recognize. She looked at them suspiciously. “Who are you?”

“Oh, please don’t be so wary. We’re Hana and Hazuki’s parents,” the man said.

“Wh— Really?!” Turmoil warred with shock as she remembered her manners and bowed. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“No, no, there’s no need for all the formalities. We heard you’re friends with our daughters. You seem like a lovely girl.”

“Aw, shucks. I can’t believe Hana talks about me,” she said bashfully, not knowing that Hana was on bad terms with her parents.

Hana had thought there was no need to expressly tell Suzu about the nature of their relationship, so Suzu talked amicably with the Ichises under the assumption that they had a normal parent-child relationship.

“Actually, we have a favor to ask of you,” Hana’s father said.

“What is it? I’m happy to do anything I can to help,” Suzu said with a smile.

There was no way she was going to refuse a request by the parents of her cherished best friend. However, her smile soon turned into bewilderment.

“Can you contact Hazuki and ask her to come to the abandoned factory nearby?”

“Um, you said the factory...?”

Yukizasa’s face popped immediately into her head, and her smile disappeared—soon replaced by a confused expression.

“Yes. Right away. Can you do that?”

“I’m sorry. I...don’t know Hazuki’s number,” she lied. She had a feeling that she shouldn’t tell them.

The moment Suzu refused, Hana’s father clicked his tongue. Startled, she glanced at him. The warm smile he had been wearing a second ago was gone. Instead, he was glowering at her, his features twisted in irritation.

“In that case, I’ll give you her number. Can you call her?”

“Um...ah...”

If they know her contact information, why can’t they contact her themselves? she wondered.

They were her parents...

Suzu sensed danger, realized it would be best not to get involved, and slowly started to back away. “I’m sorry. I have somewhere to be, so please excuse me.”

I’ll have to contact Hana right away when I get home, Suzu thought and turned away. At that moment, her mouth was covered with a cloth.

She breathed in, and in the next second, she started feeling dizzy. The strength slowly drained from her limbs, and she collapsed to the ground.

“Hurry, dear,” Hana’s mother said.

“I know without you telling me!” Hana’s father snapped.

He lifted the unconscious Suzu and loaded her into the car. The two of them climbed in and drove off.

A distance away, Yukizasa had witnessed the entirety of the brief incident. He picked up the phone Suzu had dropped.

“...Christ. If she’d just cooperated, we wouldn’t have had to resort to violence,” he muttered.

With a snap of his fingers, he dispelled the concealment barrier that Suzu hadn’t noticed.

He tapped on Suzu’s phone to bring up her newly added contacts. She had exchanged numbers with Hazuki only recently, and Hazuki’s name was on the list.

Having found what he had been after, Yukizasa’s lips curved into a cruel smirk.



Nightfall. Hazuki had come to the abandoned factory.

She scrutinized the DO NOT ENTER sign in front of the roped-off grounds with anxiety and fear, but she pushed herself to step past the rope.

The door of the factory was rusty and hard to open. Hazuki threw her entire body into the door, and it slowly screeched open. She peeked inside before entering.

The building should have been abandoned long ago, but the lights were on.

Naked bulbs lit the interior.

Hazuki checked her phone again. The location of the factory was included in the text she had received from Suzu along with the message, “*Come alone if you want to save her.*” It was clear as day Suzu had gotten herself wrapped up in something.

Hazuki scanned her surroundings nervously, but Suzu was nowhere to be seen. Just as she was about to head deeper into the building to search, she

heard footsteps coming from within. She was instantly wary.

From the dark emerged...her parents and Yukizasa.

Hazuki's eyes widened, and she slowly backed away.

Seeing her, joy rose to her parents' faces.

"We've been waiting for you, Hazuki," her father said.

"We're so delighted to see you," her mother said.

".....me.....," Hazuki mumbled. She wasn't looking at her parents but at Yukizasa. Warily, she eased farther away from the trio.

Her parents watched her in confusion.

"What's wrong? Hurry up and come here," her father said.

"You must have been lonely not being able to see us. Everything's okay now. We know everything. You're not the type of child that would turn her back on her parents and leave home," her mother said.

"Hana led you astray, didn't she? That worthless whelp. She's a bad influence. Talentless. Useless. She's a piece of trash! The position next to the head of the clan belonged to you, but she swiped it from you. How could we have raised such a despicable child?"

There was no one to stop the stream of complaints pouring out of the Ichise parents' mouths.

"But it's all right now," her father said with a bright smile. "You might have gone down the wrong road, but you need only to turn back onto the right one. Knock down that good-for-nothing and become the clan lord's wife. That way, our family will be able to stand on top of the Ichinomiya branches. Master Sankourou is lending us his hand for that purpose."

Hazuki goggled at Yukizasa. He ignored her gaze and plastered an eerie smile on his face.

Her father walked up to her and said, "Come, we're going home."

He grabbed her arm...

"*We're* not going anywhere, you stupid piece of shit!" Hazuki shouted.

Profanities that were unexpected of her spewed from her mouth as she kicked her father in the gut.

“Ugackh!” he screamed, falling flat on his butt. “Ha-Hazuki...?”

Greater than the pain in his stomach was the shock from the fact that she had kicked him. He stared blankly up at her.

“Hazuki! How could you do that to your father?!” her mother berated her, rushing to her father’s side.

Hazuki sniffed as if she found her mother’s rebuke not worth her time.

Then a butterfly glowing in iridescent colors appeared out of nowhere and landed on Hazuki’s head.

Hazuki’s form flickered, and she turned into Hana in the blink of an eye. She looked down on her parents with scorn. “Sorry, I’m not Hazuki.”

“Wh—!” Her father gasped in shock. Her mother was speechless with surprise; her mouth flapped open and closed without any words coming out. “You wench! Why are you here?! Where’s Hazuki? Where is she?!”

Her father twisted his head to look around the space, but there were no signs of anyone besides Hana.

“She was never here in the first place. The one you’ve been talking to is me, cloaked by Azuha’s illusion to look like Hazuki, you idiot.”

Her parents had been fooled completely, not having the faintest suspicion that something had been off.

Hana wanted to bask in the moment and roar with contemptuous laughter, but...

Her eyes flicked over to Yukizasa.

Judging by his utter lack of surprise, he had noticed from the beginning that she wasn’t the real Hazuki. She hadn’t expected in the first place to trick an Obsidian practitioner like him, so that wasn’t a problem.

Granted, his presence in and of itself was a *huge* problem.

She hadn’t thought he would come, too, so she had been quite surprised.

“What happened to Hazuki?!” Hana’s father demanded.

“She’s in the Ichinomiya residence, house-sitting. After she received the upsetting text from Suzu’s phone, she was going to come here alone, but her shikigami realized her plan and came to talk with me. Then it all became clear. There was no way I was going to let Hazuki go by herself to a place where some sketchy guy who sent that sketchy message could be waiting.”

Hana had given Hiragi, Hazuki’s shikigami, two big thumbs-up for his good work. Hiragi had returned the gesture. He had been scolded by Hazuki for spilling the beans, but he was on the same page as Hana with not wanting to expose his master to danger.

Hazuki, on the other hand, was scolded by Hana.

Even kids these days knew not to follow a stranger, not even for candy, so why was Hazuki going to obediently do what she was told?

It was an option to ignore the message, which reeked of bad news, but the catch was that it had been sent from Suzu’s phone.

Hana had tried calling, but Suzu hadn’t picked up, of course. If Suzu was really in danger, she couldn’t ignore it. She had immediately tried asking Saku for help, too, but for some reason, his phone had been shut off, and the call hadn’t been able to connect.

Without any other recourse, she had decided to check out the factory herself, but the problem there had been Hazuki, who had argued that the message had been sent to her so she should be the one to go. She wouldn’t listen to Hana at all.

However, the sender’s goal was to lure out Hazuki. Therefore, it was too risky to send Hazuki.

Before Hazuki had been able to fly out the door, Hana had trapped her in a barrier, borrowed Azuha’s illusory powers to look more like her sister, and come to the factory herself.

Which led to the present moment.

Thank goodness Hana had found out beforehand. It would have been too

dangerous for Hazuki to come alone.

She had known there was a possibility, but to think that their parents had actually been lying in wait.

When she got home, she would have to thank Hiragi again for his distinguished service in preventing Hazuki from running wild.

Plus, she would need to lecture Hazuki more about the importance of staying alert.

It was incredible that a naive lamb like her had gone so long without being deceived.

She was the polar opposite of Hana and her crooked personality.

Hana's rule was to doubt first. That way, everything would go exactly the way she expected.

Hana glared at her parents. "You're still planning to take advantage of Hazuki?"

The two had regained their will to fight and were back to making a fuss.

"Why did you come here?! We didn't call for you!" Hana's father yelled.

"Bring Hazuki here!" her mother added.

"'Yes, of course, my lady.' Did you think that's what I would say? There's no way I'd bring her. Are you stupid?" Hana sneered. "Oh wait. That's right, you are. Otherwise, you wouldn't dream of kidnapping Hazuki, who's officially a ward of the Ichinomiya clan lord." She snorted derisively, which had the effect of making her parents' faces turn an interesting shade of crimson.

"How long are you going to be a pain in our side, you failure?! Who do you think raised you?!" her father shouted.

"Not you. I know that much."

Hana had been raised by Sae and the kind servants in the Ichise house. If they hadn't been around, she would have never been free from her inferiority complex and would have lived a lackluster life. Repairing bridges with Hazuki would have been out of the question. Their relationship would have stayed

broken and faded into nothing.

But the reason behind all of that was these parents of theirs.

“I’ll do you a favor and leave if you promise never to come near Hazuki again,” Hana said.

“Don’t joke around. We’re her parents!”

To tell the truth, Hana had not even a molecule of intent to withdraw. They had responded as she had predicted, but having to confront them in person, she couldn’t help but be irritated.

“Master, is it time?” Hana heard a voice say.

Miyabi was by her side, invisible. She could sense that the shikigami had lifted the giant squeaky hammer and was just waiting for the go sign. She grinned unconsciously.

Hana’s father, who hadn’t realized Miyabi was there, thought she was making fun of him.

Well, he wasn’t exactly wrong, so that wasn’t an issue.

“What’s with that disgusting smile?! Call Hazuki here already!” he demanded, spittle flying everywhere. “Hurry up and move out of the way so your sister can become the lady of the clan. Then everything will be as it should. Don’t you know that you’re not suitable to sit next to Lord Ichinomiya?!”

Did he really think that Hana would do as he said? If so, she would have to get him hospitalized.

“I regret to inform you that Saku has absolutely no desire to leave me,” Hana said.

“There’s no way that’s true. Between you and Hazuki, it’s clear as day who is more suitable to be his wife.”

And as a result, Saku had chosen Hana. Where had her father gotten the misunderstanding that Saku would take that decision back?

They had even thrown a lavish wedding. Her parents had been present, so they should be well aware of Saku’s feelings.

“Haaah...” Hana heaved a deep sigh. It was too tiresome to deal with them.

It didn't matter what she said. She couldn't have a proper conversation with them; from the start, they'd had no interest in listening to her. They would believe what they wanted to and ignore everything they didn't want to hear.

It was impossible for Hazuki to be chosen as Saku's wife at this stage.

“What a pain,” Hana said.

She had made the right decision leaving Hazuki behind. Up until now, her sister had been wrapped up in their parents' affairs and tossed around for their benefit. Hana would have felt sorry to make Hazuki listen to their parents' bad joke.

“If you want glory for the Ichise family so badly, why don't you do something about it yourself without relying on others?” she sneered. “Oh, but I guess that's asking too much. Your shikigami is an insect, after all.” She smirked meaningfully. Her father felt fear for the first time. “A dragonfly, was it? You belittled me to your heart's content for having a butterfly, but yours is just a bug, too. You're in no position to talk smack about others...and yet.”

Azuha might have been an insect, but that didn't change how important she was to Hana. Hana couldn't care less what others thought. However, her father was different.

True to character, he was trembling with shame. Her attack had been an even more effective blow than she had expected.

“H-how do you know that...?” he demanded.

“My esteemed older brother told me.”

“Th-that bastard...” Even his voice was shaking. He tamped down on his fury.

To Hana's father, the fact that he had an insect shikigami was a huge disgrace. Never mind that it wasn't anything to be ashamed of.

“You're pathetic,” Hana spat.

“What do you know?! I was born as the successor, but my shikigami made me a target of ridicule. My father despaired of me, and my own son threatened my position. All because my shikigami is an insect! Can there be anything more

idiotic? Shikigami are hardly a complete indicator of one's ability. Yet everyone and their mother treated me like I was nothing!"

"That's why you demeaned me for having an insect shikigami just like you and applauded Hazuki for her human shikigami? But you see, Hazuki isn't a tool for your convenience. She's a living, breathing person with a beating heart. Her life is hers alone. Not yours."

"Then what am I supposed to do?! I need Hazuki to show that I'm powerful. I'm the parent of a genius with a human shikigami. I couldn't possibly be powerless. Isn't that right?"

His selfishness knew no bounds.

He wasn't thinking of his children nor the Ichise family, but about himself.

He needed to be acknowledged. That was the only thing he was working for.

"You're not going to listen, no matter what I say... I see..."

This wasn't the time to be depressed. But Hana couldn't deny that a gloom had stolen over her.

She realized that this man would never change.

Anything anyone said to him would be meaningless.

Hana looked at her mother for the first time, the woman who never lifted a hand to stop her husband, who conformed to him. Even now, she was standing behind him, watching him with searching eyes. She might have had a will of her own, but Hana felt that she was merely drifting through life, swept along by the current. There was no doubt that nothing Hana said would change her mother, either.

A feeling similar to despair welled up inside Hana.

"You should trust yourself more," she said to her father. "There's nothing wrong with a dragonfly. I have never felt ashamed of Azuha. Stop comparing yourself to others and do the best you can with all your power. Your position was threatened? So what? A trifle like that? Just pass it on. Aren't there more important things than a little title?"

Something absolutely irreplaceable.

However, Hana's feelings didn't get through to her father.

"A child shouldn't put on airs! You know nothing! The head of the Ichise family is me. I won't give up this seat to anyone. It's mine!" he shouted with bloodshot eyes. He refused to listen to a word.

Hana took a deep breath. She turned away from her father to face Yukizasa. "Where's Suzu? I won't forgive you if you did anything to her."

"There seems to be a misunderstanding. The ones who kidnapped that girl were your parents," Yukizasa said.

Her gaze flicked over to her parents before returning to Yukizasa. "But you can't tell me you're uninvolved. They said it before: You're helping them."

She had just begun thinking he might actually be a good person. This was a horrible betrayal.

For him to lay a hand on Suzu of all people, she could only assume that he wanted to piss her off.

"What business do you have with Hazuki?" she demanded.

"...I don't have any interest in Hazuki Ichise. The one I wanted brought here wasn't your older sister, but you, Hana Ichise." He chuckled darkly under his breath, staring at Hana with amusement in his eyes.

Hana was already married to Saku, so she was already an Ichinomiya. Had "*Ichise*" been a slip of the tongue, or had he said it on purpose?

Her brows furrowed in puzzlement. "Me?"

"I wasn't confident I could lure you out with your best friend alone, but if I used your twin as bait, I was sure you would come running. I hadn't expected you to come pretending to be your sister, but you were my goal from the start, so I was delighted that you saved me the effort."

Hana didn't understand what he was thinking at all.

"What are you planning? You went as far as to take Suzu just to bring me to this factory. Is she safe?!"

"Could be. Who knows?" He smiled eerily.

She mustered her courage to confront him, but inside, she was panicking.

Since Hazuki had been the target of the summons, Hana had suspected their parents were the ones pulling the strings. She hadn't bargained that Yukizasa would be with them.

She had dropped her guard after his apology. That was her mistake.

It didn't pay to be trusting of others.

Hana had figured she would be able to take down her parents one way or another, so she had left Arashi behind as Hazuki's bodyguard.

However, with an Obsidian practitioner as her opponent, how long would she be able to hold her own? Without knowing the full extent of Yukizasa's abilities, she couldn't say.

On top of that, there was something about this place that had been bothering her the entire time.

She'd heard that the Association had declared it off-limits, but she didn't know why.

Nonetheless, she'd had an ominous feeling for a while now.

The alarm bells were going off in her head telling her to get out of there as soon as possible.

"Sorry, but I have no time to waste. I'm going to pound you into dust now," Hana declared. "Aoi. Miyabi."

The two shikigami manifested themselves at Hana's summons. They were both raring to go, their weapons drawn. Aoi had his great sword and Miyabi her giant squeaky hammer.

Yukizasa's expression didn't change one bit seeing the two human shikigami as if to say he was confident he could take them down.

Hana felt a twinge of irritation at being looked down upon.

"It's not too late to retreat. I'll permit it. How about it?" She laughed boldly.

Even though Yukizasa's Obsidian rank was newly minted, Hana was sweating inside at the prospect of facing an Obsidian practitioner. However, she didn't let

an ounce of her fear show on the outside. Her pride wouldn't allow her to look weak in front of someone who was conspiring with her parents and their cowardly schemes.

"What...what is that? Human...shikigami? Are they Hana's? But her shikigami is a butterfly. And there's two of them. Impossible..." her father muttered in a daze.

How must he feel knowing that Hana, who he had denounced as worthless, had obtained human shikigami, which not even the talented Yanagi had. She wanted to interrogate him, but she had no time to waste on small fry at the moment.

"Where's Suzu? Spit it out," Hana demanded.

If her parents were behind the kidnapping, all she had to do was beat the answer out of them, but there was no guarantee Yukizasa would wait quietly in the meantime.

She had to deal with him somehow...

While Hana was thinking about what to do, Yukizasa abruptly took out his phone. He held out his screen, which showed an ongoing call, and smirked. "I'm connected with a buddy of mine who's with your friend. The moment you lay a hand on me, I'll give him the signal. What do you think would happen to your friend then? Want to find out?"

His flamboyant provocation had Hana grinding her teeth.

"Aoi, Miyabi, wait," she ordered.

She couldn't afford to make any bad moves. Her hands were tied.

Suddenly, loud clangs of something breaking rang through the building, and the structure trembled.

"Wh-what?" Hana said.

"Aha. Looks like it's time for our star to make its appearance," Yukizasa said. Unlike Hana, he was perfectly calm. He turned away from Hana and started walking toward the entrance.

"Wait!" she cried.

She scrambled after him, but before she could reach him, the door slammed shut. She tried to open it, but it was being held shut from the other side. Knowing it was useless, she banged on the door and shouted, “Open the door!”

In the next moment, a powerful barrier was thrown up around the entire factory. It was no exaggeration to say that it was the strongest one she had ever seen, and even when she threw her power against it, it didn’t so much as shudder.

“What? What’s going on?”

She didn’t have a clue what was happening.

From the other side of the door came Yukizasa’s voice. “Just now, multiple Sankourou practitioners erected this barrier.”

She recalled Hazuki saying that the Sankourous were defense specialists. Of the five clans, they could produce the most durable barriers. Hana had no hope against a barrier constructed with the combined power of several Sankourou practitioners.

“You plan to trap me here? What are you trying to do?!” Hana yelled. She didn’t understand what he was thinking.

“I left a present for you. Please accept it.”

“Say what?! A present? Now I’m even more lost,” she shouted, but she received no response.

Confined in the barrier, Hana was at a loss for what to do.

“Master,” Miyabi said, her brows drawn worriedly.

Aoi was wearing the same expression. “Master.”

But Hana was in the same predicament.

She tried kicking the door one more time, but because of the barrier, it stayed shut.

In the meantime, the ominous feeling she had was growing steadily stronger.

Then the sound of glass shattering reverberated through the space, and she was assaulted with a malignant force that brought goose bumps to her skin.

“Eek!” her mother shrieked.

“Wh-what was that?” her father asked nervously.

Among practitioners, her parents were weak and their senses dull. Even so, they could still sense the presence of the powerful shade.

Hana’s gaze sharpened. “The bad feeling I’ve had all this time was from a shade?”

It was coming from deeper in the factory than where Hana and the others were.

The sound of something dragging along the floor grew closer and louder.

“Something’s coming from inside,” she declared.

Aoi and Miyabi raised their weapons.

It was strong, the deadliest out of all the shades she had ever encountered.

The pressure it was exerting made her skin prickle, and she found herself sweating bullets.

It appeared out of nowhere.

It lashed out from the depths of the building and attacked them with shocking speed.

Hana immediately yelled, “Expand!” and erected a barrier around herself, but the shade was sure to break through it easily.

The barrier had been created reflexively, so it wasn’t the most durable, but it served the purpose of stopping the shade’s attack.

Hana’s parents, on the other hand, hadn’t managed to create a barrier and were snatched up by the grasping presence and thrown toward the ceiling.

“Gwahhh!”

“Eeek!”

Hana clicked her tongue instinctively.

She had her hands full protecting herself and her shikigami. She hadn’t had the time to throw a barrier around her parents, standing apart from her as they

had been.

It would have been convenient if they could by themselves, but all they were managing to do was scream.

“H-help! Master Sankourou! Where did he go?!” Hana’s father yelled.

“Hurry up and do something!” her mother cried.

Aoi glowered at Hana’s so-called parents, who were failing to do anything but make a racket, and said, “Master, can’t we just leave them for dead?”

“Aoi is right. Trash is meant to be thrown out,” Miyabi said, denouncing the two of them as the garbage that they were.

The same thought had flashed through Hana’s mind, but she caught herself just in time. “No, nuh-uh, that’s out of the question.”

As far as Hana was concerned, they were getting their just deserts, but they were still human beings, and she couldn’t abandon them.

She wouldn’t be able to sleep if she let them become shade kibble.

“Really? You’re gonna help them?” Aoi whined.

“Don’t complain. Sure, them kicking the bucket here would solve a lot of problems, but I have no choice.”

Aoi looked displeased, but he agreed and said, “Fine.”

“I suppose it can’t be helped,” Miyabi said. “However, if I mistakenly attack them instead of the shade, it’ll be nothing more than an accident, right?” A dark but delighted smile rose to her face, and she raised the hammer.

Aoi smirked, approving of Miyabi’s strategy. The expressions of the two shikigami became positively malicious.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho,” Miyabi chuckled.

Aoi joined in. “Heh-heh-heh.”

It seemed to Hana that their original goal had changed, but if they were still able to destroy the shade as a result, there was no issue.

“I’m pumped. Let’s go, Miyabi,” Aoi said.

“Let’s,” Miyabi agreed. “Make sure you take good aim at the target, Aoi. *Very* good aim.”

“Obviously.”

They charged. From their gleeful expressions, one wouldn’t think they were heading into battle.

Hana watched over them with fond exasperation and turned to head deeper into the factory to seek out their enemy who had yet to show its true form.

“Oh, dear! I made a mistake,” Miyabi said.

“Gwahh! That’s my leg,” Hana’s mother screamed.

“Whoops. My hand slipped,” Aoi said.

“Eeyahh,” her father groaned.

From behind her came her parents’ shrieks of pain and Aoi’s and Miyabi’s accidentally on-purpose exclamations, but she paid them no mind. She didn’t have the time.

She casually dodged incoming blows from her attacker as she followed the reaching limb back to its source. She arrived in an inner room to find a fat, bulging shade.

“Ugh, gross.”

Of all the shades she had encountered before, this one was particularly repulsive. Its distended body filled the entire room. It was so massive, it couldn’t leave. It was trying to pry its way out using the limbs extending out from its body.

Hana cast her eyes down toward the floor. Lying on the ground was the same rope that had been strung on the outside of the factory grounds, only this one was in pieces.

She hadn’t noticed when she had first come, but looking at the rope closely, she could sense the faint trace of a practitioner’s power.

“I see. This rope was used as a medium to maintain the barrier,” Hana mumbled to herself.

She now understood why the Association had forbidden entry to the factory. Most likely, this shade had been sealed here, and the earsplitting noise from earlier was from the shade destroying the barrier.

“Why did they seal away a monster instead of killing it outright?”

The seal had been broken. Had Yukizasa known?

Why had he left without destroying it? Not just that, he escaped first and trapped Hana and the others.

“Hmmm. I still don’t get the reason.”

She didn’t understand what his goal was.

“Wait, is Suzu safe?”

The factory wasn’t very large. There were no signs of other people, so Suzu was definitely not inside the building.

Hana was relieved but also worried about Suzu’s safety.

“There’s too much I don’t know. But first, I suppose I have to take care of this fatty...”

She had left Saku a voicemail saying she was coming to the factory. How long would it take him to notice and come help?

Before then, she would just have to do what she could.

“Expand.”

The energy she felt from the sickening shade was so powerful it gave her goose bumps.

Knowing she couldn’t afford to hold back, she constructed a heavy-duty barrier. It sealed shut with a quiet, high-pitched *ting*.

All that was left was to crush it.

“Eli—”

But before she could finish, the shade lashed out and smashed the barrier in an instant.

“You’re kidding!!!” Hana cried, gaping at the shade.

She rapidly retreated, dodging its grasping tendrils by a hair's breadth. Occupied with trying to evade the shade's attacks, she had no chance to retaliate.

"Aoi! Miyabi!" she screamed.

After a moment, Aoi came running. "Master, are you okay?"

"Where's Miyabi?" Hana said.

"The situation over there is pretty dire. She has the dead weight to look after, and the limbs have multiplied, too. I managed to get away to help," he explained. "This SOB's limbs split every time you cut one down. We have to hurry. Miyabi won't be able to protect her cargo for much longer."

"Shit. Impudent bastard."

She concentrated her power in the palm of her hand and hurled it at the shade.

The ball of energy exploded with a bang as if it were a bomb and tore at the shade from its center.

"Score!" Hana was elated her attack had been effective, but not a second later, the shade's injuries started healing with unbelievable speed. "Damn. Its regenerative abilities are crazy."

However, possibly because it was exhausting its energy healing, it had shrunk slightly.

Hana saw a spark of hope. She threw another energy bomb at the shade, then started pelting it before it could recover.

"Aoi, I'm going to bombard this guy with all I have. In the meantime, keep those limbs away from me," she ordered.

"Got it. Brute force. Master's specialty," Aoi said.

"Don't make it seem like I'm a muscle head!"

He had hit a sore spot. At school, she was ridiculed for being magically strong but intellectually weak.

"Take this! And this! And some of this!" Hana screamed.

Somewhat desperately, she continued to assault the shade with her powers, and it continued to shrink smaller and smaller.

“Yes!”

She kept up her attacks, confident that things would work out at her current pace, when all of a sudden, a slew of limbs sprouted from the shade in a last-ditch effort at resistance.

“Eww! That’s disgusting…”

The shade concentrated its attacks on Hana as if it knew that she was doing it harm.

The one who panicked at the situation was Aoi, who was protecting Hana. “W-wait a sec. This is too much even for me!”

“My hands are tied here so figure it out!” she yelled.

“No, no, no, no, no. This is literally insane! Big Sis! Can’t you do something?” he cried, begging Azuha for help.

The butterfly was batting away lashing limbs and simply replied, “Nope.”

“You gotta be kidding me.”

Alarm colored his features. It was obvious that he was at his wit’s end, too.

“Azuha has been using her powers to enthrall it this entire time, but it seems that it’s a bad matchup for her,” Hana explained. “Just a little longer. Don’t give up, Aoi.”

Hana had no time to rest. Attacking the shade took everything she had.

But then, she was struck by a tendril that had evaded Aoi’s guard.

“Shi—!”

Hana flew through the air and slammed into the wall, momentarily stealing the breath from her lungs. Excruciating pain shot through her back, but she had no time to waste on her injuries.

“One last push. Eat this!” she cried, throwing all the rest of her energy at the shade as hard as she could.

The shade had already sustained a lot of damage. Its limbs whipped through the air, but its body collapsed in on itself, shrinking until it disappeared entirely.

Silence reigned over the factory.

Hana let out a deep sigh, reassured that the shade had been destroyed. "Haaah... It's over."

Aoi ran over, worried about Hana after seeing her get hit. "Master, are you okay?!"

Azuha was similarly concerned and fluttered to Hana. "Master."

That was when Tsubaki appeared out of nowhere. "My darling," she cooed, embracing Aoi from behind.

"Gwahhhh! Where the hell did you come from?" Aoi cried.

"I'm hurt. Wherever my darling is, that's where I am!"

"Don't be!"

The tension was blown clean away with Tsubaki's appearance.

Hana watched Aoi and Tsubaki with an air of resignation. They were still making a ruckus when Miyabi came to join them from the room at the factory entrance. She looked worriedly at Hana, who was slumped against the wall, unable to move.

Miyabi went to Hana's side. "Are you all right, Master?!"

"I'm fine. I'm fine." She put on a tough face so as not to worry Miyabi further, but her back hurt so badly she was finding it hard to stand up. "If Tsubaki is here, the barrier must have been broken."

"It appears so," Miyabi said. "Lord Ichinomiya and your elder brother came inside together earlier."

"Then I guess I should go. Sorry, Miyabi, but can you lend me your shoulder?"

"Didn't you say a second ago you're fine? Are your injuries so severe that you can't walk without support?"

"Ah-ha-ha..." Hana laughed to avoid the question.

Miyabi exploded. "This is no laughing matter! Please rest here."

"I'm sorry, really," she said, "but I have to go. There are my parents to deal with, too."

Miyabi, who always prioritized Hana, seemed displeased, but Hana knew that the shikigami would do as she said.

Miyabi glared at Aoi, who was being grossly lovey-dovey with Tsubaki, and smacked the other shikigami with her squeaky hammer. With her masterful control, she hit him on the head, and Aoi finally turned his attention their way.

"Aoi, save the flirting for later and come carry our Master."

"I'm not flirting! ...Hold on, are you okay, Master?!"

"She's not. That's why I'm asking you for help," Miyabi snapped. "I don't want her pushing herself, so hurry up and get over here."

"R-right."

"Aww, boo. I'm so jelly! I want my darling to sweep me up in his arms." Tsubaki watched Hana with envy in her eyes, biting on her thumbnail in frustration. Of course, she couldn't go as far as to tell him to put down an injured person, lest she wanted to be treated to a death glare from Miyabi.

Hana was carried by Aoi back to the room where her parents were. The two were sitting on the ground, their faces pale. Looming above them were Saku and Yanagi, who were glowering at them frostily.

Intimidated by the two men, her parents were finally silent, lucky to be alive.

"Saku," Hana called.

The group turned her way.

Saku's eyes widened seeing her in Aoi's arms. "What happened?"

"Just got bruised a little in a scrap with a shade," she said flippantly. "More importantly, why didn't you pick up? You're late."

"Ah, sorry about that." He averted his gaze guiltily. "Did you take down the shade that was here?"

"Yeah. Why was something so disgusting left sitting under a seal? Wait!" She

turned to her father. "Suzu! Where is she, shitty old man?!"

She struggled in Aoi's arms. He did his best not to drop her.

"Calm down," Saku said in an attempt to soothe Hana, who looked like she was about to leap at her father's throat. "Your friend is safe. She's under our protection."

"Good." Her face finally went slack with relief.

Saku took up a stance in front of her parents again and glared down at them.

Her parents couldn't muster the energy to stand, pinned as they were by his stern gaze. Those were the eyes of the Ichinomiya clan lord, not Saku. He had never subjected Hana to this side of him.

"You have caused a lot of trouble this time."

"Lord Ichinomiya... W-we just...," Hana's father stuttered.

"I don't need your excuses. You kidnapped the daughter of a Sankourou branch family. Do you understand what a grave matter this is? One misstep, and you could have ignited a dispute between our clans."

"It was all for Hazuki's sake."

"Shut up."

Her father went white at the sharp rebuke and closed his mouth.

It was refreshing to see him scolded by Saku, who was young enough to be his son.

Her parents had always had an endless supply of abuse for her, but they were as well-behaved as a trained pup with Saku. If only they had been obedient from the beginning.

"I lowered my head to the Sankourou family myself to ask for forgiveness. I, your lord, had to prostrate myself because of *you*. I won't let you plead ignorance as to how big of a disgrace that is for the clan."

"We...ah..." Her father had broken out in a cold sweat.

Her mother couldn't say anything, either. She was staring hard at the ground.

“I cannot face the Sankourou clan without dealing you a punishment appropriate for your role as perpetrators of an incident that could have led to an interclan dispute. You will yield the head of the family position to Yanagi and retire, effective immediately.”

“No!” Her father gasped, his face twisted in misery. He looked as if he had just been handed a death sentence.

Hana watched him with cold eyes.

To be blunt, he had made his bed.

“What? Are you unhappy? Do you think you have the right to complain after what you did? Have you no shame?” Saku yelled.

Raked over the coals by Saku, Hana’s parents shrunk in on themselves, trembling.

“I am not giving you a choice. It is useless to protest. As the lord of the Ichinomiya clan, I hereby declare that Yanagi Ichise is now the head of the Ichise family!” Saku said. “Yanagi, I trust you are okay with that?”

Yanagi kneeled in front of Saku and bowed deeply. “I understand, my lord. I am terribly sorry for the trouble that my blood relations have caused.”

“Send your parents to the countryside at once.”

“As you say. I thank you for your benevolence.”

In other words, he was only making them retire from the public eye. They wouldn’t be punished conspicuously.

They sure were getting off easy considering they had kidnapped someone.

Hana would rather the police step in and lock them in jail, but the Ichinomiyas would end up targeted by the other clans for inadequate management. Saku kowtowing to the Sankourou clan for their pardon would end up all for naught.

In addition, to ensure that Yanagi could smoothly succeed the position of family head, his blood relations couldn’t be marked as criminals. Hana was an Ichise by blood as well, so Saku likely didn’t want to blow up the incident.

At least what had needed to be done was done.

Yanagi led their depressed parents out of the building.

Hana finally let herself relax, believing that it was all over, when all of a sudden, the sound of clapping rang out through the space.

“Wow, all’s well that ends well. Congratulations are in order.”

The interloper was her parents’ coconspirator, Yukizasa. He approached the group, his lips curled in a shady smile.

Hana didn’t hesitate before focusing her energy and chucking it at him. She didn’t hold anything back.

Yukizasa’s cheek spasmed. “Wait a sec.”

“Why should I, you creep?!” She whaled on him, forgetting about the pain in her back.

Flustered, Yukizasa looked at Saku for help. “Yo, Saku! Do something about your woman.”

Saku shrugged tiredly and stayed Hana’s hand. “Calm down, Hana.”

“How do you suggest I do that?! Why are you stopping me? Isn’t he the root of all the evils?!” She hadn’t forgotten that he had been in on her parents’ scheme.

“That was all a cover.”

Hana stopped in her tracks, failing to understand what he was saying. “...Excuse me?”

“I asked for his help to force your parents from their position.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“I’ll explain. You remember when Yanagi warned you that your parents could be cooking up something unpleasant?”

“Yeah...”

“Once in a while, minor irritations grow out of proportion, so I wanted to have control over the chain of events. That was why I had Yukizasa make contact with your parents, pretend to be their ally, and report to me about their plans.”

Hana's jaw dropped. She slowly turned to face Yukizasa.

He gave her a glowing smile and two thumbs-up. "That's the gist!"

"What about Suzu?" Hana demanded.

"Your little friend? The one who suggested using her as bait to bring the two of you twins here was me. Saku said he needed a reason to kick out your parents, so I gave him one. Messing with a kid whose family belonged to another clan is plenty of reason, don't you think?"

"Saku said he prostrated himself to the Sankourou clan..."

"I mean, technically, he did to me. His head dipped a whole inch."

Hana's eyes glazed over as he talked.

"I sent one of my people to collect her right away. By this time, she should be home already."

"What about the shade?"

"Oh, that was a job the Association asked me to do, but I had my hands full with your parents and didn't have the time to deal with it. The Association asked Saku for a substitute, and he volunteered you."

Hana gave Saku the stink eye. He avoided her gaze.

"For my part, I wanted to know how strong Saku's woman is, so it was a win-win situation," Yukizasa went on to say. "It's amazing you took down that shade in such a short time. Ah-ha-ha." He laughed without any trace of ill will.

However, having been wrapped up in another annoying scheme against her will, Hana wasn't laughing.

"...Aoi, let me down," she said in a low voice that shook with rage.

Aoi hesitantly did as she bid.

Hana moved in front of Yukizasa, who was still laughing away without a care, and thrust her hand into the air. "Eat this, you damn rich kid!"

Her vicious blow slammed into him. "Gak!" He squatted down in pain.

Hana gazed down her nose at him and snorted.



It was the day after Hana's first encounter with Yukizasa.

That day, Yukizasa had agreed to the short-term instructor job. When he returned to his temporary residence, the servants ushered him inside in a panic.

"Master Sankourou, Lord Ichinomiya is here to see you!"

"Is that so?"

As I expected, he thought, grimacing like he had just bitten into a lemon. He figured the other man had come to complain about the fact that Yukizasa had reached out to his wife.

But Yukizasa didn't see what the problem was.

The Saku he knew kept a cool head and never got serious no matter who his partner was.

Yukizasa was confident that the only reason Saku had chosen Hana Ichise was to complete the barrier around the pillar.

He had heard that the older sister, Hazuki, was the stronger one of the two, but he had realized the truth immediately after meeting Hana: the younger twin was leagues more powerful.

He had always assumed insect shikigami were weak, but Hana's butterfly shikigami was strong enough to completely bust up what he had thought was common sense.

The girl appeared to be hiding her powers, but she was clearly a force to be reckoned with. Yukizasa was impressed Saku had managed to dig up such a strong candidate to be his bride, a true gem whom Yukizasa would have considered marrying had he found her first.

At the time, he had thought Saku, like him, would pick a lady of the clan solely based on power, with no consideration for love or such rot.

The barrier masters who protected the pillars had to give up on various things for the sake of the country.

Even if that weren't the case, there was a part of Yukizasa that was frigid

toward women. He and Saku shared that in common.

He felt sorry for Hana being forced into her position, but she was a necessary sacrifice for the country.

Such were Yukizasa's thoughts as he went to meet Saku in the reception room.

When he entered, Saku was waiting for him with displeasure written across his face.

Saku grabbed Yukizasa by the collar and sucker punched him in the gut without so much as a "How do you do?"

"Ugh!"

With zero concern for Yukizasa, whose thoughts had been short-circuited by the pain, Saku twisted his fist and drove it deeper into Yukizasa's stomach.

Unable to bear the pain, Yukizasa sunk to his knees, clutching his abdomen. Saku looked down at him with frosty eyes.

"That hurts like a bitch. You bastard," Yukizasa groused, breathing heavily. "What did you do that for, Saku?"

Saku's leg moved.

Yukizasa immediately leaped out of the way and managed to avoid the blow, but had he not, he would've been kicked mercilessly as if he were a ball. There was a hole gaping open in the paper sliding door, which had taken the hit in Yukizasa's stead. The merciless attack proved that Saku was dead serious.

Yukizasa broke out in a cold sweat. "Hold on, man. That's not funny."

"Of course. I'm not joking around."

"What's with you?"

"...I'm just repaying you for what you did to Hana." He was expressionless, but the anger in his eyes was plain for all to see.

"Hana's your bride, right? I just went to give her my regards."

"Her arm is bruised. You're the one who put it there, right?"

“My grip was a tad too tight. So what?” Yukizasa said flippantly. “Besides that, when are you going to divorce her? Sure, it’s for the good of the country and all, but you don’t want a woman hanging around, right? I think it’s a pain, too, but I won’t have a choice since I’m next in line to be clan lord.” Yukizasa laughed freely.

Saku’s eyebrow twitched, and fury filled his expression. “...A tad?”

He grabbed Yukizasa by the collar again and raised his fist.

Yukizasa desperately held him back. “Hold on, calm down.” He didn’t understand why Saku was so angry.

Without loosening his grip on Yukizasa, Saku slammed him into the wall. “You listen to me. There will be no second time. Don’t you dare lay a hand on my Hana again.”

Yukizasa was taken aback by Saku’s humorless gaze. He nodded. “I—I got it. It won’t ever happen again.”

Satisfied by Yukizasa’s shocked expression and acquiescence, Saku harrumphed and let him go. “I’m leaving,” he said and made to exit the room. As his parting words, he declared, “FYI, I’m never going to divorce Hana!”

Yukizasa looked at him in disbelief. “What? That’s really all you came for?”

“What else could there be?”

“Hold on. Nothing comes to mind? I’m an Obsidian practitioner now,” Yukizasa said.

“So what?” Saku’s expression didn’t change one bit; he seemed like he couldn’t care less.

Yukizasa was disappointed by his utter lack of interest. “Isn’t this where you’re supposed to congratulate me? Aren’t we friends?”

“I don’t remember being friends with you,” Saku said, shooting him down point-blank.

That was the Saku that Yukizasa knew. Poker-faced, cold as ice, iron defenses he didn’t let anyone through in order to protect himself, a frigid personality that made it clear that he rejected the world with every particle of his being.

“Don’t say such heartless things. To make it up to you, I’ll do whatever you say. Any one thing,” Yukizasa said jokingly to lighten the mood.

Saku stroked his chin with one hand, pondering Yukizasa’s offer. Then a sinister smile rose to his face.

Suddenly, Yukizasa wanted to take back his words.

“In that case,” Saku said, “I’ll put you to work. I’ve been wanting a lackey to help me take out the trash.” He looked so evil even a demon would have run from him on bare feet.

Yukizasa’s face spasmed. “I shouldn’t have said anything...”

That was when he learned about the Ichise family’s circumstances and the compromise.

His mission was to get rid of the family trash and install Yanagi as the new head so the young man could revitalize the Ichise name.

Even he had heard of Yanagi, who had been the youngest practitioner to claim the Lapis rank, so he wasn’t against Yanagi becoming the head of the family per se. However, he didn’t see why he had to get his hands dirty to solve some other family’s problem.

Yukizasa let displeasure show only to have Saku pin him with a sharp gaze. He wasn’t even allowed to complain.

“There’s something different about you, Saku.”

“What?”

“How do I explain it? It just feels like the atmosphere around you is different from how it used to be.”

“That’s—”

It seemed like he wanted to say something, but Tsubaki appeared out of the blue and finished his sentence. “That’s the power of love,” she cooed. “Master’s eyes have been opened by his love for Hana. Just like mine were by my love for my darling!”

“Don’t say anything unnecessary, Tsubaki,” Saku scolded, karate-chopping her

on the head. She giggled and disappeared.

“Hana...,” Yukizasa muttered. “Do you get along?”

“We’re a married couple. Of course we do.” Saku tried to play it cool, but his voice went mellow and soft when he said *couple*.

“I see,” Yukizasa responded simply.

At the time, he had been mildly impressed that Saku was making an effort, but now that everything was over and he was seeing the two of them together with his own eyes, he realized he had been wrong.

“Saku! Don’t abuse other people whenever you feel like it!” Hana yelled. “Let me punch you once. This is grounds for a divorce! Divorce, I say!”

“What would you have had me do? This was all for the sake of a peaceful resolution.”

“Is this what you call peaceful, idiot? It was pure mayhem!”

Yukizasa watched the two argue with exasperation.

“It’s all good and well that Hazuki and Suzu are both okay, but what were you going to do if Hazuki came here alone?” Hana demanded.

“Don’t fret. We had a plan B,” Saku replied proudly.

“That’s nothing to brag about!” Suddenly, Hana’s face twisted in pain, and she crouched down. “Ow, ow, ow...”

Saku’s impish expression turned on a dime, and he rushed to Hana’s side. “Are you okay?”

“The shade slammed me into a wall. It hurts so badly.”

“Sorry...” His eyes were full of genuine concern with no hint of a lie. They made it clear that he was worried about Hana with all his heart.

Saku lifted Hana up gently.

“Oh my god! Put me down,” she shrieked.

“If you’re in pain, hold still. It’s best we treat you right away.”

The Saku who was smiling tenderly at Hana was a completely different person

from the Saku Yukizasa knew.

Saku helped Hana into the car that was waiting in front of the factory, then turned back toward Yukizasa and said, "I'll leave the rest to you."

"You got it."

Yukizasa waved. Saku climbed into the car and drove away.

Left alone, Yukizasa smiled wryly and said, "He's changed a lot."

He hadn't believed it when Hana had said Saku was expressive, but it was true; when Saku was with her, his expressions changed all the time.

But not in a bad way.

It felt like he had been freed from his burdens.

Yukizasa muttered, "You found a good woman to be your bride." His expression was one of relief.



With the incident resolved, the next day, Hana's parents were forced to move to a house in the countryside.

The servants who had been close with her parents had been replaced, so it was a lot easier to breathe in the Ichise house.

Between the move and the preparations, Hana was made to realize how thoroughly everything had been planned in advance.

Hana, having been totally oblivious, felt conflicted. The same could be said of Hazuki.

Because she had been thrown into a wall during her battle with the shade, a large bruise bloomed on Hana's back. Just when the bruise on her arm courtesy of Yukizasa had finally faded. Talk about bad luck.

Hazuki blamed herself, but in Hana's book, Saku and Yukizasa were at fault for everything.

Hana had to take a few days off from school, but the day after the whole

incident, Suzu called her. Suzu's voice was full of pep, which put Hana's mind at ease.

Although Suzu had been kidnapped without knowing a thing, she had been rescued immediately and was informed of the broad strokes of the situation. She had cooperated in order to help Hana, but at first, she hadn't understood what was going on at all and had been terrified. Or so she explained cheerfully.

Hana felt horribly guilty that she had gotten Suzu involved. She made a big fuss with Saku—this time, she would have her divorce, for sure—but he had offered a lavish full-course French dinner as compensation, and she had taken back her threat right away.

In addition, apparently, Saku had been chewed out by Mio. She had blown up, demanding to know what he'd been thinking, sticking Hana, who was still a *student*, on a shade that required the expertise of an Obsidian practitioner without any prior information.

Truer words had never been spoken.

Hana had been made to help with Saku's work several times in the past, but previously, she had always consented, so Mio had stayed quiet. However, Saku had sprung the latest job on Hana.

Mio had been feeling anxious about Hana's involvement in Obsidian-rank work for some time, and she finally snapped, reaching the limit of her patience.

Plus, Aoi and Miyabi had been complaining as well, pointing out Hana's unending parade of injuries, which had started since she had gotten married to Saku. Getting divorced as soon as possible would really be for the best.

Saku had been powerless against his mother and had listened to his lecture like a good boy.

Between this and that, the days passed, and right around the time the pain in Hana's back had gone away at long last, Yanagi came to the Ichinomiya residence to pay a visit to Hana and Hazuki.

The three siblings were alone in the room.

Yanagi spoke up first. "Our parents have been moved away from society and

are living under supervision. From now on, you'll have no more contact with them unless you so choose."

To Hana, there could be no happier news. However, Hazuki had yet to throw away all her attachments to their parents and was making a complicated expression. Nonetheless, she didn't protest Yanagi's decision and merely nodded without a word.

Yanagi added, "We've overhauled the staff and cut everyone who had no love for the family in the first place."

"What about Sae?" Hana blurted out, unable to help herself. Sae was the person she was most concerned about.

"She'll continue working in the household."

Relief washed over Hana.

Sae was the reason Hana and Hazuki could be together like this. Had she been turned out into the streets, Hana would never have been able to forgive herself.

Hazuki, too, whispered a quiet "Thank goodness..." It was apparent that Sae was an invaluable presence to her, too.

"Now, to the crux of the matter," Yanagi said. "Hazuki." He paused before continuing with some trepidation. "Won't you come back to the Ichise house?"

"What?" Hazuki said, surprised at Yanagi's suggestion.

"The parents who tormented you are no longer there. You can live however you like, doing whatever you want. It's true that here, you can be with Hana, but won't you live with me?"

Hazuki was silent for a moment. Then she nodded. "Okay. I'll go back with you."

"What?!" Hana gasped unintentionally. "You're going to leave?" Just when she was finally able to be with Hazuki.

A wistful expression crossed over Hazuki's face, plain for all to see. "I love spending time with you, too, Hana," she said, "but I'm not a part of the Ichinomiya family. I don't think I should be here. Think about how it looks to the other branch families."

Hana was disgruntled. The other branch families could go to hell for all she cared.

Hazuki pressed on. “Besides, I don’t want to leave our brother alone in that house.”

Hazuki’s words blew all of Hana’s protests away. Yanagi’s eyes widened.

“You won’t be lonely with me around, right?” Hazuki said to Yanagi, smiling softly.

Yanagi smiled back, looking as if he might cry. “Yeah. You would give me strength.”

Hana looked at the two of them grinning at each other. She shoved herself forward. “Then I’m going with you, too!”

She was dead serious, but her proclamation made the atmosphere in the room sour.

“You can’t, Hana,” Hazuki said.

“Why not?!”

“Don’t you have any pride as Lord Ichinomiya’s wife?”

The only answer that came to her mind was *none at all*. Her confession to Saku of her budding feelings was long forgotten.

“Got it. Let me go get divorced real quick,” Hana said glibly, as if she were talking about going to the convenience store to buy ice cream.

She flew out of the room without hesitation—no time like the present, right?—barged into Saku’s room, and demanded a divorce.

However, when it looked like she was about to be jumped, she ran away and returned to the room where her siblings were.

“It didn’t work...,” she said, her shoulders slumping.

Hazuki and Yanagi both looked like they had nothing to say.

“Hana...,” Hazuki said.

“Lord Ichinomiya would never give you up,” Yanagi said.

And thus, it wasn't long before the day came when Hazuki would return to the Ichise house with Yanagi.

Hana saw her off with a melancholic expression.

Saku put an arm around her shoulder. "You can see each other whenever you want."

Her face instantly lit up. "Yeah, you're right. Not to mention, if we get divorced, I can go back to the Ichise house," she said brightly as if she had put her worries behind her.

The corner of Saku's mouth convulsed. "Are you still going on about that?" A vein throbbed on his temple.

Without giving Hana any time to respond, he laid a hand on her chin and brought their lips together.

"Mmngh!!"

When they broke apart after the intense kiss, Saku smirked shamelessly. "You'll be my wife until death do us part. Give up and accept it."

"Dummy!!! Kiss fiend!" Hana yelled.

"Was that a compliment?"

"Not at all!"

Azuha fluttered leisurely above their heads. Constantly bickering though the two might have been, they were nevertheless thick as thieves.

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Copyright

Bride of the Barrier Master 3

KUREHA

Translation by Linda Liu ♦ Cover art by Bodax

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

KEKKAISHI NO ICHIRINKA Vol.3

©Kureha 2023

First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: July 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design:
Madelaine Norman Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not
owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kureha (Light novel
author), author. | Liu, Linda (Translator), translator.

Title: Bride of the barrier master / Kureha ; translation by Linda Liu.

Other titles: Kekkaishi no ichirinka. English Description: First Yen On edition.
| New York : Yen On, 2023— Identifiers: LCCN 2022043316 | ISBN
9781975360528 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370336 (v. 2 ; trade
paperback) | ISBN 9781975389116 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) Subjects: LCGFT:
Fantasy fiction. | Romance fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K85 Br 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022043316>

ISBNs: 978-1-97538911-6 (paperback) 978-1-9753-8912-3 (ebook)