

7

NOVEL

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# THOUGH I AM AN INEPT VILLAINESS

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



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"Ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Stop laughing!"

Kou Keishou

"I can't help it!  
How can you be so cute?!"

"Wha...?!"

Keigetsu had initially rebuked him, a flush on her cheeks, but the moment Keishou shouted the word "cute," she choked on her words.

"Don't mock me!"

Kou Reirin

CONTAINS SHU KEIGETSU

A HARMONIOUS SHOPPING TRIP IN THE OUTER CITY?



A CONFIDENTIAL CONSULTATION BEHIND CLOSED DOORS?

"Sorry to disappoint, but this is a teahouse."

Shin-u

This muscle-brained man...

This emotionless woman...

...is going down.

Kou Tousetsu

"Ooh, are the beds behind that door? That must be where all the action happens."

Unrain

Chief of a southern village

Kou Keikou

LET THE LARGER-THAN-LIFE DRINKING CONTEST BEGIN!





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Bonus  
Story Look! Look! Show Me!

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Written by  
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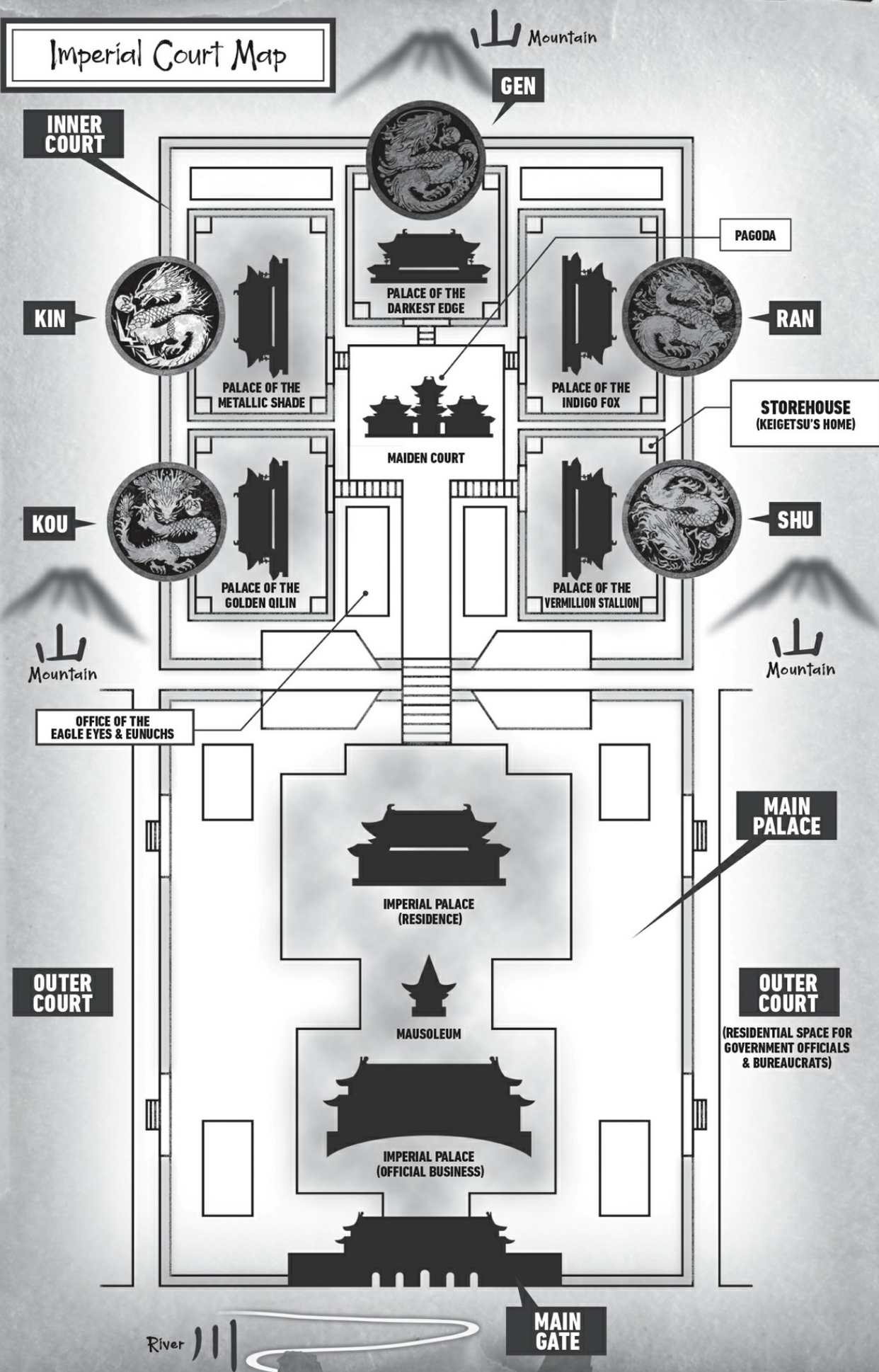
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Kana Yuki



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# Imperial Court Map





# Relationship Chart

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

**KIN CLAN**  
( METAL / WEST / AUTUMN )



**GEN CLAN**  
( WATER / NORTH / WINTER )



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

**RAN CLAN**  
( WOOD / EAST / SPRING )



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



**KOU CLAN**  
( EARTH / CENTER / CUSPS )

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



**SHU CLAN**  
( FIRE / SOUTH / SUMMER )

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

**THE MAIDEN COURT**









Kou Reirin



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

Shu Keigetsu



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

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Ei Gyomei



The crown prince. Reirin's cousin.

Shin-u



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

Leelee



A high-ranking court lady who serves Keigetsu.

Kou Tousetsu



Reirin's head court lady.

Kou Kenshuu



The empress. Reirin's aunt.

Kin Seika



The Kin Maiden.

Gen Kasui



The Gen Maiden.

Ran Houshun



The Ran Maiden.

Kou Keikou



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

Kou Keishou



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

Unran



Chief of a southern (Shu-affiliated) village.

Ei Genyou



The emperor. Gyomei's father.



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## Chapter 1: Reirin, Leelee, and Gyoumei

**“LONG LIVE the emperor!”**

“May he reign for ten thousand years!”

The fervor with which the citizens of Ei celebrated Emperor Genyou’s birthday continued well into the fifth day of the festivities. In contrast to the solemn ceremonies held within the imperial palace, such as the Rite of Reverence or the birthday ritual, the denizens of the outer city engaged in seven straight days of revelry. Merchants took advantage of the occasion to hold big bargain sales, and the common folk lined their tables with longevity greens and lotus-shaped sweets. Women tossed flower petals into the wind, while men drank wine, sang, and danced.

It was the one time of year when even the destitute living on grass congee could enjoy the steamed buns served by the taverns. There was a giddiness in the air that permeated even the downtown areas and the outskirts of the capital.

“Gracious! Is that true? By merely purchasing this pot, my beauty will blossom, my wits will sharpen—and fame, glory, and a hundred new friends will be mine to have?”

Our story begins in a narrow street just off the main road, lined on either side with jutting rows of stalls. Drawn in by a peddler’s pitch, one woman in particular picked up the advertised pot with a cry of wonder.

“You got it, little lady. This pot is a miraculous cultivator of virtue.”

“Incredible!”

The young woman craned forward, spellbound. She was tall and dressed like the daughter of a wealthy merchant family. Her face was hidden by the veil hanging from her bamboo hat—the kind that well-to-do ladies often wore when



they ventured outdoors—but her gestures and speech exuded an air of elegance.

“Stop right there, Lady Rei...I mean, Kei...I mean, *milady!*” someone admonished the girl transfixed by the pot, tugging at her sleeve from behind. “Don’t give him the time of day! Let’s be on our way now.”

“And waste this chance to make a hundred friends?”

“That’s the part that piqued your interest?!” The second girl, who was dressed as a handmaiden, looked to the sky in disbelief. Her red hair was tied up on either side of her head, and her eyes were amber in color. “You’re too much, milady. You have to stop falling for such insipid sales pitches!”

“Come now. I would hardly call the power to make a hundred friends *insipid*.” The ostensible mistress of the pair looked dejected, but whatever her reasons, she soon turned back to the street vendor. “Still, I suppose you have a point.” She solemnly handed the pot back to the man, then said in an all-too-dignified voice, “My dearest vendor, while I appreciate that this pot possesses powers untold, to make one hundred friends could prove a misfortune in disguise.”

“S-sorry, did you just call me ‘my dearest vendor’?”

“Why misfortune, you ask? An excellent question, to which the answer is this: Having enough dear friends to count on one hand is all someone needs to be happy.” After ignoring his interruption to answer a question no one had even asked, the girl added with an even greater gravity, “And I am savoring such bliss as we speak. Thus, I have no need of this pot. You will have to excuse me.”

The next thing the man knew, she was turning on her heel.

“Come along now, Leelee. Those baked potatoes are calling my name.”

“First you make a completely inexplicable boast, and now it’s potato time?!”

The pair walked off, leaving the street vendor to stare blankly in their wake. When the girl leading the way adjusted the bamboo hat atop her head, a commotion-laden breeze tickled the freckles that dotted her cheeks.

Indeed, these two girls were Shu Keigetsu—or her body, currently inhabited by Kou Reirin—and her attending court lady, Leelee.

As they put distance between themselves and the pot vendor, Reirin finally turned back to look at Leelee. “How was that, Leelee? I fended off his attempts to pressure me quite well, if I do say so myself.”

“I hate to break it to you, but most people don’t launch into a sermon every time a peddler tries to scam them.”

Leelee slumped over with a tired sigh, while Reirin pressed both hands to her chest to savor the emotion of the moment.

“Ah, so that’s what a ‘scam’ is like. Wow, I was almost scammed...”

“Don’t say that like it’s a good thing!” the redhead retorted.

Suddenly, a voice shouted, “Outta the way! Fish coming through!” The next moment, a peddler shouldering a bucket yoke passed between the girls, spraying water everywhere.

Born and raised downtown, Leelee’s immediate reaction was to click her tongue. “Oh, hell, he got my robes all wet!”

“Indeed he did! Gosh, I’m soaking wet!”

The court lady met her mistress’s excitement with a withering glare.

Said mistress clutched at her sleeves and nodded to herself over and over. “So this is what life is like in a bustling city. Oh, the wonders!”

“I see little reason to get so emotional,” said Leelee, squinting up at her.

“Nonsense, Leelee! Why, every bit of this spectacle is bursting with emotion!” Reirin replied, lovingly caressing her wet sleeves.

It was the first time that so many onlookers had shouted her way, or that she had walked through a large crowd, or that she had been waylaid by a rain of fishy water.

*So this is a city! This is what it means to go out on the town!*



She kept reminding herself not to get too carried away. Then again, in her current vessel, a little excitement wouldn't put her at risk of passing out from the collective body heat. Venturing out on a cold winter's day didn't make her feel ill, and she could even carry her own belongings. Instead of riding on a palanquin, she could enjoy shopping side by side with a trusted friend.

Leelee stopped in her tracks when she heard a bell ring. "Oh, that was the bell for the second hour of the dragon. We still have four hours before we have to meet at the tavern His Highness has designated. Shall we buy something sweet from one of the food stalls and take a break?"

"My goodness!" For Reirin, the very idea of being set loose outside her family estate or the inner court for four full hours was uncharted territory. To follow that up with such an unbelievably titillating proposition was enough to make her voice tremble. "Do you suppose that might qualify as... 'blowing one's money on snacks'?"

"That's precisely what we'd be doing, yes."

Leelee was looking downright weary by this point, while Reirin's tension and excitement were at an all-time high.

"V-very well. Let's do this with a bang!"

"It shouldn't take that much determination to walk up to a food stall." Leelee watched her mistress tremble with excitement, then shrugged. "Okay, I've got to ask. If being exiled, kidnapped, or even assaulted doesn't rattle you, how can walking around town make you this nervous?"

The redhead huffed a confused sigh, but Reirin was tempted to ask how she managed *not* to be nervous.

*I don't mind inconveniencing those who would exile or abduct me, but I mustn't trouble others when I'm heading into town of my own volition.*

What if she fainted? What if she bumped into someone and got seriously injured? What if she caused a delay in schedule or disrupted the group's

activities? What if she gave others cause for concern? Such questions always weighed on Reirin's mind when she went out with her loved ones.

*And what's more...*

She cast a glance around the bustling market. Cheerful voices bounced back and forth. The music of flutes and drums swirled in the distance. The smell of sweet and salty sauces filled her nostrils, and heat radiated from the crowd. The conversations around her held nothing back.

*This is what a market is like.*

The place she had always dreamed of visiting from her sickbed was right before her eyes.

"Oh dear. Just standing here for four hours might be enough to sate me," she murmured, pressing her hands to her chest.

"You'd be in the way, not to mention conspicuous," Leelee snapped. "Let's keep moving."

At the word "conspicuous," Reirin straightened her posture with a start. "Good point. We must be careful not to arouse suspicion. Our stroll through the town must be natural and discreet."

The Maiden steeled her resolve and took a step forward.

*Lady Keigetsu, I swear I shall spend the next four hours without incident and meet you at the tavern at the appointed hour.*

Hands clasped over her chest, she reflected on the days leading up to this moment.

It was the same day that Reirin and Keigetsu had met under a pavilion to finally undo the switch, not long after the Rite of Reverence had drawn to a close. Her heart thrumming with joy, Reirin had been making her way to the Shu Palace storehouse.



Keigetsu's skills had sent the bad guys packing, and the girls had grown a little closer to the other Maidens. Keigetsu was also pleased with her second-place finish. All that remained was to find the right time to return to their original bodies.

Just as she thought that she was forgetting something crossed her mind, someone dragged her by the arm into a deserted pocket of the Maiden Court. The one who called her "Shu Keigetsu" and pulled her into a loving embrace was none other than the crown prince, the master of the court. The very same Gyomei who had worried for Reirin and Keigetsu and helped to mediate their fight, only to be cut out of the picture when the women wanted to fight their own battle.

Belatedly mortified by the disrespect she had shown him, Reirin had scrambled to apologize, but he hadn't come to lecture her. While pretending to whisper sweet nothings into "Shu Keigetsu's" ear, he delivered her a warning: The emperor suspected one of the Maidens of dealing in the Daoist arts. Though he had opted to let the matter of the mystic mirror slide, his secret service had received orders to keep an eye on the Maidens. The girls were not to undo the switch within the walls of the Maiden Court.

Reirin had heard the rumors of a secret service under the direct command of the emperor and empress. They were the ones who operated in the dark underbelly of the kingdom and were responsible for security, espionage, and even the assassination of enemies. The part that defied imagination was that the Maidens themselves would ever become the targets of their activities.

Noting Reirin's surprise, Gyomei kept up his act by suggesting, "Come sit with me, 'Shu Keigetsu.'" He then carried her in his arms to a nearby pavilion with a good view.

Once they were sitting side by side and made sure that no one else was around, he went on to explain thus: During the previous emperor's reign, the mere notion of setting out to acquire an imitation of the dragon's qi—the power known as the Daoist arts—was deemed tantamount to treason, and all

Daoist cultivators were hunted down and eradicated. Since his father, the current emperor, was a mild-mannered man who frowned upon persecution, Gyomei hadn't been particularly concerned to this point. However, during the Rite of Reverence, his father had gazed upon the flame spell before him with deep scrutiny.

To be on the safe side, the prince had instructed his personal guards to look into his top-secret decree. According to their report, its contents boiled down to the following: "Keep watch over all those in the Maiden Court, including the Maidens themselves, to determine if there is a practitioner of disreputable magic among us."

Hearing this, the color drained from Reirin's face. "Then...supposing the secret service detects the use of magic, will His Majesty punish the practitioner?"

If so, she had made a grave blunder.

She had heard about the persecution of Daoist cultivators during the previous emperor's reign. As a consequence, fewer and fewer had passed on the mystic arts to the next generation, the number of practitioners had dwindled, and talk of suppression had died down with them. Nowadays, for better or for worse, Daoist magic was considered a "vulgar enchantment" whose very existence was questionable. It wouldn't be a good look for a Maiden to dabble in the arts—which was why Keigetsu never called herself a cultivator—but Reirin had assumed that they could easily quash any scandal that might arise.

If the highest authority in the court was serious about eradicating Daoist magic, however, that changed everything. If word got out that Keigetsu was a full-fledged practitioner, she risked worse than mere ridicule—she could be charged with a crime.

"Calm down," Gyomei told Reirin as he watched her turn pale. "If he was serious about bringing her to trial, he wouldn't settle for half-hearted surveillance. Nor would he limit the scope to the Maiden Court. Furthermore, though nominally 'top-secret,' the order was issued in writing—and on the



cheapest paper available, at that. I suspect his true intention is to keep up appearances.”

“What do you mean?”

“Although Father claims to have carried on his predecessor’s anti-magic stance, he has never once authorized the execution or hunting of Daoist cultivators since ascending the throne. His vassals are beginning to lose patience with him.”

Many of the older vassals tended to raise comparisons with the previous emperor or attempt to influence Genyou’s policies. Word had it that some of them still advocated for the persecution of cultivators as a sign of their allegiance to the former monarch. After that miraculous phenomenon everyone had witnessed during the Rite of Reverence, doing nothing would give those men an excuse to raise a fuss. Thus, he had placed the Maiden Court under surveillance as a formality—or so Gyoumei claimed was the most likely possibility.

Gyoumei urged her not to assume the worst, then added, “I plan to find out his real motive in all of this. Father is tolerant of different cultures and ethnicities. I wouldn’t expect him to be leery of what is currently considered mere occultism. Still, it’s not a risk we can afford to take. We must proceed with caution.”

The most Reirin could manage was a halting reply. “Yes... You’re quite right.”

It was Keigetsu’s well-being at stake, not her own. No amount of caution could be too much. What’s more, even if the surveillance was just for show, *she* was the one who had exposed Keigetsu to the disgrace of being monitored.

“This is all the result of my own imprudence... I sincerely apologize.”

How could she ever make this up to Keigetsu?

As Reirin blanched and fell silent, Gyoumei huffed a soft sigh and pulled her head into an embrace. “Don’t be so hard on yourself.” His long fingers ruffled

her hair in an almost brotherly fashion. “You had her use her magic in public as a way to build her confidence, didn’t you? And it worked. Her powers seem to have become her stepping stone to self-acceptance.”

Reirin looked up in surprise, shocked that Gyoumei had seen through to what she was thinking.

It was true. She had hoped to instill a sense of confidence in Keigetsu. The fire she commanded was too beautiful to go to waste. The girl in question always derided herself as talentless, so Reirin wanted her to see that she was blessed with a skill no one else could hope to possess.

Her magical flames could bring about miracles. Her flames of willpower could overcome any obstacle. They carried an intense passion and vigor that captivated onlookers and never let go—brilliant as a comet shining in the sky—and Reirin wanted Keigetsu and the people around her to appreciate that.

Yet if her wish had only served to endanger her dear friend, it was nothing but a blight.

“This is terrible... However am I to apologize to Lady Keigetsu?”

“A word of advice,” Gyoumei said solemnly when Reirin went back to hanging her head. “Speaking as someone who once begged my victim for a way to make amends, plagued with enough guilt to summon a storm...it’s no way to behave.”

Reirin stared at the prince. “What?”

“No doubt you feel impatient. No doubt you’re desperate to punish yourself. Even so, you should never put the cane of discipline into the hands of the one you hurt. All that will do is make yourself feel better.” With a rueful smile, Gyoumei added, “I only realized my blunder after the fact. Of all the things I did around the time of the Double Sevens, that one shames me as much as almost killing you.”

In a murmur, he went on to lament that he had coerced her into forgiveness. He had meant it as an apology, but in reality, he had done little more than



thrust his desire to make amends upon her.

“It was a shameful display,” he muttered. Then, reminding himself that this conversation was about Reirin, he reverted to a more casual tone. “My point is that now is not the time to panic. If you approach her looking like a tragic heroine, it will put pressure on her to forgive you. Not to mention that she’s emotional at the best of times, so I’m sure she’ll be feeling even more hopeless than you.”

“Right...”

“Stand up and apologize for your mistakes, but repent through your actions. Besides, falling to pieces will only arouse suspicion. Better to keep a carefree smile on your face,” Gyoumei rattled off smoothly, after which he grinned and gave Reirin a light flick on the forehead. “There you have it. A bit of know-it-all advice from your predecessor in mistake-making.”

“Don’t say that. They were words of wisdom.” Pressing a hand to where he had touched her forehead, Reirin nodded earnestly. “I shall take them to heart.”

Her cousin had gone out of his way to give her a pep talk, and his show of kindness resonated throughout her being.

It was true that she hadn’t fully considered her actions. That was something to be ashamed of, but instead of letting it discourage her, she was better off taking swift action to prevent any harm from befalling Keigetsu.

Either way, the best move was to postpone the planned reversal of the switch and investigate the emperor’s motives. They needed to get a sense of the intent and scope of the Maiden Court surveillance before revising their plans. And of course, Reirin had to make a proper apology to Keigetsu.

As her head swam with thoughts, Gyoumei remarked with relief, “Looks like you’ve gotten your wits about you.”

At that, Reirin put her musings on hold. “May I have a word?”

“Go ahead.”

“I know I have said as much before...but I was truly happy during the season of the Double Sevens,” she ventured, and Gyoumei stared back at her, wide-eyed.

A bitter smile threatened to come to his face, but he restrained himself. Instead, he opened his mouth, closed it, and then settled for a tight nod. “I know.”

“I am not angry with you, nor did I feel hurt. That sentiment extends to your apology as well.”

“I realize that.”

“The reason I insist on calling you ‘Your Highness’ is simply because I’m not ready—”

“You don’t have to explain.” As she debated whether to confide in him her concerns—her feelings about the position of empress and her worries about her own health—the prince interrupted her with a shake of his head. “I desire further punishment, that’s all. And I must wield my own cane of discipline.”

“Then I shall follow your example.” Reirin giggled, his silly attitude rubbing off on her. As a fellow descendant of the Kou, she knew exactly what kind of person he was. “I’ll be caning myself right alongside you.”

“So we’ll be lining up for a beating together, eh? What a strange pair we make.”

“You said it.”

They erupted into laughter, with neither sure who had let out the first chuckle. In moments like these, it was as if they had returned to being the normal pair of cousins they were before the Maiden Court.

As soon as they had gotten the mirth out of their systems, Reirin rose to her feet, slapping her cheeks with both hands. “I must keep it together! First comes apologizing and explaining the situation. I must appear confident! No panicking



or whining. I must think things through calmly so I overlook nothing in my plan to—”

“Speaking of overlooking things, I have an idea.” While Reirin was psyching herself up, Gyoumei shot her a sidelong glance as he stood. “The surveillance only covers the Maiden Court, so why don’t we head into the outer city?”

Silence fell between them. A few beats later, Reirin tilted her head with a questioning hum, unable to process his suggestion.

“The role of the secret service is to protect my father and the kingdom. We are in the midst of the birthday festivities, and the dignitaries from the neighboring kingdoms are just beginning to return home. With matters of security and intelligence to keep them busy, and with the decree limiting their surveillance to the walls of the Maiden Court, the secret service shouldn’t have time to follow us into the outer city.”

In other words, he was suggesting that they sneak out of the Maiden Court and reverse the switch there.

Reirin’s pulse quickened. “What?”

“Granted, you will need to wear a disguise. Perhaps you can masquerade as a court lady visiting home.”

A disguise.

“It would look suspicious if the Maidens of two different clans took carriages headed in the same direction. Assuming that ‘Kou Reirin’ gets priority for the carriage, the best we can give you is a palanquin. Expect to do a lot of walking.”

A lot of walking.

“Leaving with me would only draw attention. It would be better for us to go separately and meet up at the tavern I use as a hideout when I go undercover... Ah, but I suppose traveling alone might be an unsettling experience for you.”

Traveling alone.

All of the potential concerns Gyoumei listed sounded like unbelievable perks

to Reirin's ears. It wasn't long before she felt dizzy.

"No, it wouldn't work. Forget I mentioned it."

The moment Gyomei attempted to scrap the idea, Reirin found herself tugging at his sleeve. "Actually..."

She chastised herself again and again not to get carried away in her greed.

The Maiden Court was the subject of a watch order. The court was dangerous. The outer city was safe. Generally speaking, it was extremely dangerous for Maidens to venture into the outer city, but under the circumstances, no one would stop her from going. Provided that Keigetsu agreed to the plan, of course.

"I... I..."

It was astounding how much courage it took just to give voice to her desires. *I want this, I want that*. In times like these, she wished she had Keigetsu's strength to be so open and honest about what would make her happy.

"I...want to go."

Suddenly, she had a flashback to the one and only time she had tugged on her brothers' sleeves as a little girl.

*"I want to go outside too."*

Upon noticing how hot the hand clutching their sleeves was, her brothers had responded with a sad shake of their heads. In that moment, Reirin felt as though she had been crushed under the weight of her regret. There was the guilt of imposing on them, along with the despair that she wasn't allowed to have her wish. The dual emotions had torn her heart to shreds, until it was all she could do to summon a shaky voice and add, "Just kidding!" At the time, she was still far from an expert at applying the makeup known as a smile.

Before long, Reirin had stopped giving voice to such desires altogether. But now...

*"Get on with it—ask me for help!"*

*“You ought to cry and scream a little more often.”*

Whenever she fell into her usual habit of pulling back and swallowing her words, Shu Keigetsu was there to scold her with all the force of a slap to the face. This was exactly the sort of situation where that girl would start yelling at the top of her lungs.

“I...want to go to the outer city,” Reirin said with all the courage she could muster. Though she had intended her voice to ring loud and clear, it came out in a feeble squeak.

“Hmm.”

It was so indecorous of her to cling to the prince’s sleeve. It was absurd that her fingers were trembling with apprehension over something so trivial.

“My apologies, forget that I—”

As her embarrassment reached its peak and she began to retract her hand, she got her answer.

“Then let’s go.” Her cousin grabbed her hand and smiled tenderly. He didn’t neglect to add, “But safety comes first.”

“Ah...”

Swallowing down the voice that was about to escape her lips, Reirin instead squeezed her cousin’s hand in return.

*Safety is my number one priority. I must not cause a scene. I must stay out of sight and out of harm’s way.*

Thus did Reirin stand in the heart of the outer city, gazing at the market before her and reciting her mantra of self-control for the umpteenth time.

*The primary purpose of this trip is to reach the designated tavern without incident. I mustn’t cause Lady Keigetsu any further trouble.*

It had been two days since Reirin had explained the situation to Keigetsu,



apologized, and worked out a plan. She had mentioned that the emperor might have suspicions about them and proposed that they head into the outer city to reverse the switch. Although Keigetsu had reacted to the news with much surprise and dismay, she had agreed to the idea with surprising ease. In her own words, “If that’s the best solution available, then fine!”

As a token of apology, Reirin had offered up a few of her fingers—according to Gyoumei’s words of wisdom, she had to wield her own cane of discipline, after all—but Keigetsu had immediately responded, “No thank you,” leaving her unsatisfied and stewing in remorse.

*Well, I suppose we’d have to return to our original bodies before I can even consider that method of penitence...*

As had been discussed under the pavilion, it would look far too suspicious for Reirin to head through the gate with Gyoumei and Keigetsu, so the group was to split up and reconvene at their meeting place of the tavern. Disguised as a Shu court lady, Reirin had left the Forbidden City with Leelee, her “peer,” under the guise of a shopping trip. They had changed clothes as soon as they reached the streets. Reirin posed as the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and Leelee as her handmaiden.

Meanwhile, Keigetsu—in the body of Kou Reirin—would travel in a carriage with a bodyguard to escort her. This task would be entrusted to Keishou, who was both Kou Reirin’s older brother and acquainted with Keigetsu herself. They would set out on the pretext of visiting the Kou clan’s ancestral shrine in the capital, stopping at a tavern “for a break” along the way.

It was also vital to incorporate a ruse to make it look like “Shu Keigetsu” was doing her own thing. As a woman of similar stature, Tousetsu would disguise herself as Keigetsu. Shin-u, the captain of the Eagle Eyes, and Kou Keikou, who had previously served as “her” ceremonial officer, would guard the carriage she rode in. They would likewise use the cover story that “Shu Keigetsu” was headed into town to offer incense at the ancestral shrine affiliated with the Gen emperor. Rather than join up with Reirin and Keigetsu, Tousetsu and her

companions were to go to the northern end of the city—the opposite direction of the tavern—and return to the Maiden Court in the evening, making a few random stops along the way.

In summary, Reirin and Leelee would take a palanquin into town and meet up with Gyoumei. Keigetsu, playing the role of “Kou Reirin,” would ride a carriage to the tavern with Keishou. Tousetsu would disguise herself as “Shu Keigetsu” and act as a decoy with Keikou and Shin-u. All the key figures who were privy to the swap would split into three groups and go their separate ways as part of a coordinated effort.

Until Reirin met the others at the tavern, she would have no one but Leelee to accompany her. Barring exceptional circumstances like her kidnapping or exile, this was unquestionably the most freedom she had ever been granted in her life.

*Freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin!*

As her eyes darted between the ostentatious decorations and the shoppers milling about, she exhaled a short breath to calm her nerves. Once again, she swore to herself that she would make it through this tour of the city in one piece.

“Leelee, I must confess I researched the placement of the stalls along the street beforehand in the spirit of safety. There are two deep-fried pastry stalls within one hundred strides of where we’re standing. Or shall we strike the potatoes first? Our target is to the northeast. The vendor is a male of medium build. The wind is blowing from the south-southeast.”

“I didn’t realize I was traveling with a warlord,” Leelee quipped as Reirin licked a finger and held it up to the air, mumbling to herself all the while. “Oh, for crying out loud, you don’t have to overthink every little thing. That’s exactly how we ended up with so much time on our hands.”

Indeed. The truth was that the girls had arrived at the market near their rendezvous point nearly four hours early, all because Reirin had left way ahead

of schedule, rushed the palanquin along, and power walked the rest of the way.

Embarrassed, Reirin tugged at the veil hanging from her hat. “I-I do apologize. It’s a habit of mine. I started imagining all these ridiculous scenarios, like what if it hailed, or what if the road suddenly collapsed, and I simply couldn’t shake them from my mind.”

Leelee’s eyes glazed over. “Wow, you sound like a man preparing for his first date.”

“Hrk...” Reirin clutched her reddened cheeks in shame.

Whenever Reirin had to perform an important rite or travel a long distance, she *always* arrived with at least two full hours to spare. She never knew when her sickly body might fail her. Whether she fainted or ran a fever, she could push through with sheer willpower as long as she had already reached her destination. Two hours gave her ample time to take a nap or brew some medicine.

In this instance, she was so hell-bent on meeting Keigetsu in the outer city and undoing the switch that she kept extending the estimated time for the trip, factoring in scenarios like, “If the palanquin breaks down on the way, two hours might not be sufficient,” or “If I feel sick and have to stop for a rest, even three hours might be cutting it close.” Eventually, she began to worry about natural disasters, and before she knew it, she found herself outside the tavern four hours before the designated time.

Spending four hours in the tavern waiting for someone would attract attention and disrupt business. When Reirin grew flustered, Leelee eventually suggested that they wander around the market, with the proviso that they stay close enough to double back to the tavern at any time.

“I’m sorry for putting you through this, Leelee...”

Worldly, independent, and poised—that was the sort of person Reirin idolized. Why did *she* have to be so out of touch with the real world?



*I've always prided myself on my training in both the arts required of a Maiden and survival skills such as camping, but embroidery, dancing, and building a fire are all things one can do alone. I have no social experience whatsoever.*

She didn't know, for instance, the appropriate buffer needed to get to a meeting on time. Or, for another example, how to make plans on the fly and kill time doing all the things she wanted to do. How to resist pressure from a vendor. How to walk without bumping into people.

Though these were all simple challenges for the average person, Reirin found them exceedingly daunting. Why? Because they were skills cultivated through interaction with others. Keigetsu and Leelee were no doubt several steps ahead of her when it came to these matters.

"Perhaps we ought to go back to the tavern after all... If we ask for a seat in the corner, they might permit us to wait there for four hours."

It would be no exaggeration to call "blowing money on snacks" a lifelong ambition of hers, but she couldn't bear the thought of screwing up and causing trouble for her loved ones.

Just as her shoulders slumped and she was about to reluctantly turn back, Leelee cracked a lopsided grin and patted her on the back to cheer her up. "Sorry, I shouldn't have given you such a hard time. Since we're already here, we might as well enjoy our time out on the town. I'm pretty familiar with the area myself."

"Oh, Leelee!" Reirin shook with emotion. What a kind attendant she had. "Thank you so much. I shall make the most of the time I have to wander the city!"

Clenching her hands into determined fists, Reirin finally made up her mind to venture into the world of her dreams.

"You'll never believe it, Leelee! Someone just stepped on my feet! Three of them in a row!"

“Why are you happy about that?!”

“This douzhi I bought tastes simply dreadful, Leelee! Why, it’s almost addictive!”

“Why would you buy a drink famous for tasting terrible on your first-ever shopping trip?!”

“Look, Leelee! The inscription on my change has repeating digits! Leelee!”

“Yes, yes, I’m very happy for you! Hey, wait a second—he shortchanged you!”

The market was crowded from the early hours of the morning. There was no end of people to bump into, and the items for sale were hit or miss. Plenty of merchants would cheat their customers out of change without batting an eye. Each time that happened, Leelee would grumble and demand the money back with a menacing glare, while Reirin had to fight to suppress a smile beside her.

Yes, everything felt so *alive*. The winter air was frigid, but that made the heat coming off the crowd feel all the more pleasant. The sunlight was bright and dazzling, and even the angry shouts and hoots that whizzed by sounded like celestial music.

A steamed food stall down the street rang a gong and announced a sale to the passersby. “Great bargains available during the hour of the dragon only! Get a huge discount on zongzi!”

Attracted by the loud noise and the limited-time offer, hungry shoppers in the vicinity flocked to the stall.

“I’ll take five, please!”

“Ten for me!”

“Hey, I was here first!”

Leelee observed the spectacle cynically, convinced that the vendor was just trying to get rid of his stock before it cooled, but when she glanced over her shoulder, her mistress was suddenly nowhere to be found.

“Huh?! Hold on, where’d she go?!”

When she whipped around in a panic, she found Reirin dashing over to the stall. Unsure how to go about making the purchase, the Maiden stood at the edge of the crowd, bouncing up and down to get a glimpse of the action.

“I-Is this where I’m supposed to line up?! Where is the end of the line? Here?!”

“Pff—”

Leelee had to bite down on her wrist to keep from laughing. This was the prince’s butterfly—the girl said to string the most beautiful of verses together with a brush in her hand, to embroider the most breathtaking landscapes with a needle, and to make even the Heavens weep with her dance. Whoever could have imagined her hopping up and down like a wild rabbit over some sticky rice dumplings?

“I hear the zongzi here...is...delicious! I’d love to take some home...as a souvenir!”

“You don’t have to stand in line! Just slip through and grab what you want! It’s first come, first served!”

“Truly?!”

After Leelee instructed her on the proper way to shop in the outer city, Reirin spun back around and steeled her expression. With the fight in her eyes plain for all to see, she weaved through the crowd in a flash, making good use of the superlative flexibility and agility she had honed through her dance training.

“Look, I got it!”

Shortly after, she returned with a triumphant expression on her face. She was clutching four zongzi wrapped in reed leaves to her chest.

“Here, Leelee! Eat up!”

Her bamboo hat had been knocked around in the crowd, and the hem of her garment was disheveled, but she looked so happy that it was easy to tell



through the veil.

“You’re a growing girl, so I’ll let you have the bigger one.”

“This again? Watch out, I’ll take you up on it this time.”

Giggling as their conversation brought back memories, Leelee gratefully accepted the offering, and the two girls settled down on the side of the road to eat their snacks. Though the zongzi were on the small side compared to other shops Leelee could name, they were still piping hot enough to have been plucked from the bottom of the steamer basket. The chunks of braised meat were big enough to *squelch* between the teeth, the texture of the jujube was satisfying, and the sticky rice had absorbed the flavor of the ingredients inside, oozing a salty flavor with each bite. It was hard not to let out a contented moan. Reirin, for her part, was moved to tears.

“This is delectable. Truly delicious. It’s so warm...”

Though accustomed to eating meals ten times as sumptuous back at court, the Maiden looked genuinely delighted. Eating food while it was still hot or consuming fatty meats without fear of a stomachache was no doubt a valuable experience for her.

“Those zongzi were so small that it didn’t take long to wolf them down. Why not have the other two?”

With a gentle shake of her head, Reirin carefully tucked the remaining dumplings into her sleeve. “No. I’m saving these for Lady Keigetsu and Tousetsu.” While she was at it, she folded up the leftover reed leaf and stowed it in the breast of her garment. “I will keep this leaf to cherish the memory.”

As she watched her mistress delicately pat her chest, Leelee couldn’t help but bury her face in her hands. “Plenty of places sell zongzi...so let’s buy ourselves a bunch more, shall we?”

In truth, it wasn’t a good idea to wander too far into the market, but it was hard not to be charmed by Reirin’s glee over something so trivial. Surely it

wasn't a crime to feel like feeding her lots of local zongzi.

Reirin, meanwhile, let out a sigh of wonder, pressing a hand to her chest and the leaf she'd stored there. *I never thought I'd see the day when I was the one bringing back souvenirs for others.*

Thinking back, every year during the birthday festivities, a grand market was held in the Kou lands near the imperial capital. Her brothers would always dress up like townspeople and rush to the market to browse, clutching spending money in their hands.

*"See you later, Reirin!"*

*"We'll be back soon, Reirin. We promise to bring you something nice."*

She couldn't count how many times she had heard her brothers cheerfully bid her goodbye as she lay in bed. Time and time again, she had watched them leave with a spring in their step as she was delirious with fever.

This time, however, she would be bringing something back instead of receiving it. *She* would come bearing a gift for someone else. And she wouldn't have to hear goodbye—*she* would be the one saying it.

Her heart almost aching with joy, she instinctively drew her hand closer to her breast, eliciting a faint crinkle from the reed leaf. She closed her eyes and savored the sensation for a time. What a precious memento of her first-ever stroll through the town.

*Come to think of it, it wasn't until recently that I got into the habit of keeping souvenirs at all.*

The more possessions she owned, the more attachments she had to life. Besides, even the finest of gifts would be worthless if there was no one alive to appreciate them, so she had always been quick to distribute her things to the people around her.

Nowadays, she might keep a letter, for example. Or a single reed leaf. Surely it would be all right to hold on to such insignificant trinkets. Such was Reirin's new

perspective.

“Come along, Leelee. Let’s move on to the next—”

Just as she had called out to her patient attendant, Reirin heard the shout of a barker from across the street. “Come one, come all! A street performance will soon begin in the eastern town square! Just two blocks down from the main street!”

Reirin whipped around upon hearing the words “street performance.”

*Does he mean that art form spun out of bodies and sweat? The kind of performance I could never dream of seeing in the imperial palace?*

Behind her, Leelee sensed that something was wrong and lifted her face, shouting, “Hold it!” By the time the words had left her mouth, however, Reirin was already gravitating toward the barker.

“Lady Rei... Milady! Don’t get lured in! That’s a sketchy backstreet!”

“B-but, Leelee, my legs took on a mind of their own!”

“Well, put your *actual* mind back in charge!”

Despite Leelee’s yelling, Reirin was literally being swept away by the crowd, and her limited experience navigating a city left her no means to resist. Slowly but surely, she was whisked off to the back alley.

“Wha...?! Stop! Come back! Lady Rei—*Milady!*”

“Come one, come all! The show is about to start!”

The festive sound of drums and gongs filled the air. Reirin wondered if the girls dressed in strikingly extravagant garments were dancers. It was hard to see through the sheer fabric of her veil.

*There are so many people...*

The air sizzled with heat. Strangers surrounded her, so close that her hat bumped into their shoulders again and again. Her heart raced as she felt her hand grip the door to the unknown.



*So this is the outside world!*

In her excitement, she instinctively reached to take off her hat and get a better look.

*Yank!*

“Eep!”

All of a sudden, someone shoved the hat back on her head, causing Reirin to nearly pitch forward.

“Careful now.”

An arm wound around her waist from behind, catching her mid-fall.

“Th-thank yo—”

“I suggest you don’t remove your hat without reason, young miss. You must be in quite a fluster.”

Just as she was about to thank the mysterious stranger, she sensed something familiar about the voice so close to her ear, and her whole body went stiff.

“Why the rush? There’s still plenty of time before the appointed hour. And may I add, you’re headed in the wrong direction.”

“Oh...”

His deep, booming tones made Reirin freeze, a cold sweat already trickling down her face.

No, surely it couldn’t be *him*. There were still four more hours until their rendezvous.

“The tavern is that way, *milady*.”

After twisting around so stiffly that one could almost hear the *creak* of her body, Reirin found Gyoumei, who was sporting a similar bamboo hat and dressed like a traveler, standing there with a charming smile.

Man... What awful timing.

The tavern was bustling with patrons in search of a slightly belated breakfast. As soon as the trio were shown to their seats, Leelee poured the hot tea they had been served and studied the man before her: Gyoumei, disguised as a traveler.

*He must think we showed up early on purpose. If I were him, I'd make the same assumption. But milady really did try to show restraint... Then again, I guess she succumbed to temptation at the end there. Yeah, she really should've known better.*

Since Leelee knew how endearingly hesitant Reirin had been to tour the city, she had mixed feelings. Part of her wanted to defend the Maiden, another part of her was mad that Reirin had been so easily tempted by the street performance, and a third part of her was beating herself up for failing to stop her mistress in the first place.

The tavern Gyoumei had designated was a surprisingly unpretentious one, filled with a steady stream of patrons despite the late hour. Delicious smells wafted from the plates of food and steamer baskets. The hot pot must have been a particularly popular dish, as white steam billowed from tables scattered throughout the establishment. Alcohol was served from the early hours of the morning during the festival season, so the room was filled with incessant howls of laughter.

Despite the constant noise, the tables were separated by a waist-high wall and a curtain hanging from the ceiling, allowing for ease of conversation. It made sense why the prince had chosen this tavern; it was the perfect place to focus on a discussion with some measure of privacy.

It was also the perfect place to focus on a lecture.

"Are you listening to me?"

“Yes...”

From the moment she was dragged to the tavern, “Shu Keigetsu”—currently inhabited by Reirin—had been on the receiving end of a lecture from Gyoumei, who was seated across from her. Reirin slumped her shoulders, while Gyoumei crossed his legs and jabbed his finger against the table.

“I hear you refused the palanquin I arranged for you and came here on your own. Do you have any idea how worried I was? I said we were to gather at noon. *Noon!* Remind me what time it is now?”

“I-It’s still the hour of the dragon.”

“To ‘assemble’ means to meet at a designated place. It does *not* involve running off in the opposite direction of the tavern and casting your hat aside. How can you be so foolhardy?”

“I have no good answer.”

As Leelee watched her mistress clutch the zongzi between her fingers, crestfallen, she was tempted to tell the prince to leave it at that.

*Ugh, but he’s right that we didn’t come here to do sightseeing. The reversal of the switch is riding on this excursion... If a sheltered lady suddenly takes off four hours in advance, of course he’s going to worry.*

Much as Leelee itched to jump to Reirin’s defense, she realized that Gyoumei had a good point. Still, the pitiful sight of Reirin squishing the zongzi had her heart in tatters. She definitely bore some of the blame for failing to stop her mistress’s rampage, and she would have liked to argue as much. Alas, Reirin refused to make eye contact and made no attempts to deflect responsibility, so it wasn’t Leelee’s place to interrupt a conversation between the crown prince and his Maiden.

“You are far too quick to break your promises. Didn’t we agree that safety would come first? I hope you’re prepared to face the consequences of going back on your word.”

*Please, Your Highness! You're completely in the right here, but she's had enough!*

Just as Leelee offered a teacup, all but whimpering with dread, she noticed something and blinked. Gyoumei had quickly gestured between her and Reirin with the finger he'd been slamming against the table. With a hint of desperation, he took advantage of the fact that Reirin was staring at the floor to mouth, *Defend her!*

*Oh! So that's his plan!*

Finally realizing his true motives, Leelee leaned across the table. "I-If you will allow me to speak, Lady Rei—*milady* did not set out to break her promise! The blame lies squarely with me for failing to prevent this from happening!"

"Fair enough. I will overlook this transgression in light of your staunch loyalty."

Gyoumei dropped the argument so fast that it sounded completely contrived. He was visibly relieved. It was likely that he also had mixed feelings about watching Reirin clutching her souvenirs in remorse. Unfortunately, she refused to make excuses for herself, and he would be coddling her if he actively let her off the hook for reneging on their deal. He must have been waiting for the right opportunity to back down all along.

*It takes a strict person to stop Lady Reirin from running wild. I feel like I'm finally getting a grasp on His Highness's personality.*

He would never neglect to admonish a loved one, even if it meant playing the bad guy. That gruff, stern brand of kindness might very well have been the product of his Kou blood.

"I thank you for your generosity. It was all due to my own folly!" Leelee asserted, slapping her own cheeks in an exaggerated manner.

Gyoumei responded with a magnanimous nod. "I see. Do endeavor to be more careful in the future."



That marked the end of the matter. Or did it?

“Wait a moment. This is all my fault. Please don’t blame Leelee.”

*Ack!*

Seeing her beloved court lady come “under attack,” Reirin thrust herself forward with a look of purpose. Both Leelee and Gyoumei stole a brief, desperate glance at the ceiling.

“A-and if I may have a word, Your... *You*, sir, treat me too much like some sort of infant.”

Her freckled face was flushed with nerves and determination. By nature, Kou Reirin was mild mannered and obedient. But when it came to protecting her loved ones, she was the sort of person who would reflexively lash out at even the highest authority in the kingdom. If nothing else, it seemed she at least had enough sense left in her to call the crown prince “sir” under the circumstances.

“I took every precaution to avoid trouble on my walk through the city. I have memorized a map of the area down to the last detail, and I brought plenty of coins for shopping. I invented a backstory for my merchant family as part of my disguise, and I even designed a family crest.”

Leelee wanted to beg Reirin not to talk back to the crown prince over a lowly court lady like herself, yet she also wanted to yell at her for a different reason entirely. Had it really been necessary to prepare quite *that* thoroughly?

Even Gyoumei shrank back, overwhelmed. “You actually bothered with all that?”

“I have invested all of my skills in preparing for this day. I have honed my self-defense techniques in case I come under attack, and in my current vessel, I am confident that I could fight off even a bear.”

“A bear? Seriously?”

It was such an outlandish claim that Leelee wasn’t sure how to react. Kou Reirin’s absurd, impulsive, and yet poignant efforts clearly had the power to

bring common sense to its knees.

“In addition, I have continued to hone my acting skills to make my ‘Shu Keigetsu’ act more believable. I have expanded my list of hypothetical—”

“As much as it pains me to tell you this, Reirin...” While Leelee went stiff, Gyoumei flexed his status as the childhood friend and declared, “Your acting is abysmal. Accounting for hypotheticals is nigh meaningless.”

*Someone finally said it!*

Leelee gaped at Gyoumei, amazed by the formidable surprise attack unleashed before her eyes. The thrill was—for some bizarre reason—comparable to watching a competitive cuju match where the ball whizzed past with lightning-fast footwork.

*That was a direct hit, Your Highness!*

Gyoumei had to be the first man to subdue Kou Reirin and take her by the reins, and Leelee was impressed to witness it. For the first time, she felt like she could root for the couple from the bottom of her heart.

Reirin, meanwhile, seemed shaken by the blow of her loved one’s observation. “I’m sorry, *abysmal*?” she muttered, her eyes wide.

“To hear Mother tell it, she could hardly contain her laughter during your ham act the other day. Honestly, why would you think those histrionic cries were a good idea? ‘Oh! Ohh!’”

“Y-you have no right to say that... Didn’t I manage to deceive you once in the past?”

“True. If even one as willfully blind as me thinks your acting is terrible, you ought to consider what that says about you.”

Reirin forced herself to dredge up the past in hopes of rattling her opponent—probably the dirtiest move a good-natured girl like her could manage—but he leaned into it and fended her off with ease.

“It’s time you faced reality. You may be a woman of many talents, but you

fundamentally lack a knack for lying.”

“B-but Leelee and Tousetsu always tell me I’m getting better!”

As Reirin cast her a pleading look, sweat poured down Leelee’s face.

*I’m sorry! You’re right, I did say that! It was very irresponsible of me!*

She couldn’t resist praising her mistress’s efforts. It had been too charming to watch her do her best to stockpile insults or practice her glares when she didn’t have the slightest aptitude for playing the villainess. Stars in her eyes, the girl might say, “I just thought of another insult! ‘Hah! If you were a pickled food, you wouldn’t be a gourd—you’d be an eggshell!’ What do you think, Leelee?!” It was so baffling that it looped back to being deeply amusing and endearing.

“F-forgive me.”

“Why are you apologizing? Was it all a lie?” Shocked by Leelee’s betrayal, Reirin turned a shade paler. “Does Tousetsu think the same?”

She was stunned to have stumbled upon a truth she shouldn’t have.

*Ahhhhh!*

“Thanks for waiting! Here’s your hot pot! If it cools before you’ve finished eating, say the word and I’ll come boil it again.”

Just then, a waitress brought their hot pot with all the hustle of a restaurant at peak hours, and Leelee accepted it with an exaggerated cheer. “Oh boy, this is their most famous dish! Phew, looks like they already boiled it in the kitchen, so it should be nice and easy to eat! Oh, are these rice cakes?! I guess the rice cakes go in later? Wow! I sure do love rice cakes!”

She posed as the resident mochi lover in a desperate attempt to ease the tension in the air.

For reasons known only to herself, Reirin snatched the hot pot out of her attendant’s hands. “Have a seat, Leelee. I will portion out the food myself. I am quite capable of doing that much on my own.” As she set the pot down in front of her, the light went out of her eyes. “Especially compared to a certain

someone who needs his pages to do everything for him.”

*Help! She's picking a fight with His Highness!*

Hearing herself described as a helpless, sheltered girl had evidently struck a nerve.

“Excuse me?” Gyomei leaned forward, his brow furrowed in offense at Reirin’s remark. “Do you think me a spoiled child who can’t even portion out hot pot?” As one who carried the blood of the Kou clan, he couldn’t let such an insult go unchallenged.

Gyomei and Reirin dove for their chopsticks in perfect sync, then made a grab for each other’s plates.

“For the record, I have made multiple trips to the outer city in between my official duties. I know far more about how the common folk live than you do.”

“I must disagree. If I may say so, a commoner would never load a single plate with that much meat. Your regality is evident in every little action you take.”

Though both spoke sharply, they piled food onto the plates with a surprising speed and efficiency. Once each finished filling the other’s plate at exactly the same time, the pair made a grab for the one remaining plate: Leelee’s. Upon realizing that their opponent wasn’t about to let go, they began to dish out the food together, tugging the plate back and forth between them.

“Do you see this? Look at how skillfully I handle my chopsticks! The crumbly tofu hasn’t lost a shred of its original shape!”

“Speed is what truly matters. It all comes down to preserving the heat and the flavor.”

“E-excuse me...” The sight of the crown prince and his Maiden inexplicably serving her a meal sent Leelee into a panic. “Don’t bother—*ahem*, please don’t trouble yourselves on my account!”

“It’s rude to refuse food.”

“One mustn’t hold back at the dining table.”

The couple rebuffed her desperate plea with the same admonition in the same stern tone.

“Just look at how heavy you go on the vegetables. It screams ‘nobility.’ *This* is your idea of playing the commoner? Don’t make me laugh.”

“Is it not prejudice to assume that commoners are always eager to fight over meat? Precisely because they do not have regular access to expensive cuts of meat, they are more likely to savor it in small portions. I’m sure of it.”

“Commoners start with the meat because the fat sticks to the pot when it cools. You didn’t even know that? Unbelievable. Well, I shouldn’t be surprised. I suppose you always *have* left it to others to adjust the heat of the flame.”

“Wha...!”

As the pair carried on with their rather plebeian back-and-forth, they began to slather Leelee’s plate in condiments. Flustered, Leelee made to arrange rice cakes in the pot, figuring it was the least she could do, but that was the wrong move.

“Not yet!”

“It’s not time for the rice cakes!”

The two of them scolded her in perfect unison.

*They’re like an old married couple!*

On the verge of tears, Leelee came to a realization. For a fleeting moment, she’d entertained the idea that if an entity powerful enough to rival Kou Reirin took her reins, it might put an end to her rampages, but it turned out that two egos of equal strength didn’t cancel each other out. Instead, they created twice the threat.

*Oh no... Please don’t tell me I have to deal with this until Lady Keigetsu shows up!*

Hardship always fell on Keigetsu as surely as water flowed from high to low



places. If only *she* were around, Leelee would have someone to share in her suffering. The girl was quick to make a fuss or hurl insults for no reason, but she seldom strayed from basic common sense, and Leelee missed that trait of hers dearly.

Three hours remained until her arrival. No, it could take even longer, depending on how crowded the roads were. After all, she was sure to travel at a reasonable speed.

*Will someone please get me out of this stressful conversation?!*

Leelee's prayer would soon be answered in a twisted way.

"Shaddap! I'm tryin' to eat over here! Paws off, you filthy li'l brat!"

"Eeep!"

A man's roar and a young girl's scream pealed through the air, accompanied by the *crash* of several plates shattering.

A hush fell over the entire restaurant. Several patrons lifted their bamboo screens, and when Leelee did the same, she gasped at what she saw. A man sitting not far from the entrance had kicked a scrawny little girl to the ground. The girl, who couldn't have been older than twelve or thirteen, appeared to have hit her head on impact, but she quickly picked herself back up and clung to the man's leg.

"I won't move from this spot until you promise to give back Lady Miu!"



“Quit yer yappin’! We have a contract. If you’ve got a problem, take it up with her old man! He’s the one who got himself into debt!”

“What contract? You mean the one your crooked gambling den made him seal in blood?! I should go report you to the authorities!”

Based on their conversation, the man was both a tavern patron who had come for a meal and a gambling den employee. The girl was likely a maidservant whose mistress had been taken as collateral for a debt.

The other patrons’ dismay at this fraught exchange was evident, and they looked to the waitstaff for help. Alas, upon catching a glimpse of the debt collector’s face, the employees averted their eyes with a look of distress.

“The authorities? Seriously? Go ahead and try it, ya mongrel! By the looks of it, ya got some Western blood in ya, don’tcha?”

The man rose to his feet, sneering at the girl’s earnest pleas, before grabbing her roughly by the hair. Said hair was identical to Leelee’s—wavy and red, unlike that of an Ei native.

Not one to sit back and watch, Leelee flew out of her seat, knocking it over in the process. “Don’t get violent with a little girl, you creep!”

“Leelee, you mustn’t!”

“Huh? Who are you, a friend of hers?” When Leelee came running over, the man’s eyes widened, after which a lascivious smile rose to his face. “Looks like Western women go up in value when they get to this age.” As he reached for Leelee’s breasts, he looked down at the girl he had knocked to the floor.

“Ringyoku was your name, right? Once your knockers get this big, I’d be willing to trade ya for your mistress. I’ll give ya a job as a dice girl at the Three Realms Parlor!”

Just as he was poised to grope Leelee’s chest with one of his hairy hands, there came a crisp *smack*!

“Agh!”



Reirin had caught up and delivered a powerful kick to the man's elbow, leaving his fingers to graze the air.

"Be more prudent, Leelee. You mustn't let your emotions get the better of you," said Reirin, shielding her attendant behind her back and solemnly adjusting her hat. "That is all the truer in a situation like this one. You must remain calm and take careful aim at your foe."

"You seem even angrier than me!"

"Didn't I tell you not to make matters worse?" Gyoumei joined them with a disgruntled look, likewise wearing his bamboo hat. "You're both far too hotheaded. A word of advice: Anger will pass with three deep breaths. Our first move should be to keep calm and question both parties—"

"Hey! What was that for, you ugly broad?! I oughta rip off those flat tits and let my men screw your brains out!"

When the man screamed vulgarities at the Maiden, clutching at his elbow, Gyoumei fell silent and, without so much as a backward glance, slammed his own elbow into the man's gut.

"Gwah!"

The sheer force of the blow caused the man to double over.

"Wasn't anger supposed to pass with three deep breaths?" Reirin quipped, pressing a hand to her cheek.

"Indeed, which is why you must strike before it has a chance to subside," replied Gyoumei, breezily amending his own philosophy.

As the high-class couple stood there with their hands on their hips, Leelee and the girl named Ringyoku found themselves gripping each other's hands in fear. Somehow, these two were far more intimidating than the thuggish debt collectors.

"Bro! Did you see what these guys just pulled?!" the man shouted, breaking into a nervous sweat.

“Sure did.” His companions, who had been watching with smirks on their faces, slowly rose from their seats. “They’ve got some balls to pick a fight with the Three Realms Parlor.”

In the blink of an eye, Reirin and Gyoumei found themselves surrounded by the brawny debt collectors.

“Lady Rei... Milady!”

“Mister! Miss! Look out!”

Leelee, Ringyoku, and the rest of the patrons leaned forward with concern, but even as the men closed in, Reirin and Gyoumei showed not a crack in their composure. They must have been confident that they could eliminate these small fry in no time.

The men, for their part, broke into vulgar grins.

“Should we kill ‘em?”

“Nah, take a look at how they’re dressed. We’ve got some choice merchandise on our hands. Better to bleed ‘em dry.” The so-called “Bro,” a burly man who appeared to be the most influential of the group, spread his hands and added, “I take it you two also wanna reclaim the little miss? There’s a better way to do it than making a scene here. Why don’tcha win big at the Three Realms Parlor and buy her back? Lucky for you, we keep the parlor open all throughout the festivities.”

“As a heads-up, this is the quickest and most peaceful solution. Call the authorities if you want, but they’ll be on our side.”

From the sound of it, the gambling den known as the Three Realms Parlor had bought off the local government officials. Still, allowing themselves to be led into the enemy’s base would end with them stripped of everything they had.

As the men steadily closed in, Ringyoku raised a quivering voice from the periphery. “L-Leave them alone!”

In contrast to the girl’s panic, Leelee breathed a sigh of relief and regained her



composure. *Idiots! Who would be stupid enough to waltz right into your gambling den? The game is ours if we call the authorities. You're looking at the crown prince and his Maiden! Whoever you've bribed, they'll change their tune in a heartbeat!*

All they had to do was stick around and wait for the authorities to show up. Hell would freeze over before the upstanding crown prince and his Maiden stooped to gambling.

Yet what happened next was beyond Leelee's wildest imagination.

"Good point... It would be a poor idea to call for the authorities. Even so, we cannot let the matter drop."

"We have three hours until noon."

After muttering some foreboding remarks to themselves, Reirin and Gyomei exchanged glances.

"Ha ha ha! Come along quietly now! Otherwise, we might hafta get rough—"

One of the debt collectors made a rough grab for Reirin's arm, but his hairy hand swung and missed. Why? Because the prey he was supposed to be dragging along by force was already making her way to the tavern door.

"What are you dawdling around for? Let us be off to the parlor at once."

The debt collectors boggled. "Huh? Uh...seriously?"

Normally, this was the part where—after some arm-twisting or a minor scuffle—the man and woman would be forcibly dragged off to the gambling den in tears. Why were the supposed captives marching off to their own doom?

The entire audience, Ringyoku included, wore their confusion plain on their faces. "Um, mister? Miss?"

*Hold on. I know what's going on here...* Leelee's face froze in horror as the pair's true motives dawned on her. *They want to keep a low profile so bad that they're throwing themselves right into danger!*

Neither Gyomei nor Reirin could abandon a person in need. That said, they couldn't afford to make a scene or be late for their appointment. In that case, their "best option" was to storm the enemy's home base and settle the matter once and for all. It was almost dizzying how quickly the two convinced themselves to take the most dangerous course of action.

"For Heaven's sake! Would you please hurry up?!"

"We don't have all day."

Their hands hovering over the tavern door, the two birds of a feather glanced back and hurried the men along one more time.

## Chapter 2:

### Keigetsu and Keishou

**A**LTHOUGH THE CARRIAGE provided by the Kou clan had a modest exterior, it was designed with great care and boasted plush cotton seats. The horses were docile and the driver skilled, so the stately carriage barely rocked at all. The Kou Maiden riding inside—or rather, Shu Keigetsu, the girl wearing her form—was enjoying a pleasant journey as a result.

“See that, Lady Keigetsu? That’s the street with all the food stalls. Ha ha, I could get fat on just a whiff of that heavenly smell!”

Or perhaps she would have, were it not for the man sitting across from her.

“That grand market square is a battleground for seared meat stalls, so it’s easy to find a good bargain there. They’re also fairly generous with their portions. The only trouble is that it all sits heavy in the stomach. Personally, I’d prefer to try a variety of different foods.”

“Excuse you!”

“Oh, check out that vendor over there! Doesn’t he look like a pig? Mind you, I mean that as a compliment. A pig selling seared pork is quite the clever marketing strategy. Stalls like that always turn out to have the best food, oddly enough.”

“Could you please back off a bit?”

“Whoa, look! Did you see that?! Fire just leapt from that pan and crawled up the cook’s beard! And he’s still cooking... Oh, it’s gone! Wow, he didn’t even blink. Now that’s dedication to the craft.”

“Are you listening to me?! You’re too close, Lord Keishou!” Keigetsu couldn’t help but yell at Kou Keishou, the man who kept invading her personal space to peek out the window. “Look out your own window! Quit getting up in my face!”

“I can’t help it. The stalls are disappearing into the distance behind you.”

“Then why don’t you get out of the carriage and drive the carriage yourself? A mere military officer shouldn’t be riding with a Maiden in the first place!”

“Today, I’m here as ‘Kou Reirin’s’ brother, not a ceremonial officer. Wouldn’t it look more natural for us to ride together?” He let Keigetsu’s shrill demands pass over him like a gentle spring breeze. Worse yet, he even winked at her. “Plus, I can guard you more closely this way.”

Keigetsu jerked her head aside as if to dodge the wink he shot her way. “I never asked you to guard me *this* closely!”

As much as she hated to admit it, it made her deeply uncomfortable to have a man staring at her in such close quarters.

“I never even wanted to go to the city in the first place. I haven’t the slightest interest in any of this.” In an effort to hide her nerves, she spoke more harshly than necessary.

“Oh, come off it. I know you were looking forward to this trip.”

“I was not! I only went along with it because Kou Reirin got down on her knees and begged me!”

As she scoffed at the man who was always so quick to tease, Keigetsu told herself over and over again: *That’s right. I’m doing this against my will. There’s nothing remotely appealing about a trip outside the palace.*

It had been two days since Kou Reirin doubled back to the pavilion with a somber expression on her face. At the time, Keigetsu had been ready and waiting to rake her over the coals for letting Kasui find out about the switch, so it took the wind out of her sails when Reirin apologized in her first breath. When the dismayed Keigetsu had questioned her sudden change in attitude, Reirin first made sure there was no one around before explaining thus: The Maiden Court was possibly under surveillance by the emperor’s men, so they had to go to the outer city to reverse the switch.

Kou Reirin seemed to regret having attracted the emperor's attention with her plan, and she had given Keigetsu an obviously heartfelt apology. She had even gone so far as to offer up one or two of her fingers, and not as a joke.

In all honesty, Keigetsu had been shocked when she first heard the news, and her distress had swiftly turned to rage, leading her to yell at Reirin that it was all her fault. However, by the time the other girl bowed her head and offered to make amends, her anger had passed its peak, leaving her confused as to why *Reirin* was so desperate to take responsibility. Keigetsu had absolutely no use for one of her fingers, and besides...

*Why should Kou Reirin be responsible for a spell I cast of my own free will?*

That one simple question had doused her boiling emotions like a pitcher of ice-cold water.

It was true that Reirin was the one who had come up with the whole outrageous plan. Still, Keigetsu wasn't charitable enough to lend a helping hand against her will. She had wanted to strike back at the shaman who insulted and cornered her during the Rite of Reverence, to demonstrate her might as her gift for the final trial, and to bring those pesky Kins and Rans to ruin. It would have sufficed to give the shaman a light burn and form the connection with a small-scale flame spell, but Keigetsu had made the choice to engulf Anni's entire body in flames and hang a curtain of fire over the whole square.

Yet, as always, Kou Reirin shouldered the blame as easily as she breathed. She seemed to be under the misconception that Keigetsu was a good, altruistic person who would do anything for a friend, and the latter felt deeply awkward about it. Keigetsu often wondered if Reirin had perhaps forgotten her past attempt to curse and kill her. Worse still, she had made it this far on the back of a single apology, never once having gone out of her way to make amends.

*I should quit while I'm ahead. If I start keeping strict accounts of who owes what to whom, I'll come out deep in the red.* Keigetsu shook her head to rid herself of the guilt. *Besides, I get the impression that His Majesty is actually*



*quite tolerant of the Daoist arts.*

For that matter, she was able to make a relatively calm assessment compared to Reirin's panic.

It was true that Genyou was the son of the emperor who had suppressed Daoist magic. At the time of the Rite of Reverence, Keigetsu had been quite leery of him. However, he had faithfully kept his promise not to probe into the matter of the mirror, and despite his suspicions that sorcery was afoot, he had settled for imposing surveillance and nothing more.

Additionally, the persecution that had been so severe during the previous emperor's reign had eased when Genyou took over the throne. That was how Keigetsu's would-be cultivator of a father had escaped a death sentence. It followed, then, that Gyoumei was right that the surveillance order was only for the sake of appearances.

Kou Reirin was the one making a big deal out of nothing. If she had already devised a counterstrategy, there was no need to rake her over the coals. After coming to that conclusion, Keigetsu had raked a hand through her hair with a huff and replied, "If that's the best solution available, then fine. If you're really that sorry, I don't mind heading into town."

She would die before letting Kou Reirin know that she'd actually been giddy at the prospect of seeing the imperial capital from the comfortable Kou clan carriage with a guard at her side.

"Ugh. What a chore. This is unbearable. Why must I risk heading into the outer city during such a crowded festival?" she grumbled, trying to convince herself of her disinterest. All the while, her eyes remained glued to the market outside the window.

The crowd was incomparable to what she used to see in her southern backwater. People flocked to the stalls scattered around the street. For all she knew, there could have been novelty snacks, trendy makeup, or unique garments for sale there. The decorations were all elaborate. The smell wafting

through the air was enough to make her drool.

“You seem quite entranced with the scenery, considering.”

“I-I am not.” When Keishou pointed out that she was about to bump her forehead into the window, Keigetsu turned her head aside. “I just don’t want to see your face, so I have nowhere else to look!”

“What a terrible thing to say. I’m hurt.” Contrary to his words, Keishou gave an unabashed shrug. “I’m your ‘brother,’ and I know your secret. Wouldn’t you say we’re bound together by some sort of common destiny? I’ve been looking forward to this ever since His Highness named me as a suitable escort. Come now, wipe that grumpy look off your face and let yourself enjoy this undercover jaunt.”

“There’s nothing to ‘let’ myself enjoy! I told you I’m not interested!” After her initial overreaction to Keishou’s suggestion that she was looking forward to this, Keigetsu began to speak more emphatically. “Once we reverse the swap, I’ll never have reason to interact with the Kou clan again. I have no intention of bonding with you,” she said with a snort, followed by a haughty jerk of her chin.

She had to make it clear that she had no interest in making nice with this man.

“In the first place, Kou Reirin is making a big to-do about nothing. We could have easily taken the same carriage to the outer city, but she insisted on splitting up, wearing disguises, and having her brother create a diversion. She said we ought to practice for the next time, but there’s no reason to believe there will even *be* a next time.”

In a desperate bid to hide her own excitement, Keigetsu found fault wherever she could, but Keishou only listened quietly, tilting his head with a thoughtful hum before peering carefully into her eyes.

“I’m not so sure about that. I believe this is absolutely necessary.”

Keigetsu blinked. “What? Why?”

Keishou scooped up a lock of his “sister’s” hair, as soft and gorgeous as a silk thread. “During the trip to Unso, your qi spiraled out of control. This time, you had to save Reirin’s life. This might not be the last time unforeseen circumstances force you to switch places, so we should prepare for that eventuality.” There was no trace of the usual mischief in his eyes, a solemn glint in its place. “We can’t let anyone find out about the swap. We have to come up with a story to fool them. We need to know our potential hiding places, familiarize ourselves with decoy tactics, and strengthen our teamwork. All of these things are essential, if you ask me.”

The sensation of his fingers gently twirling her hair, the earnest look in his eyes, and the words he spoke all overwhelmed Keigetsu, leaving her breathless.

When he noticed she had gone silent, Keishou put the smile back on his face and let the lock of hair drop. “That means it’s also important for you to play nice with your ‘brother.’ No more glaring at me or yelling at me at the slightest provocation. For the moment, we are the Kou siblings famed for our close bond.”

Apparently, the point of that speech was just to tell her to stop glaring at him.

This was the part where she’d usually shout back, “Not a chance!” Instead, the grave look on his face compelled her to follow his advice.

As Keigetsu sat there, tongue-tied, Keishou amiably pointed out the window. “Here’s an idea. Let’s stop this carriage somewhere along the way and do some shopping in the market to get better acquainted. Your ‘brother’ here will buy you anything you desire. Consider it an apology for all the trouble my sister has caused you.”

“We don’t have time for that,” Keigetsu argued, confused. “It’s the first hour of the snake, isn’t it? We’re supposed to meet at the second hour sharp.”

Keishou offered a surprising response. “About that...” A blithe smile rose to his lips, and he gave a slight tilt of his head. “We’re actually supposed to meet at noon, not the second hour of the snake. We still have a good three hours to

spare.”

“Huh?”

“It’s been a long time since my last shopping trip. I was so eager to hit the market that I lied about the actual meeting time. Ha ha, you’ll have to forgive me!”

As soon as she processed what he was saying, the corner of Keigetsu’s lip twitched. *This jerk!*

What was his deal? Just when she’d taken him for a frivolous man, he suddenly offered her earnest advice, yet as soon as she decided to take him seriously, he turned around and betrayed her expectations.

*He’s just pretending to be nice while he does whatever he wants!*

Before she knew it, Keigetsu was smacking her seat and screaming, “I’ve had quite enough of your games!”

“Back to glaring and yelling again? Have you already forgotten my advice?”

With a cheerful laugh, Keishou motioned for the driver to head into the market.

*She’s such a fascinating girl.*

Keishou had to stifle a laugh as Keigetsu whipped around and glared out the window. Her face remained fixed into a scowl for a while, but in the short time it took for the carriage to roll steadily toward the market, she’d begun to blink her wide eyes in wonder. Apparently, she had found a stall that caught her attention.

She flitted so fast between facial expressions that it was hard to believe she was wearing his sister’s face. No matter how many times the two switched places, he was confident he could tell them apart with ease.

*Her eyes positively sparkle with the strength of her backbone.*

She was Shu Keigetsu, the talentless Maiden known as the court sewer rat. At first, even Keishou had been furious to learn that she'd nearly killed his sister, but his impression of her had changed by the time she'd risen to the challenge of the Unso tea party. For all her whining, she had stood her ground, braved the slander leveled against her, and done her best to fulfill her responsibilities.

Shu Keigetsu was easily petrified with fear. But as a trade-off, she never ran away. Shu Keigetsu was quick to scream in anger. At the same time, she was willing to take even an authority figure to task if it meant protecting her pride.

It was novel to see her emote so fiercely with Reirin's delicate face and to hear her raise Reirin's voice in the heat of the moment. The way she scrambled to get a situation under control despite her complaints was as endearing as watching a child sniffle and clean up the mess they'd made during a tantrum.

*Such a shame that she seems to think herself an unpleasant person.*

The current situation was another good example. Even though Reirin had gotten her into this mess and forced her to leave the palace walls, Keigetsu didn't hold it against her. She seemed to believe that she herself was partly to blame, not to mention that she owed Reirin a debt she could never hope to repay.

Since her previous mistreatment of her court ladies and attempted murder of another Maiden were both immutable facts, there was no doubt she had once had an expunitive side to her. Still, Keishou believed that Shu Keigetsu was a girl who returned affection and trust with equal—if not greater—devotion. Her growth, which even the girl in question seemed to be blind to, was a dazzling sight to a Kou who so loved to nurture others.

*Why can't anyone else see her appeal?*

It was in Keishou's nature to want the whole world to appreciate those he favored, so he found it vexing that Keigetsu was presently scorned as a talentless mediocrity. It must have been even more frustrating for his sister, who always took things to greater extremes than he did.



Keigetsu was a woman worth cultivating, one who blossomed bigger the more work others put into her. He only wished more people would come to learn of her charms.

*Isn't it about time His Highness gave her a warmer reception?*

The moment the thought crossed his mind, Keishou blinked from where he had propped his chin on the windowsill. As Reirin's brother, shouldn't he have been content with the current state of affairs? Finding his own train of thought puzzling, he opted to drop the matter.

He'd let a bemused grunt slip, though, so Keigetsu shot him a suspicious look from the opposite seat. "What is it? First you suddenly went quiet, and now you're grumbling to yourself."

"Oh, nothing. I was simply pondering how we ought to spend our surplus of spare time."

"Seriously? If your plan was this ill-conceived, you might as well have been honest about the time and skipped the trip to the market."

"You've got me there."

Keishou nodded along with the criticism, but to tell the truth, he hadn't moved up the time purely because he wanted to visit the market. He knew his sickly sister had a habit of leaving for appointments over two hours early, so he wanted to be around in case any problems arose. He wasn't about to tell Keigetsu as much, however. Considering how hard Reirin tried to put on a brave face, she would be ashamed if someone else were to expose her fragility.

"Oh, honestly. You girls and your fronts," he murmured under his breath.

Keigetsu leaned forward, her sharp ears catching the sound. "What? Did you say something?"

"Nothing important." Keishou dodged the question with a laid-back smile. "I was just musing that we ought to focus on shopping after all. I can never have enough gifts to give my sister, and there are others I'd like to give a little

something to as well.”

Routine gift-giving was an essential skill for any man who made frequent visits to the inner court. Of course, in Keishou’s case, this wasn’t meant as a ticket to romance; it was little more than a way of bribing his sister’s staff to make her stay at the court more pleasant. Regarded as one of the most conscientious personalities in the Kou clan, Keishou was acutely aware of how much a modest gift could soften the heart. He also knew how much more comfortable that could make his sister’s environment.

“Hmph. How very sociable of you.”

“The sun can still be strong in the winter, so be sure to keep your hat on,” he advised Keigetsu, casually brushing aside her cynical comment. Even the most trivial of reasons could cause his little sister to faint.

Just as Keigetsu had finished donning her bamboo hat, the carriage came to a gentle stop.

“Wow, it’s certainly packed!” Keishou gushed from beside her when they reached the main street, which was crammed full of food stalls.

Beneath the blue sky, flags advertising roasted rice cakes fluttered lazily in the air, and red paper lanterns added a bright splash of color to the scene. The sizzle of oil in pots or pans echoed from every corner, the vendors’ cries of “Get your roasted chestnuts!” rang out, and the sweet aroma of fried confections hung in the air here and there.

Staple foods such as seared meat, steamed buns, and noodles appeared to be largely clustered in the grand square the pair had seen from the carriage, while snacks and sundries were the main items sold on the street. Women and children therefore made up most of the crowd, and couples out for a date were also a common sight. With so many people around, even a Maiden could easily blend into the crowd.

Unfortunately, due to Keigetsu’s sensitivity to qi, the heat coming at her from all directions was wearing her down. The excitement she’d felt upon alighting

from the carriage was fading fast, and she was already leaning toward finding this a hassle.

“It’s too crowded...”

“Oh, don’t look so glum. Let’s do this with a bang, Keikei!”

“K-Keikei?!” When Keishou patted her on the shoulder and called her by a baffling name, Keigetsu’s voice hitched. “Wh-what is *that* supposed to be?!”

“Hm? A nickname, obviously.”

In the Kingdom of Ei, particularly among the citizenry, it was common practice to refer to close siblings or lovers by doubling one of the syllables of their name or prefixing it with a diminutive. Some children were even given such names at birth as a token of love.

According to Keishou, both he and Keikou had originally wanted to call their sister “Reirei,” but after she refused them with a smile, they had respected her wishes and settled for calling her by name alone. Keigetsu wasn’t particularly surprised that Reirin wouldn’t appreciate such a cloying term of endearment.

“When I call you ‘Reirin,’ your reaction is sometimes delayed. But if I call you ‘Lady Keigetsu,’ the people around us will figure out who you are, and you won’t react at all if I call you ‘Reirei.’ Thus, I’ve opted to take the middle road and call you ‘Keikei’ for today,” Keishou added charmingly, spinning the nickname as something he was doing for Keigetsu’s sake. “To tell you the truth, it’s always been a secret fantasy of mine to call my sister by a nickname. I relish that ‘close siblings’ feel.”

“I’m not sure *that’s* the feel it gives off...” Keigetsu almost added that it might make them look more like a pair of lovers, but she hastily bit back the words.

Calling a woman by a nickname probably wasn’t the least bit nerve-racking for Keishou. Keigetsu was too self-conscious about these things because she’d never had an intimate conversation with a man in her entire life.

*Get a grip! He thinks of this version of “me” as his little sister!*

“Here, Keikei. Make sure your hat is tied nice and tight. Are your legs starting to hurt? Be careful not to leave your big brother’s side. Crouch down if you feel like you’re going to faint. No holding back now. If you get tired, I’m happy to pick you up and carry you. Here’s a hand towel. Take a spare too. And this is your spending money.”

Paying no heed to how Keigetsu had stiffened and turned bright red, Keishou waited on her hand and foot with brisk efficiency. He was the picture of an overprotective older brother.

No, judging by the very specific warnings interspersed throughout his ramblings, it was clear that his sister really would fall ill if she neglected any of these efforts. Perhaps he was being just the right amount of protective.

“Oh, do you know how to pay with coins? This one with a hole in the middle is —”

“I know that much!” When he casually tried to take her hand, Keigetsu automatically shook him off. Hoping that he wouldn’t realize how startled she’d been by the touch, she hastily invented a rationalization for her anger. “Don’t take me for a fool. I’m not as sheltered as a certain someone I could name. I’ve been to the capital market plenty of times before.”

“Hm? Really?”

“That’s right. I even know which sesame balls are supposed to be the best.”

That was a lie. She had been holed up in the Maiden Court ever since she moved from the countryside, so she had no way of knowing which treats were most popular in the imperial capital.

Now that she had said it in the heat of the moment, however, there was no backing down. After a quick scan of the area, she started walking toward a flag advertising sesame balls. Sesame balls could be found for sale even in the southern countryside. *Any* deep-fried rice cake filled with red bean paste was bound to be delicious.

“It’s that stall.”

The stall and its flag were both on the large side, meaning it must have been popular and well funded. At first glance, there seemed to be fewer customers in line compared to its competitors, but the quick pace at which the line was moving indicated that this was due to the vendor’s efficiency, not poor quality.

Who needed prior knowledge of the area? Good intuition was all it took to track down a scrumptious treat.

“Here’s the end of line. Get over here.”

Keishou observed the steady progress of the queue with interest. “Hmm. It’s moving along awfully fast...”

Keigetsu arched an eyebrow with a huff, then proudly asserted, “That’s proof of its popularity. A good stand doesn’t keep its customers waiting.”

No matter how worldly he made himself out to be, Keishou was the son of a distinguished nobleman. He’d mentioned that it had been “a long time” since his last shopping trip, so he probably didn’t have much experience. Keigetsu had done her own shopping back in the southern territory, so she was a few steps ahead of him when it came to street smarts.

“Listen here. An endless line isn’t the true mark of a successful stand.”

Keigetsu went on lecturing and lording it over him for a while—*Oh, how delightful it feels to have the upper hand over this man!*—but as soon as they made it to the front of the line, the color drained from her face.

“Thanks for the wait! You get a blue one, little lady!”

For some reason, instead of piping hot sesame balls, the vendor handed her a crude wooden tablet.

“Huh?”

“Your tablet’s blue, missy. The blue batch should be ready, hmm...after the hour of the horse, I figure! Next, please!”

Leaving Keigetsu to gape in shock, the vendor swiftly began handing out wooden strips to the customers behind her. He was holding a basket, and in it was a stack of about five different color-coded tablets. It wasn't until a young man next to the vendor banged the rim of a pot and shouted, "Red is up! We're taking customers with red tablets! Sorry for the wait! Now accepting red tablets!" that Keigetsu finally understood how the stall operated.

*A reservation system? For a food stall?!*

Even worse, her turn wouldn't come for another three hours!

Instantly overcome by a blinding fury, Keigetsu instinctively slammed the tablet against the ground.

"This is ridiculous!"

Her face was burning with shame. If they had such a system and queue in place, why didn't they explain it up front on the signboard?

*Why do I always look so pathetic?! I can't stand it!*

Keishou's long silence was making her afraid to turn around. No, she could already picture his expression without even looking. Surely he was heaving a deep sigh. Or perhaps he was shrugging his shoulders in disbelief or shooting a cold sneer her way.

It was just like when she botched a dance in the Maiden Court, hit the wrong note in a song, misspelled a word, or gave an incoherent answer to a question. Tears welled in Keigetsu's eyes as she recalled the frosty looks the instructors, Maidens, or court ladies always gave her in those moments.

Why did she always get everything wrong?

"Pff—"

When she heard a stifled laugh, Keigetsu cast a dubious glance at the man standing next to her.

"Pff"...?



A quick look revealed that Keishou was looking down at the ground, clutching at his own arms. No, upon closer inspection, his shoulders and arms were trembling ever so slightly.

Keigetsu frowned. The shaking was going on a little too long for a scornful snicker.

“...Are you laughing at me?”

“N-no, of course not. I wouldn’t laugh at...ghk! Okay, you got me. That was just too priceless...”

“What is that supposed to mean?! There’s absolutely nothing funny about any of this!”

“I mean...you rushed right in so confidently...and missed the mark so spectacularly...” He began to wheeze with laughter, abandoning his attempts at self-control. “I-I’m sorry for laughing. But you’re truly something special! You’re the fastest woman to the punchline!”

“I have no desire to be!”

“And to top it off, you threw the tablet on the ground! *Wham!*” Tears of mirth were beginning to form in his eyes; he clearly found something inexplicably hilarious about the whole ordeal. “Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Stop laughing!”

“I can’t help it! How can you be so cute?!”

“Wha...?!” Keigetsu had initially rebuked him, a flush on her cheeks, but the moment Keishou shouted the word “cute,” she choked on her words. “Don’t mock me!”

“I know, I know, that was rude of me. Believe me, I truly didn’t mean to make fun of you.” Once Keishou finally got his laughter under control, he picked up the wooden tablet and handed it back to Keigetsu. “I do appreciate your efforts to find me the most popular sesame ball stand. It’s not every day that I see that face cycle through so many expressions, so I find it a delight to watch, that’s

all,” he said mildly.

He had a point. The ever-ladylike Kou Reirin would never scowl in a fit of rage or slam a wooden tablet to the ground in tears.

When Keigetsu lapsed into silence, flustered by the surprising compliment, Keishou gave her a light pat on the shoulder and said, “Once everything is settled, let’s come back here after the hour of the horse.” And with that, he strode off.

Evidently, he was willing to let the matter drop.

*Hm, so he does have his considerate moments. I’ll give him credit for being good with women,* Keigetsu admitted as she walked a step behind him.

For all that Kou Keishou was a pushy bully, he would casually take the lead to clear a path for someone else, and he never drew out his teasing for too long. As she caught a peek at his chiseled profile through the veil of her hat, Keigetsu secretly wondered if there was truth to him being one of the two most popular military officers in the capital.

“Oh, look, Keikei! They’re selling your berserker balls over there too! Ooh, I spy even more berserker balls over here! Shall we buy a few different samples and compare them?”

“Stop calling them that!”

She immediately amended that private thought. Kou Keishou was indeed the most relentless man alive.

Having learned her lesson from the “berserker balls” incident, Keigetsu opted to let Keishou lead the way. The man had developed such a habit of fussing over his sister’s health that, at first, he turned around every few steps to check on her. He would be genuinely surprised to see that his “sister” hadn’t fainted after walking a few dozen steps, and he would constantly remark, “You’re doing great!” or “Are you sure you’re all right?” or “Is this too hard on you?”

Eventually, Keigetsu grew so annoyed that she threatened to knock him flat if he asked any more questions.

How frail did a person have to be to pass out after such a short period of walking?

Keishou burst out laughing again, but her reaction seemed to put his mind at ease. After buying Keigetsu some filling snacks and roasted rice cakes, he began to glance back at her with less and less frequency, concentrating instead on leisurely browsing the stalls lined with sundries. There were embroideries, ornamental hairpins, cloth shoes, incense, and cosmetics. Unlike the gated trading houses, these stalls were all out in the open, so their goods were generally on the cheap side. Still, it was possible to find a hidden treasure among them.

Rather than impulsively buying whatever struck his fancy, Keishou examined each item carefully, had Keigetsu try them on beside him, even compared different colors, and always made the effort to haggle down the price. Perhaps because his companion, Keigetsu—or “Kou Reirin,” as it were—boasted a beauty too exquisite for her veil to conceal, no matter how long he spent agonizing over a purchase, the vendors never seemed to mind. On the contrary, they showed the pair all sorts of products and even offered them a cup of tea, hoping that their patronage might boost the stall’s reputation.

*Being a beauty certainly has its advantages. Kou Reirin is a lucky girl,* thought Keigetsu, not altogether displeased with the special treatment.

Looking back, though she had gone to the market or a festival plenty of times when she lived in the southern territory, she had never once received VIP treatment. Proud of her noble status, no matter how marginal, Keigetsu’s mother had taught her young daughter not to talk to the merchants. Keigetsu had taken her at her word and refused to make eye contact with the lowly vendors. Later, when their family fell on hard financial times, she would instead avert her eyes out of shame. Unable to afford an attendant, Keigetsu would wear her one decent outfit, hide her unkempt face from view, and do her own

shopping.

Now things were different. Everyone gazed upon Kou Reirin's lithe physique with admiration, and they quickly made way for her upon catching a glimpse of the beautiful face behind her veil. The vendors all engaged her in friendly conversation. Though she was well aware that this body wasn't her own, Keigetsu couldn't help breaking into a grin regardless.

That said...

*Once he knows he doesn't have to worry about his companion, this man will keep on walking forever.*

After an hour on her feet, even Keigetsu was starting to get tired. Keishou, on the other hand, had yet to exhaust his stamina—as was to be expected of a military officer—and remained in high spirits throughout.

That was especially true now that he had found a vendor selling rather high-end jewelry for an open-air stall and was in the midst of excitedly picking out a bracelet.

“Which one do you think looks best?” he asked Keigetsu, making her wonder for a fleeting moment if he was planning to buy her something. But seeing as all the options he presented had lotus patterns, it was safe to say that he was only choosing one for Reirin. “I must say, you’ve been a huge help. I couldn’t very well drag my sickly sister around with me, but there are a lot of things you have to try on to know how they’ll look. I never thought I’d see the day when she was in such good shape.”

In short, this man was using Keigetsu as a way to test out his gifts for his sister. She was being dragged around on someone else's never-ending shopping spree in exchange for just a few sweets—he'd been worried she might throw up if she ate too much at once—and she was getting more and more fed up by the minute. Why should *she* have to join him in pounding the pavement just to make Kou Reirin happy?

“There's no need to give her all these little gifts! Exactly how many are you

planning to buy her?!”

“I’m aiming for about twenty different varieties. The smallest of gifts can make someone’s day, don’t you think? I like to leave these presents in the hands of her court ladies, such that I can shower her with gifts at any given moment.”

“Wait, you drag unrelated parties into your nonsense?! Not even a lover in a new relationship would go that far. Isn’t it enough to give her one gift a year on her birthday?!”

It was a well-known fact that Kou Reirin was spoiled by everyone under the sun, but Keigetsu found herself strangely annoyed to be confronted with it anew.

Reirin was the girl who had it all. Everything fell into her lap. Strangers were kind to her, people were delighted just to see her, and her loved ones were happy to pick out gifts for her. The more charming and colorful the items Keishou chose, the more their brilliance cast a shadow over Keigetsu’s heart.

Naturally, she directed those caustic emotions in Keishou’s direction. “Frankly, the way you shop is downright creepy. How do you know so much about what women like?”

Forgetting how impressed she had been with his understanding of a woman’s heart only moments before, she felt consumed with the desire to berate or criticize him for any shortcoming she could name.

“What can I say? Once you’ve made your fair share of purchases, the knowledge comes naturally. And I always have enjoyed the act of gift-giving.”

“Meaning you’ve spent your whole life ingratiating yourself with women? Fascinating.”

Keishou knew her decently well at this point. How come *she* had never received even a single gift from him?

The thought of it made Keigetsu’s insults more pointed than ever. “It must be

hard to play the lady-killer. Can't get a single woman to look your way without a deluge of gifts? You poor thing. Well, that's no surprise... Yes, I suppose you *are* shorter than your brother and the captain of the Eagle Eyes, aren't you?" she said, grasping at straws for something to criticize after giving Keishou a quick, sweeping glance.

Looks? Stunning. Mind? Brilliant. Martial arts skills? Masterful. Conversation? Witty. The only thing left to nitpick was his height. He was on the tall side compared to the average person, but he was ever so slightly shorter than the brawny Kou Keikou or the half-foreign Shin-u.

Putting it the other way around, no other feature of his could possibly be called into question.

"Wow, you certainly know how to rile a man up." As it turned out, Keigetsu's desperate search for an insult had stumbled upon a secret insecurity of Keishou's. After returning a handful of bracelets to the stand, he cast her a somewhat sullen look. "Let's leave it at that. I wouldn't exactly say I'm short."

"Oh dear, did I hit a nerve?"

Keigetsu's mood improved the instant she saw Keishou's reaction. *Aha! Since he's constantly surrounded by a legion of tall men, the height difference gets to him!*

"I finally understand why you spend so much time with your sister. Being around a petite girl helps you feel better about yourself, since it makes you look taller by comparison! With a tall girl, the height difference isn't nearly as obvious! You have my sympathies."

This was fun. She was having the time of her life. Nothing relieved stress quite like jeering at others.

"You think so?" Yet just as Keigetsu was gleefully devising more ways to fuel his inferiority complex, Keishou abruptly yanked her hat up, stunning her into silence. "I'd say my height comes in handy for certain things."



He parted the veil and brought his face close to hers. The moment he let go, the sheer cloth fluttered back down, forming a private curtain around the two of them.

They were in such close quarters that the carriage ride couldn't compare.

"When I'm dealing with tall girls, like your real self..." Perhaps because he was alluding to the switch, he lowered his voice and whispered, "It's the perfect height for a kiss."

"Wha...?!"

Keigetsu's reaction went far beyond the level of blushing.

"Wh-wha-wha...?!"

The shapely lips right before her eyes, the body heat trapped within the veil, the half-lidded eyes gazing into hers—as she struggled to process the flood of sensory information hitting her at once, Keigetsu's legs buckled under her.

*Jangle, clang, ka-crash!*

When she scrambled to retreat, she hit the display shelf in the process, knocking the jewelry to the ground.

"Hey, watch it, little miss! My goods ain't as cheap as any old stall around here!"

"Oh, apologies," Keishou replied in his companion's stead, extracting himself from her hat and elegantly retrieving the merchandise. He glanced back at Keigetsu, who was still clumsily bracing herself against the stand, before breaking into a grin. "*That's* how you rile someone up, Keikei."

"Wha...?"

"Mm, the look of you fighting back tears is simply precious. I never get to see it on *her* face."

Worse, when he saw that she looked ready to cry, his smile widened in delight.

“Why, you...!”

*I ought to send him to Hell!*

Keigetsu flushed so hard that it almost knocked the breath out of her, but she was clearly the one who had started it, so she had no right to complain.

While she stood there trembling, Keishou bought two of the bracelets he’d been considering without even negotiating the price, perhaps as an apology to the vendor.

“Thanks for doing business! You’ve got discerning tastes, sir. Both of those were made by first-rate artisans who have yet to make a name for themselves. Each one is as good as new and valued at a tael of gold. But tell ya what? I’ll cut you a special deal of ten mace of silver apiece.”

The vendor’s mood instantly improved, and a laugh rumbled in his broad throat. Ten mace of silver was close to a commoner’s monthly food budget. It was still cheaper than buying from a trading house, but the price was rather steep for a street vendor’s offerings.

*Well, I suppose these are of high enough quality to belong in a trading house,* Keigetsu thought as her eyes roamed over the merchandise.

She was forced to take a good look at what she’d done, pressuring Keishou to buy something he didn’t even want. The pearl bracelet fashioned in the shape of a lotus was probably worth the purchase, but the second one he had bought—a gaudy one that depicted a fictitious flower made of colorful gems—couldn’t possibly be to Kou Reirin’s tastes.

As Keigetsu eyed the bracelets uncomfortably, Keishou noticed her gaze and glanced over at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It just...seems like a lot to spend on a mundane, ‘just because’ gift.” Hesitant to admit her own guilt in the matter, she phrased her apology evasively. “Why not save it for her birthday?”

“Mm, I’m afraid that won’t work.” Keishou shrugged and gave a surprising

answer. “She never accepts birthday presents.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Because her birthday is the anniversary of our mother’s death,” he replied casually. Or, rather, it seemed as if he was deliberately keeping his tone even to make it sound less grim.

Keigetsu gasped. *Oh, I didn’t think about that...*

Kou Reirin was the crown jewel of the Kou clan. Her gorgeous looks and great personality had played a large part in winning her their affections—but it was also because she was a pitiful girl who had lost her mother as the price for her own birth.

Even for one as deprived of parental love as Keigetsu, her birthday was the one day of the year she could expect to be celebrated by others. For Kou Reirin, however, it was a day to reflect on her own sins.

Kou Reirin would never celebrate the day she came into the world. Knowing this, Keishou would never give her a birthday present. Instead, he would collect these humble trinkets and give them to her on ordinary days for no reason at all. Sometimes, he would even rely on the help of others to do it. All this in the hope that even a small fraction of his love and affection would reach her.

When Keigetsu lapsed into silence, Keishou smiled faintly and held out one of the bracelets that had just been packaged for him. “Here. This is for you.”

Keigetsu slowly lifted her face and stared at the cloth pouch with a grave expression.

*So he wants me to give her something as well?*

Before, she had found Kou Keishou’s extended shopping spree to be nothing but a nuisance. Now that she knew the circumstances behind it, however, it wasn’t so easy to dismiss his behavior as overzealous.

“Fine. I’ll give it to her on a day when you can’t come by the court.”

No sooner had she solemnly accepted the task than Keishou burst out

laughing. “Why is *that* your first response? That’s not what I meant. I’m giving it to you.”

“Huh?” She was genuinely blindsided.

“I could tell you wanted one of those bracelets, and the made-up flower reminded me of you.”

Keigetsu was too surprised to say a word.

*He got this for me? Not for Kou Reirin...but for me?*

As soon as she processed what was happening, her body temperature rose and she broke into a nervous sweat.

She had to thank him. No, perhaps it would be better manners to refuse the gift at first. On the other hand, that seemed a bit manipulative. Better to be true to her feelings and... No, that definitely still felt rude. Why was she getting so flustered over a measly bracelet, anyway? She had to act more confident, raise one eyebrow like she was appraising the offering, and— “You...” Flooded with too many emotions at once, Keigetsu blurted out a cynical comment. “You thought a made-up flower would suit me best? Should I take that as an insult?”

The moment the words left her mouth, she was overcome with despair. The gesture had made her unbelievably happy. Why was she incapable of responding with anything but criticism?

“No, I didn’t mean it negatively.” Keishou declined to poke fun at her, instead launching into a matter-of-fact explanation. “You’re not much of an immaculate lotus, are you? Neither are you a glamorous peony, a gallant camellia, or a dainty daffodil.”

“Hey! You *are* insulting me!”

“Still, you have a little of each in you.”

As Keigetsu’s eyes went wide, Keishou asked for the pouch back and emptied the bracelet onto his palm. “Don’t you find this design intriguing? The flower blooms near the water like a lotus, but its petals are like a peony, its leaves like

a daffodil, and its color like a camellia.” He pointed to each of the features in turn, and Keigetsu watched attentively.

The flower had likely been formed from, say, an assortment of gems used in the lotus bracelets or the wood scraps used to compose a peony. There was a lack of class and elegance to it, but it was still easy to find the colorful collection of gems a stunning sight.

“It reminds me of how you’ve been lately. As you interact with all sorts of people, you absorb a bit of their nobility, adopt a bit of their charm, and blossom into a flower all your own.”

The entire Kou clan seemed to have a knack for shamelessly saying things that could make the listener cringe in embarrassment. Some part of Keigetsu wished that he would just smile impishly like before, but he gazed intently at the bracelet, nodded in satisfaction, and remarked, “Mm. I love how colorful it is. It’s quite enchanting.”

He was only talking about the bracelet. Keigetsu realized as much, yet still she was too overwhelmed to speak.

“I-If you say so.”

For some reason, she found it hard to watch his bony fingers caress the bracelet, so she snatched it from his hand. Unfortunately, her palms were so sweaty that she fumbled and dropped it.

“Oh no!”

The gorgeous circular trinket went rolling over the ground until it slipped under the cloth draped over the stall.

“Don’t worry, little miss! I’ll get that for ya!”

Ignoring the vendor’s haste to stop her, Keigetsu knelt down on the ground and plunged her hand beneath the cloth. She felt around for a hard object, and as soon as her fingers hit upon something, she tightened her grip around it and pulled it out.

*Huh?*

When she looked down and saw what she was holding, she blinked. What she had assumed to be her floral bracelet turned out to be a different bracelet altogether.

“That’s part of my inventory. This one’s yours, missy.” The vendor, who had bent down behind the stall at the same time as Keigetsu, handed her the original bracelet with a strained smile. “Can I have that back? It’s not ready for display yet.”

The tendrils of his voice coiled around her. His smile looked almost pasted on.

“O-of course...” Averting her eyes, Keigetsu nodded and exchanged bracelets with the vendor. Sweat beaded on her forehead for a different reason than before, and she could feel her pulse quicken. “Here you go.”

There was a hidden inventory under the booth. Being a jewelry shop, it was only natural to have additional items in stock.

*What was that bracelet I just saw?*

However, as far as she could tell from the touch, that “inventory” had been abnormally large. The bracelet she had held up to the sun had also been quite nice for an open-air stall.

What’s more, the brief glimpse she had caught of its inner side had revealed the words “*To a lifetime of happiness*” and a woman’s name engraved there.

*That was wedding jewelry.*

It was something a married woman was supposed to wear for the rest of her life. It was to be buried with her after death, and certainly not to be parted with lightly.

“What’s the matter, miss?” the smiling vendor asked.

Keigetsu looked up with a start. Wetting her dry lips, she ventured, “Erm... your stock is all new and unused, right?”



“Of course!” he answered, spreading his hands in an exaggerated gesture, and that was when Keigetsu regretted asking.

The man’s eyes weren’t smiling.

“I-I’m going to go now.”

She was getting a bad feeling about this. Resisting the urge to check the inside of the floral bracelet she was clutching to her chest, Keigetsu bolted from the shop.

“Huh? Where are you going, Keikei?! Hold on, they haven’t packaged—”

Leaving Keishou to his bewilderment, she pushed her way through the crowd. She heard a voice calling her to a stop from behind, but she ignored it and ran even faster.

She didn’t want to stop. All she wanted in that moment was to blend in with the exhausting swarm of people. She wanted to feel safe.

*What else can I do?*

The store had offered unusually high-end merchandise for an outdoor stall. There had been a huge stock of bracelets. And it had been in possession of an item that couldn’t be easily bought or sold. If a woman ever parted ways with her bracelet, it was either because she had been the victim of a robbery...or one other possibility.

“Debt collateral,” she murmured.

Keigetsu was all too aware of such enterprises. When her mother fell into debt, she had been forced to sell off her own wedding bracelet. It had originally been worth almost a tael of gold, but she had sold it for a pittance to keep the debt collectors off her doorstep.

Indeed, the buyers would drive the prices down staggeringly low. Not many people cared to purchase proof of their marriage secondhand. If there was a name inscribed on the underside, it would take time and effort to remove it, further reducing the demand. Nevertheless, there was no shortage of people

strapped for money, so there had been a slew of high-end bracelets carelessly strewn about the shady pawnshop her mother had used.

Just like what Keigetsu had seen at that stall.

*That was no antique gold dealer.*

Due to the fluctuating price of gold, only state-approved shops were allowed to engage in antique gold dealing—to buy and resell items made of gold. Since there was no special sign hung up—not to mention the fact that the rare licensed retailer would never operate out of a stall in the first place—that clearly wasn't a legitimate antique gold dealer.

On the other hand, the vendor's claim that he dealt in legitimate, bargain products made by apprentice artisans was also patently false. He was obtaining his goods through illicit channels. First, those unsavory types stripped debtors of their money and goods. Then they disposed of the items that were either difficult to sell or easy to trace via temporary outdoor stalls.

*Does that include this bracelet?*

The moment she clutched the bracelet to her chest, someone yanked her back by the shoulder. Assuming that Keishou must have caught up with her, she whipped around to face him, only to gasp at what she saw.

"Why'd you run off in such a hurry, sweetheart? It caught me by surprise."

The one standing before her was the same vendor from earlier.

Upon closer inspection, the man had a muscular build that made him look more the part of a weapons dealer than a variety store owner. His grip on her shoulder was relentless, and his bulky fingers dug into her robes.

"Were you dissatisfied with our products?" he asked in an ingratiating voice.

Keigetsu shoved him back with a scream. Stumbling over herself, she turned on her heel and ran as fast as her legs could go.

She had to get away. Fast! Her instincts were sounding the alarm.

She was in no state of mind to make the rational judgment that she was safer with more people around. When the crowd blocked her path forward, her fear of getting caught skyrocketed. She had to find an opening in the masses. She had to find space to slip through. These instincts led her to rush toward a spot where the crowd abruptly parted.

What Keigetsu had assumed to be part of the main street turned out to be a dimly lit path that stretched between the stalls. As she blindly scurried into an alleyway with earthen walls towering over her on both sides, she finally stopped dead in her tracks and gasped.

It was a dead end.

“Aww, you went to the trouble of trapping yourself like a rat for me? Thanks,” a gleeful voice sounded from behind. It was the man from earlier.

Just as Keigetsu turned around, the color draining from her face, the man seized her by the arm and slammed her whole body against the wall.

“Eek!”

Her hat slipped off as she fell on her backside. The man gave a low whistle when he saw the face that emerged from within.

“Now that’s some fine merchandise.”

Keigetsu nearly gritted her teeth when she saw the gleam in his eyes—and the lust and delight dancing there. Any girl would long for “Kou Reirin’s” gorgeous looks, which were so often likened to a light dusting of snow. However, that beauty was so delicate in nature that it could sometimes arouse sadistic impulses in the beholder and put the girl herself in danger.

“Forget everything you just saw.” With the few rays of light streaming from the main street to his back, the man slowly crouched down. “I know a little ‘magic spell’ that oughta keep you from running your mouth.”

Her breath caught, Keigetsu glared at the hairy arm reaching for her. She told herself over and over again that she wasn’t scared. She could handle being

shoved into dingy spaces. She was used to being the target of animosity.

No one was going to save her. So, as always, she would stand and fight. She had the weapons to do so.

*I'll set him ablaze with my magic. There should be plenty of fires lit all over the market...*

As soon as she had that thought, Keishou's words suddenly played back in her head.

*"We should prepare for that eventuality."*

He had scooped up a lock of her hair and given her a stern warning.

*"We can't let anyone find out about the swap. All of these things are essential."*

She might be able to smite this thug if she gathered up enough fire qi. But she was right outside the market. If a fire ran out of control in such a busy area, panic would ensue. It would attract attention, rumors would spread, and soon people would realize the truth: Magic still existed in this day and age, and "Kou Reirin" had command over fire.

*What should I do?!*

Her heart nearly rattled her rib cage with the force of its pounding. Fear and impatience welled up in her throat, making it hard to breathe.

Unconsciously, she hugged the bracelet tighter to her chest. When the man noticed this, he broke into a predatory smile. "Whoops. Can't leave any evidence. I'll be taking this back, if ya don't mind."

Next, he made a rough grab for her arm. The moment he wrenched the bracelet from her clenched fists, Keigetsu was seized by a feverish impulse.

*No!*

Her skin prickled. A white-hot rage shot from the tips of her toes to the top of her head, its heat engulfing her entire being.

*That bracelet...*

It was the first gift anyone had ever picked out just for her.

The taste of blood filled her mouth. She clenched her fists and automatically began to draw in the fire qi around her.

She was going to burn this man alive!

“Hold it right there!”

Just as Keigetsu had furrowed her brow and was about to ignite the fire qi she felt nearby, a dull *thud* echoed through the alley.

“Were you about to do something really concerning, Keikei?! I saw a flame on one of the stalls flare up!”

The one to appear against the backdrop of light was none other than Kou Keishou. He had sprinted into the alley, using that momentum to drop-kick the vendor from behind.

“Gah!” The man collapsed right next to Keigetsu with a garbled cry.

Keishou then grabbed the man by the collar, slammed him against the wall, and kneed him in the gut without hesitation. Judging by the sound of the impact, it was quite the heavy blow. The man crumpled to the ground, his eyes rolling back in his head, and completely lost consciousness. It all happened so fast that he didn’t even have a chance to scream.

“Why did you leave me behind and run off to get kidnapped?! I told you to stay close!”

When Keishou whirled on her, Keigetsu stared back at him blankly from her place on the ground. She hadn’t expected him to yell at her, let alone come to her rescue in the first place.

“Are you listening to me?! I know it’s my own fault for getting distracted by my purchase, but why would you try to fend off your attacker all by yourself?! And in the worst possible way!”

His emotions on full display for once, Keishou continued to lecture her, telling her that she should have waited for him to catch up or that she should never have left in the first place.

“But...” As Keigetsu sat there, unsure which part to respond to first, a few words fell helplessly from her lips. “He was going to...take my bracelet.”

“Let him have it, then!” Keishou roared with a look of disbelief. “Who cares about that stupid bracelet?!”

Somehow, his blunt outburst hit with the same impact as a punch square to the chest. The shock shot straight up the length of her body, and upon reaching her eyes, it caused them to water.

“But...”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her throat locked up, and her voice quivered pathetically. It was the first gift she had ever received. She hadn’t wanted to let it go, no matter the cost.

*Why is he angry with me?*

Keigetsu was shocked to see the man who had always been so glib not even bothering to conceal his fury. Had she really been that stupid? Had she really caused him that much trouble? Was he really that disillusioned with her? The thought made her feel far more distraught than watching that thug reach his hairy arm for her.

“I just...”

When Keigetsu squeezed her eyes shut, shrinking in on herself and hanging her head, a flummoxed voice rained down from above. “Wait! Hold it! Stop right there!”

As she chanced a dubious glance upward, Keishou knelt before her with a stiff expression. Once he was at her eye level, he suddenly bowed his head.

“I’m sorry. It was all my fault. Forgive me.”

“Excuse me...?”

“Now that we’ve got that out of the way, would you mind putting a stop to that clear liquid leaking from your eyes?”

When he drew attention to her tears, laying his consternation bare, Keigetsu finally realized what he was reacting to. At least in theory, she did—but his dismay came as such a surprise that she just stared at him unblinkingly.

“Didn’t you say you liked the look of me crying pathetically?”

“I said that I liked the look of you ‘fighting back tears’! It’s different if you actually start crying!” Keishou shouted, for reasons that escaped Keigetsu, before bringing his sleeve to her cheek. “I only just learned this myself, but it feels terrible to see you shed tears because of me.”

He gingerly dried her tears on his robe. “I’m begging you, no more crying.” A sour look crossed his handsome features.

*Why, this bully of a man is completely beside himself.*







Keigetsu was so surprised that her tears stopped falling. Was it possible that the tears produced by Kou Reirin's body possessed the magical power to make even the strongest of men falter?

*I wouldn't put it past Kou Reirin.*

Confused to the point that her head was swimming with unrealistic thoughts, Keigetsu wiped the remaining tears from her cheeks.

"There. I stopped."

"Thank you."

Oddly enough, the man had thanked her with a completely straight face. Unsure of how to react, Keigetsu fell back on what came most naturally to her: finding fault.

"Hmph. You *should* be grateful. Don't forget that you're the one who made me cry."

"You're right. I regret the way I acted. I can't apologize enough."

Even her flagrantly unreasonable demands were met with an apology. Keishou was deferring to her.

It was a bad habit of Keigetsu's to take advantage as soon as another person showed a hint of weakness. Though she knew this well, the moment she was convinced she had the upper hand, her earlier despondency turned into an irrepressible elation. Her face threatened to break into a grin.

"Yes, you've got that right. You ought to be grinding your forehead into the dirt. Why was your head in the clouds when you were supposed to be protecting me?"

"I know. I'm ashamed of myself."

"And then you had the nerve to get mad at me!"

"I'm sorry. But I wasn't actually angry... I just panicked. I was really worried about you."

The soft tones of his voice seeped into the still-healing cracks of Keigetsu's heart. The word "worried" had such a sweet ring to it that even she was taken aback.

"On top of that, you mocked me for getting upset over a stupid bracelet."

"I wasn't mocking you. That's not what I meant..." As Keigetsu gleefully strung together more accusations, Keishou trailed off, his lips twisting into an awkward grimace. "I believe my exact words were '*that* stupid bracelet.'"

"What's the difference?"

"I meant it as in, 'That badge of shame I stupidly gave you without realizing it was pawned'!" he blurted out in a single breath.

Keigetsu's eyes went round.

Perhaps embarrassed, Keishou hung his head with a sigh. "All the merchandise along that row of shops was high-end, so I let my guard down. If anything, the steep prices alleviated my concerns. It didn't help that I was thrilled to have found something that suited you so well. But when I saw you go pale, I checked the hidden stash of inventory and, well... Damn, this is so mortifying!"

He even mussed his perfectly coiffed hair. It was clear that he was ashamed of himself like never before—and curiously enough, the more disgusted with himself he looked, the more Keigetsu's heart melted.

*Seriously?*

Even Kou Keishou made mistakes.

*Would you look at that?*

Despite his calm exterior, he would get ahead of himself, miss the mark, and then feel mortified by what he had done.

*He's just like me.*

As soon as the thought occurred to her, the same word Keishou had used

when she screwed up buying sesame balls flashed through her mind.

This was cute.

The sentiment was subtly different from mockery or ridicule. It was a curious feeling, one that warmed her heart and brought a helpless smile to her face.

“Now that we’ve cleared that up, would you hurry up and give me that bracelet? It’s bad luck to gift someone a pawned item, and I’d feel bad for the original owner. The very notion of fighting for something like that is unconscionable.”

Keishou held out a hand, his face fixed in a scowl, and Keigetsu pushed the bracelet into his palm without further argument. She managed to hand it back to him with so few qualms that it was hard to believe she had almost set a man on fire to keep it. After all, rather than clinging to someone else’s old bracelet for dear life, it was bound to be a dozen times more fun to milk this man for all he was worth.

“I trust you’ll make this up to me?”

As Keishou helped her to her feet, Keigetsu broke into a grin. Considering how much this egotistical lady-killer liked to play up his street smarts, this blunder would probably haunt him for a long time to come. The question was, how far could she exploit that? If she demanded that he give her something worthwhile next time, she had a feeling that he would buy her anything she wanted, given what a generous spender he was. If the gift turned out to be cheap, she would tell Kou Reirin and the two men who had him beat in the height department all about this little mishap!

“Of course. I’ll get right on it.”

Alas, Keigetsu had forgotten that all of her petty schemes were destined to backfire on her.

“I swear to settle the score.”

“Huh? The score?”

Kou Keishou's choice of words was a bit too sinister for him to simply mean buying her a brand-new piece of jewelry. And that was the point where Keigetsu should have stopped him.

Instead, she nodded along vaguely, the sight of which spurred him on and brought a light back to his eyes.

"D-damn it... You bastard..."

Just then, there came a grunt from the man sprawled over the ground. He had evidently regained consciousness.

"Oh, morning." Keishou greeted him as pleasantly as if he were a friendly neighbor. "Perfect timing."

Then he did the unexpected. With a smile on his face, he grabbed the man by the hair and held a dagger to his exposed throat.

Keigetsu's face froze in horror. "What are you doing?!"

As far as she was concerned, the case was closed now that they had taken down the man selling illegitimate bracelets.

"We can get your money back if we return to the stall while he's out. There's no need to threaten him at knifepoint."

From the looks of it, although the vendor had regained consciousness, he was in no condition to get up and run. If she and Keishou went back to the stall now, they could take their sweet time refunding their purchase.

"You think this is about the money? You must be joking." Dagger still pressed against the thug's neck and a grin on his face, Keishou nudged his victim and whispered at him to wake up. Then he tilted his head to one side and added, "This man attacked you and humiliated me. A mere refund won't be enough to appease me. His shop is clearly mixed up in some shady business, so we're going to destroy it from the ground up."

It was then that Keigetsu came to fully appreciate something: Those of the Kou clan seldom initiated an attack, but once they decided to strike back, it was

in their nature to return the favor in full.

“There are those who buy the pawned items, those who distribute them, and those responsible for putting the victims into debt in the first place. I imagine there must be a large organization involved. Let’s extract a full confession from this man—and have him bring us to the big boss.”

His almond-shaped eyes narrowed. He looked just like a beast setting out on a hunt.

There was still an hour left until the noon meeting. This was the moment that determined how the pair would spend their remaining time.

### Chapter 3:

#### Interlude

**S**OME TIME PASSED as Reirin and friends were dragged away by the group of ruffians—or, to be more precise, as they voluntarily tagged along after them. Eventually, they arrived at the gambling den known as the Three Realms Parlor, located in the entertainment district just west of the capital center.

Compared to the brothels with their colorful draperies and countless red lanterns, the building's exterior was a modest affair. The letters on the sign were little more than carvings filled with ink. The pale mud walls were punctuated with windows in lieu of decorations, and it was safe to assume that such tiny openings allowed very little sunlight inside. The gate facing the street was so small that one had to crouch down to pass through, which perhaps doubled as a measure to avoid taxes. Since there was a poor excuse for a flag with the faded word “booze” flying outside, the establishment probably passed itself off as a local tavern, but the gate was clearly designed to prevent people from easily entering or escaping.

“Why did Miss Miu’s father ever set foot here in the first place?” Reirin asked the girl walking next to her—Ringyoku—as the men ushered them through the gate. As soon as Reirin and Gyoumei had announced their intent to visit the gambling den, the redheaded girl had insisted on coming along. This was happening because of her, after all. “If he came here willingly, I’m afraid we cannot come down too hard on these men.”

“We had just moved to the capital after going broke in the countryside. The master was looking for a job. Someone told him about a good opportunity to make a fortune...and it turned out to be a scam. The master is a sucker for deals that sound too good to be true.”

Ringyoku explained her circumstances on the way into the gambling den. The man she referred to as “the master” was the youngest son of a trader from the



capital. He had spent all his earnings to woo a dancer from the West, taken her as his wife, and had a daughter named Miu. Meanwhile, Ringyoku herself was the orphaned daughter of a Western slave. About six years ago, Miu had found her starving on the street and taken her in, and in recognition of their proximity in age and shared Western heritage, she was appointed as Miu's personal attendant. At the time, Ringyoku was seven years old and Miu was nine.

Unfortunately, a few years later, Miu's mother had abandoned both her husband and daughter to elope with another man. Disgraced, the man and Miu had left the imperial capital, taking only Ringyoku with them.

After settling down in a rural farming village, Miu and Ringyoku had eked out a living for the past three years, but Miu's father grew sick and tired of peasant life. Yearning for his old life of luxury, he returned to the imperial capital in search of a quick profit—and that was how he got himself duped.

"It's said that gambling in the Three Realms Parlor is a guaranteed ticket to ruin, but we had no way of knowing that when we were so new to the capital. Apparently, it hasn't been that long since it first opened. They're clearly running a dishonest business, but they've bribed the local authorities to keep word from reaching the higher-ups."

As Ringyoku told it, Miu's father had jumped at the chance to turn a small wager into a large sum of money. Unfortunately, he had only won the first few rounds. His losses piled up in the blink of an eye, and within ten days, he had fallen even deeper into debt. Men claiming to be security from the gambling den had roughed him up, threatening to keep going until he sealed a contract in blood—and he had given it his personal stamp in a semiconscious stupor.

Said contract stated that he would sell his daughter to a brothel as collateral for his debt.

It seemed that the Three Realms Parlor hired brawny bouncers and used brute force to extort people for what they owed. At first, some had spoken out against the violence, but the men would beat anyone who complained within

an inch of their lives. Eventually, there was no one left to challenge them. This emboldened the bouncers to strut around the city like they owned the place, making a great deal of trouble for the eateries in particular.

“Last week, some of the men who work here kidnapped my mistress. While he was bedridden, the master finally read the contents of the contract he had signed...and realized the horrifying truth too late.”

For a child of thirteen, Ringyoku spoke with considerable maturity. One look at her sharp gaze or emaciated body revealed how much hardship the young girl had endured. This petite little thing must have fought tooth and nail to support her mistress in place of the girl’s impressionable, fanciful father.

“Frankly, I don’t care what happens to the master. He brought this on himself. But it’s not fair for Lady Miu to get caught up in his mess, so I want to get her back.”

Reirin and Leelee listened to the story with disconsolate sighs. If nothing else, they wanted to save the two girls from the injustice befalling them.

The same appeared to be true of Gyoumei, who was walking at the head of the group, as he glanced back at Ringyoku behind him. “For now, let us handle things here. I hope to prove that there are *some* adults out there you can count on,” he said mildly, then turned his gaze back to the property ahead. “Well, here we are.”

The building had an odd structure. After passing through the front door to what one would assume was the inside of the building, there was another wall. This wall did not have a single window in sight; instead, it was fitted with a small iron gate. For some reason, the character for “Earth” was inscribed on the plaque above the door.

“What kind of door is this? Bizarre.”

“Heh heh! Is it finally kicking in that you came here like moths to a flame?” The man who had led the group this far had been unsettled by how eagerly his prey was following him to the slaughter, but Gyoumei’s scowl seemed to

reassure him. Regaining his composure, he spread his arms in a sweeping gesture. “This is the Three Realms Parlor—a place packed with more pleasure than Heaven, Earth, and Man combined. If you win big, you can see Paradise, but if you lose, it’s straight to Hell. But first, all patrons have to head through the ‘Earth’ door between ’em.”

With that preamble, the man pushed the door open with a slow *creak*. In an instant, the cacophony of noise trapped inside the room spilled out like a flood.

“Ooh, bet *bigger*, you stallion!”

“High! High! Come on, high!”

“Hey, where’s my booze?!”

The vast chamber, which appeared to take up the entire first floor of the establishment, was abuzz with activity. Barmaids hung off the arms of the male patrons. Men looked ready to pounce on the dice cups face down on the tables, their spittle flying everywhere. The suffocating stench of alcohol and the scent of the dancers’ rouge and powder filled the air, and angry shouts mingled with jubilant cheers. On the ceiling was a mural of a demon baring his teeth in a sinister grin as he overpowered and deflowered a celestial maiden, her face contorted with tears. The obscenity of it was positively distasteful. It was a hedonistic enough spectacle to make the girls go wide-eyed and Gyoumei scowl in displeasure.

“See that? That’s what a winner looks like. He gets all the women and booze he wants. He gets to go home through the Heaven door, and we see to it that he’s entertained on his way out.”

The man jerked his thumb at a gilded door labeled “Heaven.” It presumably led to a reception room, but even outside, men were raking together large piles of money, chugging alcohol straight from the jug, or pinning the barmaids to the wall and hiking up the hems of their skirts, lending the area a very debauched atmosphere.

“But,” the man went on, his lips curling into a wicked smile, “if you lose, you

see Hell. You'll pay what you owe, even if we hafta strip ya of everything to your name."

With perfect timing, a shriek rang out from the other end of the parlor, immediately grabbing everyone's attention. At the back of the room, on the opposite side of the Heaven door, was a door labeled "Man."

"Behind the Man door is the garbage dump. The ones standing around it are the losers on the verge of getting trashed."

His explanation was drowned out by an anguished scream coming from just outside the door.

"Wait, don't do it! Have mercy—gaaah!"

Upon closer inspection, a man dressed in shabby attire was pinned to a wall, surrounded by a group of men who were taking turns hurling daggers at him.

"No, stop... Aieeee!"

Next to the men throwing daggers, a burly man sipped his liquor and swayed merrily from side to side. "Ha ha, now that's the good stuff! Once that tub is filled to the brim with blood, we'll do ya a favor and write off your loss!"

While Reirin and friends struggled to process what they were seeing, their guide broke into a leering grin. "There are a lot of different ways to pay. If you've got assets or daughters, you can sell 'em off, but bachelors don't have that option. Those guys settle their debts by turning themselves into a source of entertainment. In case you're wondering, the ones throwing the daggers are also gamblers. They're all desperate to hit the 'target,' since that'll net them a good sum."

It was a truly despicable business.

Just then, the man who had been drinking and watching the dagger-throwing game rose to his feet, perhaps having noticed the eyes on him. "Whoa, what's the story here? You brought us some awfully well-dressed customers."

"Get this, Kugai, bro! These guys are looking to buy back the lady this little

pip squeak serves, so they marched right in of their own free will! Must be confident they'll win."

"Heh, glad to hear it. We do appreciate a cocky customer around here."

The man named Kugai—the owner of the gambling den, if one had to guess—lumbered over to the group. He was over six feet tall, with a stubbled face and a large scar that ran from his eye to his cheek. He had stripped down to his waist, possibly to flaunt the large tattoo of a dragon and tiger on his shoulder, and it was clear at a glance what line of work he was in.

Ringyoku had completely lost her nerve. "Eep..."

Leelee pulled the young girl into a hug upon seeing her go rigid, but even she was struggling to hide her fear.

Kugai looked down at the group, the stench of alcohol heavy on his breath. When he noticed that Gyoumei and Reirin were dressed in particularly fine clothes, he grinned and stroked his chin. "I see we've got some very important guests on our hands. Welcome to the Three Realms Parlor. Step right up and place your bets."

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but we didn't come here to gamble. We're in a hurry, so we simply came to talk to the owner of this establishment face-to-face," Gyoumei said on behalf of the party, his tone matter-of-fact.

"Huh?! You walked into a gambling den with no intention of gambling?!" Kugai guffawed, twirling the dagger in his hand. The next moment, he growled, "You don't get to leave until you've placed a bet."

As far as he was concerned, pressuring someone to bet and driving them to ruin were synonymous.

"Here's a little heads-up. We've hired some hotshot security. The local authorities will also swoop in if we just say the word—to punish you, not to arrest us. We happen to be running an honest business here."

"The authorities? Hm."

“That won’t do. I’d much rather someone else swoop in.”

Gyoumei’s and Reirin’s responses to Kugai’s smirking threat were somewhat underwhelming. If anything, the way they tried to cut the man’s long-winded speech short made it seem like they were more concerned about the time.

“Hey, what’s the holdup? Once you’re in a gambling den, you gotta gamble. If you don’t have any money on hand, we’ll be happy to lend you some. Hit a limb on the ‘target,’ and we’ll give you ten mace of silver. Hit the face, and we’ll give you a tael of gold.”

“Did you not hear me the first time?”

“If you refuse to play a round, we’ll treat you as trespassers. How would you prefer to be tortured? We could rip off your fingernails, tear off your limbs, or maybe even poke ya full of holes.”

“I believe we made ourselves quite clear...”

Despite the pair’s insistence that they weren’t here to gamble, Kugai continued to issue threats in his gravelly voice. Gyoumei’s scowl grew deeper, while Reirin’s smile widened.

At this rate, the negotiations weren’t going to get anywhere before noon.

“I can’t believe this! Here I am offering to show you Paradise if you win, but you’re both too scared of what’ll happen if you lose and hafta pay up! Guess that’s all I can expect from some cowardly, pampered rich boy and a sheltered little la—”

Realizing that the threats weren’t getting him results, Kugai switched to mocking them, but he ended up choking on his words before he could finish his taunt. Why?

*Shing! Shing!*

Because Gyoumei had stolen Kugai’s dagger, Reirin had swiftly produced a dagger of her own from her sleeve, and the two of them had thrust their blades straight up into the ceiling.

The prince must have put considerable muscle into the throw, as his dagger gouged the demon's face in the mural hard enough to open a crack in the ceiling. Reirin's throw naturally didn't have quite as much force behind it, but whether by accident or by design, her blade had lodged itself in the demon's grotesquely exaggerated "manhood," the sight of which was more than enough to send a chill down any onlooker's spine.

While Kugai stood there, gawking, the pair slowly turned around with smiles on their faces.

"Hitting the face gets us a tael of gold."

"And I believe hitting a limb gets us ten mace of silver."

They turned their hands over and thrust their palms before the flabbergasted owner of the gambling den.

"I'm out of patience. I'll do things your way and play a round. Now hand over the money."

"I have heard quite enough of your threats and taunts. Let's move this conversation along, please."

The sheer menace in their smiles made Ringyoku yelp and cling to Leelee. "I-I thought they were respectable people! Why did they suddenly get so much scarier than these thugs?!"

"Well, you see..."

It was *because* they were so inordinately respectable that they would do anything to uphold an agreement. Most likely, they had come to the conclusion that listening to Kugai's threats was a waste of their time and that involving the local authorities risked blowing their cover.

"It's a long story," Leelee said.

Meanwhile, Reirin and Gyoumei strode into the thick of the gambling den.

"Hurry up and show me to my seat. An explanation? Not necessary. I'm *used* to this sort of thing."



“Move along, please. I’ll be fine at a separate table. I’m *worldly* enough to play by myself.”

*Hold on. The way these two are acting...*

A thought occurred to Leelee as she watched the duo emphasize their “street smarts.” Part of the reason they were playing by the enemy’s rules was to save time, yes, but that wasn’t all.

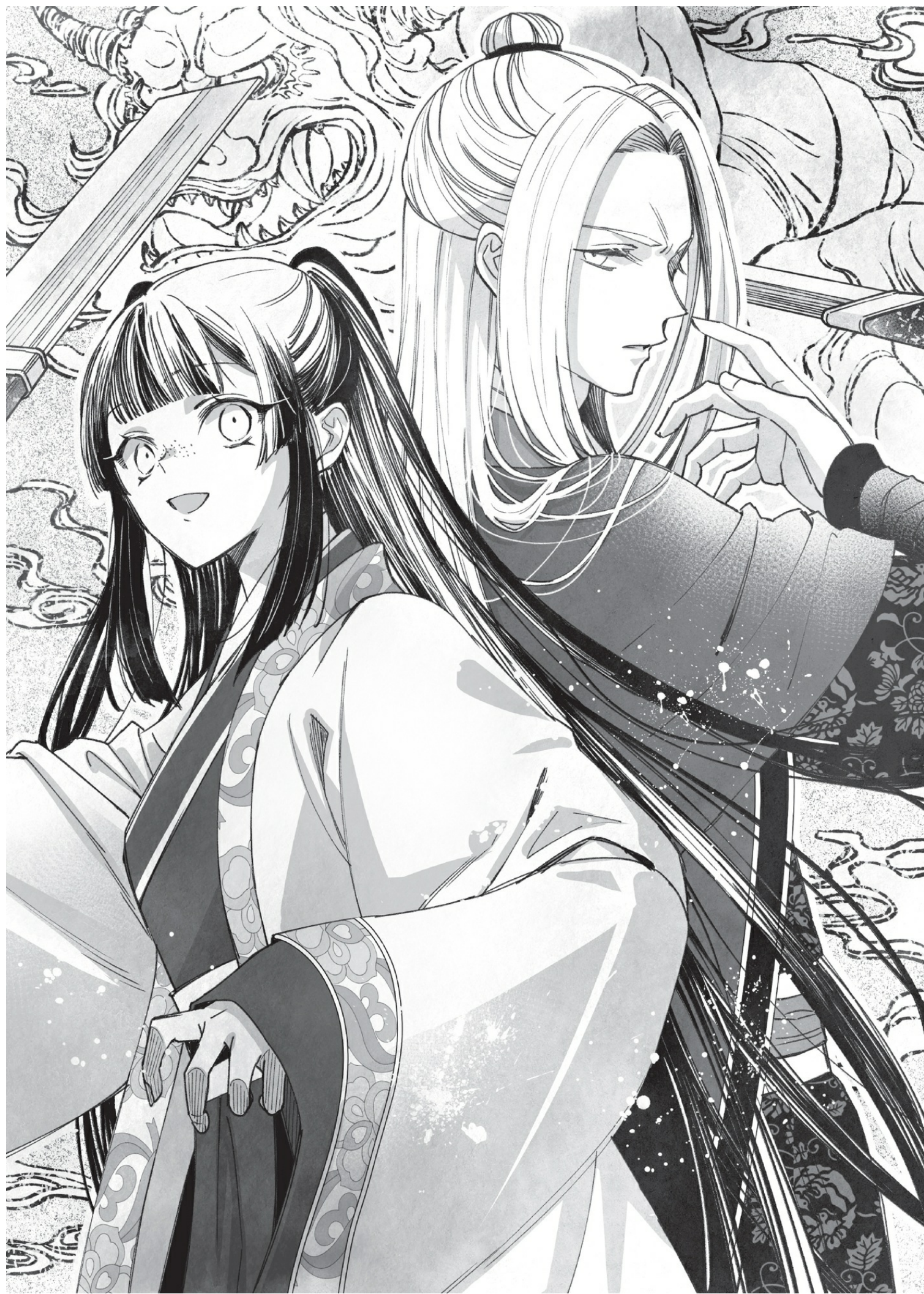
*They’re actually pissed that he called them “sheltered,” aren’t they?!*

The redhead looked on with a twitch in her face. While insinuations of violence couldn’t hope to faze them, nothing set this pair of Kous off quite like having their self-sufficiency called into question.

*I can feel Leelee and our new friend staring at me... I’m sure she’s appalled that I’m throwing myself into danger again.*

As Reirin walked around the gambling den, she subtly pressed a hand to her cheek in discomfiture. Having just left the two underage girls in the designated seating area, she was now observing the section devoted to dice games all by herself. She had made the conscious decision to separate herself from Gyomei, who was checking out the card games. If they were going to gamble—and thereby uncover what dirty trick was in play—it was more efficient to divide and conquer.







*A gambling den that bankrupts all who enter? This is no “honest business.” They must be cheating somehow.*

The truth was that Reirin and Gyoumei hadn't joined the games because they were impatient with the conversation going around in circles. It was so that they could discover the trick behind the scam and expose the gambling den's crimes.

*Between the burly bouncers and the brutal treatment of the losers, it's clear that this establishment is involved in other questionable practices.*

This gambling den obviously had additional crimes to answer for. Now that they knew as much, it wouldn't be enough to get Miu back and call it a day. As leaders of the people, they wanted to find evidence of illegal activity—or, to approach it from the most expeditious angle, the method used to cheat—so that they could bring a case against the operation at the earliest opportunity.

Fortunately, while the men who worked at the gambling den shot Reirin and Gyoumei wary looks after that stunt with the daggers, they still allowed the pair to roam freely. They seemed to think that as soon as their new guests placed a bet, the game would be theirs. They must have had a solid track record and a lot of confidence in their techniques to swindle people out of everything they owned.

*I wonder if two hours will be enough time for Brother Senior's dove to reach him.*

Reirin glanced up at the two blades embedded in the ceiling. As it happened, the dagger she had thrown was one Keikou had given her due to her tendency to get caught up in kidnappings and assassination attempts. The hilt had a special feature: a small hole that worked like a bird whistle when the wind blew through it. The sound it made was only audible to birds, and it attracted the doves Keikou had released all over the imperial capital. Those doves would then fly to either him or his most trusted subordinates.

In short, the pair had pretended to hurl their daggers in a fit of rage, when in

fact Gyoumei had opened an air hole in the ceiling and Reirin had placed her bird whistle right next to it.

*“I’d much rather someone else swoop in.”*

If they couldn’t have the authorities show up, they would have her brother come instead.

Since Gyoumei knew the context, that short exchange had been enough to communicate her idea to him, but Leelee and Ringyoku couldn’t be expected to infer the same. Regardless, Reirin couldn’t very well blab about their hidden agenda right in front of Kugai and his men.

*Forgive me, Leelee! I promise to tell you later. Once my brother arrives, I plan to leave the rest in his hands and complete our undercover mission. I’m not as thoughtless as it may seem!* she appealed in the privacy of her mind. Hoping the sentiment would get through, if nothing else, she flexed a bicep in the girls’ direction.

Alas, taking this to mean that her mistress was eager to try her hand at gambling, Leelee looked more nervous than ever. Reirin was saddened by the sight.

*Does she truly take me for a compulsive gambler in the making?*

As she complained to herself that she was actually approaching this quite calmly, she looked around the gambling den again. The crowd was in the scruffiest state of dress she’d ever seen. The pungent smell of alcohol permeated the air, shouts of rage juxtaposed with flirtatious squeals, and the whole scene smacked of immorality and depravity. This was a place she would never have encountered from the safety of the inner court—the underworld.

*What a curious feeling. It’s not unlike the strange thrill of witnessing a carnivorous plant snap up a bug... Ack, bad Reirin!*

As soon as she realized that she was craning forward and studying her surroundings out of morbid curiosity, Reirin cleared her throat. No matter how

novel an experience this was, she wasn't so frivolous as to lose herself in gambling when she had an appointment to keep.

*Yes, quite so! This may be a first for me, but no matter how rare an opportunity it is, I still... Oh, come to think of it, I imagine even Lady Keigetsu has never set foot in a gambling den before.*

No sooner had she chastised herself than her mind began to wander again.

Keigetsu seemed to have a complex about her status as a marginal noble—a background barely distinguishable from a commoner—but it served to make her more versed in the ways of the world, a quality Reirin aspired to. Every time the Kou Maiden didn't know a love story popular among the masses or mismanaged her coins, Keigetsu would tease her for her ignorance. How would she react if Reirin were to flaunt her gambling expertise, the ultimate in street smarts? No doubt those expressive eyes of hers would go wide with wonder.

*Perhaps she'll say, "Oh, Kou Reirin! You're more experienced than I ever could have imagined!"*

Reirin slapped her hands over her mouth, barely suppressing the smile that threatened to spread across her face.

The point was, it was important to observe this decadent scene closely, both to save her subjects and to give Keigetsu a little surprise. With one more cough to clear her throat, Reirin cast another glance around the gambling den.

*There are approximately twenty tables of varying sizes set up around the floor.*

Said tables were arranged in concentric circles according to the type of game being played. The seating for the high-stakes games was on a raised platform near the center of the room. The low-stakes tables were shoved into dimly lit areas near the walls. Overlooking the men crowding the platform was a stage constructed on the upper floor, where women dressed as celestial maidens performed a dance. Perhaps the idea was to stroke the egos of their biggest spenders by seating them higher and closer to the stage. The standing braziers were also strategically arranged so that the higher one went, the more fires

were lit, transforming the upper tier into a more festive space.

The minimum number of players at the dice tables was two. Games that involved dealing out hands of cards or sticks required four or more players. Each table was staffed by a sharp-eyed bookmaker, a burly bouncer, and, at the dice tables, a “dice girl” holding the cup.

The dice girls were, as the name suggested, the women who put the dice in the cups and shook them around. They frequently switched tables, perhaps to establish the appearance of fair play. However, judging by the thin, sheer dresses they wore and the way they poured drinks for the customers, their role was more to arouse the men than to ensure transparency. In practice, a few of the more inebriated patrons could be seen hanging off the good-looking dice girls, making passes and groping the women’s bodies.

Reirin’s first guess was that the cards or dice were being switched out while the men were preoccupied with the dice girls, but based on her observations, that didn’t seem to be the case. Perhaps a bit drunk themselves, the bookmakers were distracted enough to occasionally become as engrossed in watching the dances as the patrons, and the dice girls simply repeated the same motions over and over in a dispassionate manner. The bouncers would sometimes goad the meeker customers into upping the ante, but not to the point where it could be considered coercion. If anything, they did a surprisingly respectable job of chasing away the customers who were sexually harassing the women.

*Is there a trick to the dice, perhaps?*

With that suspicion in mind, Reirin walked between the tables and watched the dice, but she found no indication that, say, the dice at a certain table always came up as three. The rolls were consistently irregular.

Next, she walked over to a table where bets were placed on whether the sum of the dice would be odd or even, then picked up one of the dice in her hand. Alas, the placement of the faces was the standard, and none had been shaved

down to make it more likely to land on a particular side. She could stretch and say that it was a bit unusual for the dice to be made of a light metal coated with gold instead of wood, but that was easily explained as an attempt to give them a more extravagant flair.

“Step right up, little lady! Is this your first time playing Odd or Even?” the bookmaker called out to Reirin. He had been sitting on the table, watching the stage, but he got up as soon as he spotted her. Perhaps because this was so close to the wall—in other words, a low-stakes game for beginners—he was awfully friendly.

Since Reirin didn’t know the first thing about gambling, he gave her a well-rehearsed explanation of the rules. Two dice were thrown, and the sum of their numbers determined whether the result was “odd” or “even.” Players would place bets on the outcome before each round. The winners took their opponents’ wagers, while the losers had to forfeit theirs. The rules were quite simple.

“Don’t worry, I won’t pressure you into going all in. How ’bout betting a tiny piece of silver to start?”

Reirin took the bookmaker’s advice and decided to try a round of dice.

At that moment, a male patron happened to wander by, and the bookmaker urged him to join their table. The man seemed to be in a generous mood, perhaps fresh off a winning streak, so he readily agreed to help the young lady get some practice. It was clearly no great loss to him to part with a single piece of silver.

The bouncer glanced in their direction, but he didn’t break his commanding pose. The dice girl impassively offered to pour some alcohol, which Reirin declined. Indifferent to this response, the woman ceremoniously picked up the dice and placed them in the cup.

As she rattled the dice with a rallying cry, the bookmaker asked, “Which will it be? Odd or even?!”



Just as Reirin began to automatically calculate the odds, the bookmaker laughed and said, “A divisible number always brings better luck!” Thus, she went ahead and placed her bet on “even” for the first round. This left the man no choice but to bet on “odd.”

*Smack!*

The cup made a crisp sound as the dice girl slammed it down on the table. The faces revealed when she lifted it back up were a one and a three. Even.

“Hey, not bad!”

The bookmaker gave Reirin an encouraging clap on the shoulder, to which she responded with a strained smile.

*He obviously led me into that... I assume this is set up so that if I listen to his advice, I'll win.*

That explained a lot. *This* was how the bookmaker gained the trust of inexperienced customers. It was possible that the male patron acting the part of a regular was actually a member of the gambling den staff, stationed to allow beginners a few easy wins.

There was one more thing Reirin was sure of: They definitely had a way to either manipulate or read the dice rolls.

“All right, you’ve got a little more betting money now! How ’bout it? Wanna go another round?!” the bookmaker cheerfully suggested, and she opted to go along with it.

This time around, she wanted to figure out the trick behind the cheat.

“Very well. I’ll bet the money I just won.”

“Nice! How ’bout you, Sir Tan?”

“Course I’m in. Gotta win back my silver.”

The male patron also got on board, which meant the game was on again.

Reirin cast the man a surreptitious glance, curious as to whether he really was

a skill for the gambling den. Seated across from her with his chin propped in his hand, he had a self-assured air about him that made him seem at home in the establishment. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. If one ignored the drunken flush on his cheeks, he was a handsome man with chiseled features, and his full lips and beard both exuded confidence and gave him the look of a womanizer. Judging by his fearless demeanor, he was probably the current head of a wealthy merchant family.

Since the bookmaker had called him “Sir Tan,” either his surname was Tan, or he hailed from the Tan Region a little west of Ei. Perhaps he was a merchant who sold imported goods from the Tan Region.

*Or is he an employee posing as a merchant?*

The man didn’t notice Reirin’s probing gaze, too focused on ogling the dice girl’s waistline. When he reached for her hips, the bouncer slapped his hand away, causing him to let out a pathetic yelp. Apparently, he was just some lecherous gambler.

Upon reaching that conclusion, Reirin tore her gaze away from the man and returned to observing the flow of the games. The patrons would take their seats. The bookmaker would explain the rules. In most cases, the dice girl would then serve alcohol to the guests. The patrons were neither forced into nor discouraged from drinking. Reirin tried a sip in the second round but found it to be nothing more than a cool, refreshing drink without any added drugs to impair comprehension. Considering that the bookmaker was drinking the same stuff, it was safe to say that it wasn’t harmful.

Once the players were pleasantly buzzed, the dice girl would ceremoniously pick up the dice, which sat on a pedestal next to a standing brazier, and put them into the cup, calling out, “Come, test your fortunes at the Three Realms Parlor!” She would shake the dice, twisting and turning her body with the motion, then slam the cup down on the table. The bookmaker would ask for the bets. The players would answer. The woman would lift the cup. The players would find out whether they had won or lost.

*Could there be a trick to the cup? But when I was looking around earlier, I observed one table substitute a teacup after an enraged player smashed the dice cup.*

In that case, it clearly wasn't the cup either.

When Reirin felt a pair of eyes on her and turned around, she locked gazes with Gyoumei, who was sitting at a table some distance away. He gave a small shake of his head, indicating that he was likewise having trouble figuring out how the house was cheating. These crooks were surprisingly good at covering their tracks.

"And there it is! Odd! You're on a roll, little lady! This is only your second round, right? But just look at that—you've already doubled your money! You must have a real knack for this. Can you believe it? All this silver here is yours to keep."

Seeing as the dice had once again fallen exactly as Reirin had wagered, there had to be *some* sort of trick in play.

When Reirin fell so deep into thought that she failed to react to her win, the male patron—Tan—shot her a dubious look. "Something wrong, little lady? For someone who just emptied my pockets of silver, you seem pretty indifferent."

"Huh?"

Flustered, Reirin jumped out of her seat and began hastily scraping the silver together. Perhaps a Maiden accustomed to seeing gold and jewels would be unmoved, but it would be strange for a city dweller not to jump for joy at the sight of silver.

"O-oh! I can't believe it! Oh, wow, look at all this silver! Yay, silver! I love silver more than three meals a day!"

Alas, Reirin had never had much of a lust for wealth, so she couldn't imitate the way most people salivated when presented with a pile of money.

"Y-yippee!"

Stumped for ideas, she waved handfuls of silver in the air and spun around in circles. Members of the Kou clan would often behave this way when they came across a cute critter. If gamblers were truly so fond of money, surely it was a decent enough example to follow.

“My, what adorable silver! I wish I could pet this silver all day long! I can’t wait to rub my cheek against it, call its name, lavish it with praise day in and day out, and sleep with it in my bed! Silver is the best!”

“You like money *that* much, huh?”

The bookmaker recoiled in utter bewilderment, while a bemused smile appeared on Tan’s face.

Satisfied that she had successfully bamboozled the two men, Reirin took the opportunity to look around the entire floor while she spun. The fire in the braziers blazed brightly. A bouncer and a dice girl were stationed at each and every table. Dances were being performed on the raised platform of the stage. Golden dice were in play. Alcohol was being served. There had to be a trick somewhere.

*They haven’t shaved down one side of the dice. There’s no particular number that keeps coming up. Yet the dice always land the way the house wants them to. How are they doing it?*

Throughout the game, the bookmaker had prompted her to pick certain numbers, and from time to time, he stole glances at the dancing women. The stage was positioned at the highest point in the gambling den, and the higher-stakes tables were lit with extra braziers, so it was possible that a dancer with good eyesight could “read” the number on a dice before it was thrown. Perhaps the dancers then secretly passed this information on to the bookmakers.

What that didn’t explain was how they could get the dice to land on the numbers they wanted. If it wasn’t the size they had tweaked, had they tampered with the weight of the dice?

*For example, just before throwing the dice, they could press a grain of rice to*

*the side opposite the number they want to roll... That would weigh it down.*

Reirin gave a slight shake of her head as she took her seat again.

*No, it would be easy to notice a grain of rice on such a shiny gold die. No food is served at the game tables either.*

The only place to order food was the designated seating area. Alcohol was all that was served at the game tables.

It was no good. She couldn't think of a way to ensure that only the desired side was weighted.

"Hey, lady, you got anything to give me besides these ice-cold drinks? My belly's starting to freeze," Tan complained to the dice girl from the opposite seat, pushing away the cup he was about to knock back. "It's a cold winter. Don'tcha have any hot rice wine? I can feel the fat from the fried pork I ate earlier hardening in my stomach. I'm in the mood for a warm drink. Pleeese?"

He affected a wheedling drawl, taking the dice girl's hands in his.

"Damn, your hands are cold! Must be all those chilled drinks you've been pouring. Say, how about I warm you up a little?"

"Hands off!" The woman slapped his hands away in a panic, reaching for the liquor bottle again to ward off a second attempt.

Less than pleased with the patron's philandering, the bouncer warned him in a low growl, "'Scuse me, sir, but we serve our drinks chilled to keep our players thinking sharp. It's a courtesy on the part of the house, so I don't wanna hear any complaints. 'Sides, it's sweltering in here."

Perhaps intimidated, Tan winced and made a knee-jerk apology, then did his best to butter the guard up. "True. With all the fires you've got burning, I guess there's no need to seek extra warmth."

"Thanks for understanding. If you're really dying to hold a lady's hand, you'll have to settle for that freckled girl."

"Seriously? Ouch. Even I have preferences, y'know," Tan grumbled as he

backed off. The bouncer snorted a laugh before reassuming his vigilant stance.

After listening to that series of exchanges, Reirin stared intently at the dice girl's hands, then checked the position of the standing brazier and the dice, and finally examined the liquor bottle a barmaid had brought to the table.

*So that's the answer!*

She could practically feel the scattered pieces of information coming together into a single thread.

Since Tan was the one who had prompted her to make the connection, she reflexively shot him a grateful look. Noticing her gaze, the man turned to her with a grin. "What's up, sweetheart? Were you hoping for something? Well, your face is nothing special, but I could work with those breasts."

"Goodness."

The moment the man reached in her direction, Reirin smiled sweetly, grabbed his index finger, and bent it as far backward as she could. She had acted according to her very simple creed: *"Death to all who insult Shu Keigetsu."*

"Ouch! What the hell?!"

"Oh, I didn't manage to break it," Reirin mumbled regretfully, then shot to her feet.

The bookmaker tried to stop her. "Hey, miss! You're on a roll! Aren't you gonna go another round?"

"Of course. I'm just taking a little break." Reirin brushed him aside, then slipped through the gap between the game tables. She had a rough idea of the dice trick they might be using. All that remained was to observe repeated, proven instances of it.

Fortunately, by the time she had passed five tables, she was convinced that her hypothesis was correct.

*The dice are always placed near the standing braziers before they're rolled. And the dice girls always cool their hands on a bottle of chilled liquor before*

*handling the dice.*

Letting the exhilaration wash over her, Reirin turned back to where Leelee and Ringyoku were waiting by the wall, a spring in her step.



## Chapter 4:

### Tousetsu and Keikou

**T**HE GROUP'S ASSIGNED ROOM on the second floor, though snug, was well ventilated, tastefully furnished, and clean. The sole lady of the party placed a rolled-up pillow and wig on the pristine bed, draped the opulent vermillion robe she had been wearing over top, and then covered the whole pile with the blankets. Once she had arranged the scene to look like a noblewoman was taking a nap, this woman—Tousetsu, the head court lady of the Palace of the Golden Qilin—let a long breath go.

At that very moment, a bell rang outside to announce the first hour of the horse. It was just about time to eat.

“Tedious. A Maiden’s robe is far too heavy and stiff on the shoulders. What a miserable role I’ve been cast in,” the court lady muttered to herself, adjusting the sleeves of the gamboge gold robe she had tucked under her outer garment.

The sparsely embellished robe was the uniform worn by the high-ranking court ladies of the Kou Palace. While not particularly ornate, Tousetsu took great pride in its vibrant color, which only a select few were permitted to wear. Since she also happened to be a distant descendant of the Gen, the rulers of the northern territory, the lack of frills didn’t bother her in the least.

“Was it that bad? I thought it looked good on you. It’s not every day that you wear a vermillion robe or let your hair down. If you ask me, it’s a waste to change back so soon,” a voice called out to Tousetsu as she began to tie up her hair.

It was Kou Keikou, the eldest son of the Kou clan, who was in the midst of deftly pulling the bamboo blinds over the window. Leaving his signature headband tied around his forehead, he tossed the bamboo hat he had been

wearing into a corner of the room. He then pulled up a nearby chair and sat down, leaning all the way back on his elbows and beginning to relax.

“This is a nice inn. The owner seems like a respectable man, and the food at the tavern downstairs looks tasty. It’s not far from the northern market either. Man, I love the idea of buying some fresh fish and dressing it right here. What do you think, Tousetsu?”

“With all due respect, Master Keikou, we are not here to see the sights. This is no time for us to enjoy a gourmet meal,” Tousetsu snapped in response to the friendly banter. “Our role is to make the public believe that ‘Shu Keigetsu’ is resting in this room, should a decoy prove necessary.”

Once she’d fired off the rebuke with a scowl, a sigh escaped her lips. She reflected back on the events that had led up to this moment.

It had been two days since her revered mistress, Kou Reirin, and Prince Gyomei had informed her that they wanted to head into town to reverse the switch in order to prevent the spell from being detected. Although she had her misgivings about a Maiden going to the outer city, Tousetsu had consented. A court lady had no right to refuse an order from her mistress, and she agreed that it was a good idea to practice their emergency procedure.

Traveling in a large group would arouse suspicion, so they were to split up into smaller teams and meet in the outer city. No problems there.

Reirin, who inhabited the body of “Shu Keigetsu,” would disguise herself as a court lady and make her way to the tavern alongside Leelee. Tousetsu knew that her mistress was skilled in the art of self-defense, so this was also fine.

Keigetsu, who inhabited the body of “Kou Reirin,” would pretend to take a carriage to the Kou clan’s ancestral shrine, accompanied by Keishou, another member of the clan. Assuming this would involve an actual visit to the Kou estate, it would be best to have the silver-tongued Keishou with her, so the plan made sense.

To create the impression that “Shu Keigetsu” was concurrently moving in the

opposite direction, a court lady had to impersonate her, board a carriage, and take a joyride around the city before returning home. Here was the problem. Why did *she* have to dress up as Shu Keigetsu?

*No, I understand that part. Of all the women in the know, I'm the one with the physique closest to Shu Keigetsu's.*

If the body-swapped Reirin played the part of “Shu Keigetsu” and went the other way, it would be impossible to meet and undo the switch, and the petite, redheaded Leelee wasn't a good fit for the role.

*But why must I travel together with Master Keikou?*

That was where her complaints began and ended.

As she arranged her hair into its usual court lady style, Tousetsu glanced at Keikou where he sat. He had a strong build and masculine features. What he lacked in elegance, he made up for with his friendly, straightforward personality, and he was rumored to be one of the two most popular military officers in the capital. No small number of court ladies would be thrilled to spend half a day sharing secrets and working alongside him.

“You take everything so seriously! I bet Reirin would be thrilled to debone a fish with me. Heh heh, I'm the one who taught her how it's done!” Keikou cheerfully proclaimed.

“Ah, yes. You must mean that sloppy method of cutting it into two and a half fillets instead of the proper three,” Tousetsu replied with a cold smile. “I showed her how to do it the right way. I wouldn't want Lady Reirin to be burdened with erroneous knowledge.”

Tousetsu found it an unmitigated nuisance that this man always taught her mistress—her Supreme One—the “wrong” lessons.

It had been a year and a half since Tousetsu had first begun to serve her Maiden. To this day, Kou Reirin remained her ideal: as beautiful as a celestial maiden and as delicate as a work of gold, yet strong-willed enough to

overpower a grown man. She was as pure as water and as firm as the earth, and Tousetsu thought it nothing short of a miracle that her mistress could manifest those two contradictory forms of beauty at the same time. She felt it her duty to ensure that the girl attained the supreme status she deserved.

However, Kou Reirin occasionally showed a sillier side of herself that aspired to boorish antics, though it was hard to tell until one truly got to know her. To give a few concrete examples, she longed to sleep beneath the open sky or to climb onto a roof and scream at the top of her lungs during a thunderstorm. Granted, due to her frail constitution, these hopes of hers were never realized.

These were the same active and dangerous pastimes of a prepubescent boy.

It was Tousetsu's belief that her mistress's fascination with such childish pursuits could be wholly ascribed to the influence of her rowdy eldest brother. He was always going around saying things like, "Boar stew tastes best when you hunt the meat yourself!" or "Nothing feels more invigorating than flapping your sleeves and yelling into a big storm, mwa ha ha!" Each time, the eyes of the impressionable baby of the family would light up as she exclaimed, "Goodness! How intrepid! Now that's what I call backbone."

As far as Tousetsu was concerned, none of that constituted "backbone." It was foolish, ill-conceived, and barbaric recklessness, plain and simple. She much preferred that Reirin grow up to be an empress with unshakable dignity, much like the great Kou Kenshuu. To that end, she certainly wanted the girl to - develop backbone and force of personality. What she didn't want was for her to become feral.

For instance, were Reirin to come under attack by an assassin, she would want the Maiden to chuckle and land a chop to the back of her assailant's neck, not headbutt them with a loud battle cry. If Keigetsu heard this, she would probably scream that both options were so outrageous that she couldn't see the difference, but from Tousetsu's perspective, this constituted a major difference in educational policy. It was a matter of aesthetics.

As such, she was deeply annoyed by Keikou's constant attempts to instill his muscle-brained values in her mistress. Keikou, for his part, seemed to resent the fact that his little sister—who had once absorbed his teachings without question—was constantly reevaluating her views thanks to her court lady's nagging. Whenever he and Tousetsu crossed paths, he made every effort to assert his dominance.

Few knew it, but the pair got along like oil and water.

“Hey! What do you mean, ‘erroneous’? When you’re camping and need to debone a fish with a dagger instead of a sharpened kitchen knife, that’s the way to do it. I’m thinking one step ahead of you, see?”

*Oh, look at that. The bear is speaking human language.*

Tousetsu tilted her head to one side, tuning out Keikou's rantings till they were little more than background noise. Having spent her childhood years in the Gen domain, she would never get used to his overzealous conversation style.

*If I'd known this was going to happen, I would have tried harder to keep the captain from leaving. He could have handled the task of nodding along and spared me this conversation.*

She heaved another sigh. The original plan had been for Shin-u, the captain of the Eagle Eyes, to accompany them on their travels. As a matter of fact, he *had* been with them...until a few minutes ago, when he left them outside the inn.

“My job was to act as a human identification badge and get you through the palace gates without being stopped at any checkpoints. Now that I’ve served my purpose, I’ll be taking my leave,” he’d said, summarily turning around the horse he had ridden alongside the carriage.

He’d added that he wanted to take advantage of the trip into town to browse the shops, but Tousetsu was certain that was a lie. There hadn’t been a hint of excitement for shopping in those apathetic blue eyes. Most likely, he had left because he was tired of Keikou's never-ending, overenthusiastic chatter. Either

that, or there simply wasn't anything in this room that could hold his interest.

*He's a surprisingly easy man to figure out.*

Tousetsu grimaced, her feelings on the matter mixed.

Shin-u was a descendant of the emperor and the son of a foreign slave. By all accounts, he was the cruel and unfeeling executioner of the inner court. He had always spent his days in indifference, the look in his eyes that of a man who had renounced everything. But lately, Tousetsu knew, there was something he was unconsciously pursuing. There was someone who weighed on his mind, whom he kept a close eye on, and who frequently brought a smile to his face when he talked to her.

*I can only hope that won't cause problems down the line.*

Tousetsu was proud that her mistress was adored by so many. Still, there were times when love from an unexpected source could bring disaster. The man's heart was akin to a tense water's surface. Tousetsu feared that his Gen-like obsession, which had pooled a drop at a time, would one day burst like a dam.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Keikou asked with a tilt of his head when Tousetsu lapsed into thoughtful silence. "You went quiet all of a sudden. Did you get the runs?"

It was probably an attempt at consideration, but that last question was over the line.

*This is precisely why I can't stand him.*

Tousetsu's face grew sullen. "No. I was simply concerned that a dark cloud might be forming over my lady's head," she said, assuming that such a happy-go-lucky man wouldn't understand the subtleties of emotion.

Sure enough, the man slouched back in his chair and gave an utterly useless response. "Oho? Well, don't worry too much. If that happens, we just have to pull the cloud our way. Nothing a little fighting spirit can't fix."

Irritated, Tousetsu glared at him. “How do you expect to control the weather? Will you please stop indoctrinating my lady with your unrealistic notion that backbone can solve everything?” Inadvertently, her choice of words grew more pointed.

Tousetsu was not fond of *any* of the unclean, unruly creatures known as men. They were all big in stature but short of temper, violent, and lustful toward every woman they saw all year round. Their urges were so indiscriminate that Tousetsu wished they would learn a thing or two from cats and dogs, who had the good sense to limit their mating seasons to the spring.

Despite possessing less intellect than animals, they acted like big shots at home and in politics, and despite praising their own acts of violence, they demanded obedience and weakness from women. Tousetsu found their self-serving double standards the hardest thing to swallow.

For instance, Tousetsu’s past suitors, being of Gen clan lineage, had prided themselves on their martial arts skills and confidently claimed that strength and desirability were one and the same. Yet as soon as it became clear that Tousetsu outclassed them, they had blustered that rowdy women were a turn-off and withdrawn.

Each time it happened, Tousetsu was tempted to scream, *This is nonsense! How can you excuse your own boorish behavior as a show of strength, only to forbid women from doing the same? You have no right to demand self-control and demureness from others when an animal could outsmart you!*

It was because she harbored that underlying rage that just looking at the uninhibited Kou Keikou made her livid. Men had it so good. They could roll around in the mud, have a hearty laugh, and that would be the end of it.

It wasn’t so easy for women. This man had no concept of those struggles, so Tousetsu resented him for trying to impose his own unclean, unruly values—values that only men were allowed to have—on his sister.

*No doubt Master Keikou would be taken aback if he actually witnessed a*



*woman bellowing at the top of her lungs.*

Tousetsu was sure of it. Her countless suitors who had retreated with horrified looks were all the proof she needed.

Thus, she was careful to raise Reirin not to become a wild child. Though Tousetsu found the men's logic self-centered and infuriating, she wanted her Maiden to win the love of those same men and prevail over them.

She escalated the argument in a warning tone. "Moreover, now that she is a Maiden, those of the inner court are the ones responsible for Lady Reirin's education. You are her elder brother, not her teacher. I must ask that you refrain from meddling further."

"That's crazy talk!" said Keikou, getting up from his chair. "The most important quality for a teacher to have isn't a title, it's compatibility with their student. Reirin and I are kindred spirits. In fact, I'd say we're in perfect step with each other. That makes me her lifelong teacher."

"You truly believe that the two of you see eye to eye on everything? Absurd. There is a world of difference between a boar-headed man like you and—"

"Ah-ah-ah, Tousetsu. Let me ask you something. How many perfumed sachets has Reirin given you so far?" When Tousetsu finally grew frustrated enough to argue back, Keikou cut her off with a sweeping gesture. "She has a habit of sewing sachets for her favorite people as a token of her gratitude. If you claim to be her teacher, you must have received a few yourself. Now fess up. How many?"

"Three. Why?" Tousetsu replied, the overt smugness in his question making her wary.

"Ha ha ha! *Three?*" Keikou immediately shot back, giving a haughty jerk of his chin and jabbing a finger at the court lady. "I've received ten. There's a whole digit of difference between us! That's proof that my sister and I are of one mind!"

The man's nostrils flared, but it wouldn't be long before his expression turned to a frown. He had expected the court lady to lose heart when confronted with the harsh truth, but instead her shoulders shook quietly with mirth.

"Oh dear. You have no idea at all, do you? I almost have to pity you."

"What?"

"You have spent nearly fifteen years of your life with Lady Reirin. Assuming she learned to embroider at the age of five, that's ten years you have lived with her when she was able to hand out sachets. I, on the other hand, first began to serve Lady Reirin only a year and a half ago."

The court lady, whose face was usually devoid of all emotion, broke into a broad smile. It was what most people would describe as a "smirk."

"Suppose affection is measured in sachets. Since you have received ten sachets over ten years, her feelings for you are worth one sachet per year. As I have received three over the course of a year and a half, she values me at two sachets per year. That's twice as much. The densities are incomparable!"

"You can't just invent new units of measurement!" Keikou yelled, but he was the one who had brought up the sachets as a reference for comparison in the first place. "Oh, come on! You have a comeback for everything, don't you?! That's it, I'm out of here!"

Realizing that he couldn't win a war of words, the man snorted and made to leave the room.

"Where are you going, Master Keikou? We're supposed to be here as bodyguards. We shouldn't leave this room."

"Even guards have to eat, right? Back at the start, I was looking forward to joining you and the captain in the tavern for a bite to eat. But then one of you split off from the group, and now the other keeps picking fights with me. I've got no choice but to eat alone."

"I can at least escort you downstairs," Tousetsu offered, the sulk in his voice

making her feel the slightest pang of a conscience.

It was true that she might have been too outspoken against Kou Keikou as of late. A mere court lady had no right to insult a son of the Kou clan, and his being an infuriating musclehead was hardly anything new.

“I’m afraid I never have been the friendly sort. I sincerely apologize if that has given you cause for offense. I will stay behind and guard this room, so please relax and enjoy your meal.”

Tousetsu’s concession immediately brightened Keikou’s mood. When she handed him his bamboo hat, he accepted it with a word of thanks. After waiting for his companion to make herself presentable, he cheerfully walked down the stairs with her.

“I shouldn’t be long. I wasn’t actually planning on going to the tavern. I’m off to a weapons shop.”

“A weapons shop, you say?”

Keikou failed to notice how Tousetsu’s eyes abruptly narrowed.

“Yeah. It’s a hidden gem tucked away in the northern market, a prestigious weapons store called the Moon’s Razor. The owner is a stubborn old cuss, but he’s passionate about the martial arts. He sells only ten blades a month, and the requirement to buy one is to demonstrate an acceptable level of skill in his presence.”

The longer he talked, the more traces of expression vanished from Tousetsu’s face.

“Lately, more and more people have been making inquiries, so even the chance to give a martial arts demonstration is decided by lottery. The twenty or so people who apply and get this wooden tablet back have passed the first stage of the selection process.”

When Keikou proudly produced a wooden tablet from his sleeve, Tousetsu automatically pressed a hand to the breast of her garment.

“I see.”

Women of the Gen line loved the martial arts. At this point, Keikou still had no idea that Tousetsu, who was a more avid collector of weapons than accessories, was carrying a wooden tablet with the exact same Moon’s Razor emblem in her bosom.

“Master Keikou,” Tousetsu called out to him just as he was about to walk straight through the tavern and out the door.

Her expression was as inscrutable as ever, but thoughts swirled through her mind at a dizzying pace. Both guards couldn’t leave the room at the same time. Though there was nothing for them to protect except a doll—no, for that very reason—it would look unnatural and leave them vulnerable if security was too light. In that case, it was better that they went out one at a time. It would be acceptable and inconspicuous enough if either of them stepped out for half an hour or so.

That raised the question of which of them would go first.

*Master Keikou is quite skilled. If he gets the chance to demonstrate his prowess, I have no doubt that he will be granted permission to buy a blade.*

If Keikou were allowed to go first, there would be one less slot available by the time Tousetsu got there. This month, the Moon’s Razor was selling daggers that were easy for women to handle. Tousetsu had been eyeing one as a potential gift for Reirin for a while now.

*I must have it.*

She was confident that her martial arts skills would be up to the owner’s standards. As long as Keikou went after her, he was free to shop at his leisure as far as she was concerned. But she *had* to get to the shop before him. Of that, Tousetsu was convinced.

And so she quickly devised a plan of attack.

*I’ll get him drunk.*

He wouldn't listen to her if she asked—if anything, there was a risk that he would dig in his heels harder—and she couldn't beat him in a contest of sheer physical strength. In that case, she had no choice but to bring him down with the closest poison on hand: alcohol.

A simple task, really. All she had to do was spend half an hour getting him pleasantly intoxicated. Why, as a court lady, it was only good manners for her to pour a few drinks for her mistress's brother.

Once Tousetsu was done arming herself with excuses, she turned back to Keikou and spoke to him with a solemn expression. "I sincerely regret my earlier rudeness. Would you still allow me to join you for lunch? I would like to pour you a drink as a token of my apology."

Keikou's eyes went wide. "Seriously?"

It was questionable whether this court lady had anything resembling social skills at all, so he certainly hadn't expected such a warm and courteous invitation from her. Not that he had any reservations about accepting the offer. He preferred to eat in large groups, and despite how it seemed, he was actually rather fond of the woman.

Kou Keikou's taste in people was the same as his taste in sashimi. That is to say, he liked people who were fresh and full of texture. Despite this, all the people in the imperial capital—particularly the women—were floppy and flabby, much to Keikou's disapproval. Whenever he expressed his honest opinion, someone would take it as a snide remark and burst into tears, and whenever he gave a girl a friendly clap on the shoulder, she would become terrified that he'd raised a hand against her. Frankly, he wasn't sure how to handle a one-on-one interaction with any woman other than his little sister.

His little brother, Keishou, liked to laugh and say, "Brother, you sound like a monster afraid to crush humans with your beastly strength," and he wasn't that far off the mark. If Keikou liked someone, be they man or woman, it was in his nature to nuzzle his cheek against theirs, ruffle their hair, and hug them as hard

as he could. It went without saying that conversational banter and physical affection were most enjoyable when they were direct. And yet, getting even a little too close would always send the other person running scared.

Although Tousetsu was a difficult woman to approach, she was reliable in the sense that she was imperturbable and never cried over trivial things. She was firm in her likes and dislikes, and Keikou appreciated her radical willingness to fight to protect her loved ones.

Granted, even *she* was bound to shrink in fear if Keikou were ever to go all out. Still, his little sister was the only one who could withstand the full force of his presence, so Tousetsu nonetheless counted as something of a rarity.

“I never thought I’d hear such a noble sentiment from you! Ha ha, of course I’m in! Let’s have lunch together!”

Thrilled, Keikou’s first instinct was to clap Tousetsu on the shoulder, just as he would do to his men.

“Ngh...”

“Oops, sorry, I put a little too much force into that one. I’ll foot the bill, so feel free to order whatever you—”

Just as Tousetsu staggered from the impact, there came a rustling sound as she pressed a hand to her chest. Keikou’s smile vanished in an instant.

*What was that?*

A rectangular object had peeked out from the collar of her robe. She scrambled to shove it back into place, but Keikou could have sworn he saw a familiar brand stamped on that piece of wood.

It was the same Moon’s Razor emblem carved onto his wooden tablet.

*Oho?*

Keikou was the type to rely on brute force, but that didn’t mean he was obtuse. On the contrary, the man was known for his beastly intuition. He had transcended logical thought and arrived at the truth of Tousetsu’s plot in a

single leap.

In other words, Tousetsu's sudden proposal to have lunch together wasn't out of any interest in deepening their bond. All she wanted was to stall him by getting him drunk or forcing him to eat enormous portions of food.

*Aha, it's all coming together now.*

How strange. Perhaps due to the contrast with how happy he had been with Tousetsu just a few moments ago, his mood had turned well and truly sour.

Keikou flashed the court lady a superficial smile. "It's a real honor to be asked out by a lady who's notoriously impervious to male advances."

Tousetsu, for her part, curled the corners of her rigid lips into the best smile she could muster and replied, "I, too, am honored beyond measure to be sharing lunch with the court ladies' dream man."

Even when she was out to manipulate him, she made a point of calling him the court ladies' dream man, not her own. Keikou wasn't sure whether to be impressed or insulted.

"Oh boy, I can hardly wait!"

"Me neither."

After exchanging smiles, the pair descended the stairs. When the entrance to the first-floor tavern came into view, their faces turned deadly serious, and they headed for the door at an abnormally brisk pace.

*This muscle-brained man...*

*This emotionless woman...*

*...is going down.*

Earlier, in the pantry in a corner of the first-floor tavern...

Having just shown the guests to their room upstairs, the old innkeeper bowed his head in thanks and stowed the generous tip he had received in a jar. Tips



were kept in a separate fund from the profits, and he would distribute the money to the waitstaff whenever there was a special occasion. The Good Omens Inn had a reputation for scrumptious food and honest management.

*Just as I'd expect from a man of the Kou. He was quite generous.*

Parked outside the entrance was a modest carriage with no identifying crest. From the sound of it, it was the Shu Maiden herself who had been riding inside. Seeing as she had no guardian consort, the Maiden of the Kou clan, who was a friend of hers, had provided her a means of transportation so that she could enjoy a stroll during the birthday festivities. In addition to the carriage, the Kou Maiden had sent the other girl off with her brother—a military officer—and one of her most trusted court ladies as her escorts.

Word had it that Kou Reirin was a benevolent woman, and it appeared to be true that she cared deeply for her friends.

Alas, after coming all this way to see the market from her carriage, Shu Keigetsu had succumbed to motion sickness. Her entourage had therefore decided to suspend their tour of the city and stop at an inn to rest. Knowing how rare it must have been for the girl to venture outside, it was a truly unfortunate turn of events.

To allow the staff to focus on running the tavern, the inn half of the operation was neglected during the afternoon. The innkeeper had insisted there was no need to pay for a mere few hours' rest, but the military officer had grinned and said, "I know it's a sudden imposition, so take the money," then paid almost double the standard price. A nobleman's generosity knew no bounds.

One might expect him to then stay true to his noble ways and start making all sorts of demands, but all he had asked was that the Maiden be left to rest undisturbed. He had also insisted that he could carry his own luggage and didn't need a servant to help him. This had been right toward the start of the tavern's peak hours, so frankly, it had come as a great relief.

Though the innkeeper hadn't gotten a good look at the court lady, the man

had mentioned that she would be joining them upstairs, so he thought it might be a good idea to have some tea sent up to their room later. The Good Omens Inn was an unpretentious affair, so it wasn't every day that they received such distinguished guests. While it was a point of pride to be graced by the nobility, it was also unnerving. It was imperative that there be no oversights or mishaps.

Just then, a waitress rushed in from the dining area, out of breath. "Sir! We have an emergency. The southwesterners are back."

The proprietor grimaced the moment he heard her news. "Again?"

"Southwesterners" was a term for those who resided in the southwestern district of the imperial capital—or, to put it more plainly, those who made their living in the entertainment district. Other names for them were "nightlifers" or "moonlighters." Originally used to describe anyone who worked in shady businesses, such as prostitutes, gambling den owners, or the debt collectors who preyed on their patrons, the term had taken on a more specific and sinister meaning for the Good Omens Inn in recent days.

It alluded to the bouncers from the infamous Three Realms Parlor.

Since anyone who complained about the operation was guaranteed a world of hurt, it hadn't taken long for everyone to learn to look the other way and keep their mouths shut about its practices.

As nice as it would have been for the men to stick to their southwestern corner, the bouncers had recently grown bored of dining in the entertainment district and begun venturing out to the northern market. By some twist of fate, the men had developed a taste for the food served at the Good Omens Inn and taken to raiding the tavern on a daily basis.

"Hey, where's the booze?! Somebody bring me a stiff drink! And something to eat while yer at it!"

Nothing good could come of being popular with a bunch of thugs. The men made a mess of their meals, drank until they puked, and shoved their hands up the waitresses' robes. They cursed out the other patrons in their guttural growls

and brandished their swords whenever a foul mood struck them. If a customer preferred to keep a tab, the system worked by recording the amount they owed on a wooden tablet, which was thrown out when they made their payment at the end of the year. These men had discarded their own board just the other day—meaning they were skipping out on their bills.

“I told ya to have my food ready by now! Do I hafta beat that lazy cook to death?!”

Even so, provoking the men would only invite harm upon the staff. These bouncers weren’t the type to make empty threats; if they threatened to beat someone, they would really do it, and if they threatened to kill someone, that person could wind up dead.

Reminded of the painful gut punch he had suffered a few days ago, the elderly proprietor scurried out into the dining area. “M-my deepest apologies, sirs! Your food will be ready shortly! Have something to drink while you wait!” Seeing that the bouncers had been poised to barge into the kitchen, he pushed a jug full of rice wine into their hands.

He then jerked his chin at the waitress he was shielding behind his back, a silent signal to get out of there. He wouldn’t know how to apologize to her parents if such a young girl were ravished by these brutes.

“Oh, look, I guess the service here isn’t *all* bad. But you weren’t planning on leaving us with just the one jug, were ya?”

“O-of course not... I’ll bring you another at once.”

“That ain’t enough! Bring us three more! And be quick about it!”

Their party consisted of three burly, stubbled men. One short old man was no match for them.

“Don’t forget the food. It’s boring to eat the same stir-fry every day. The taverns in the southwestern district are serving hot pot this time of year. Bring us some of that!”

“Um, sir, I’m afraid we don’t have the ingredients or the right pots to—”

“Can it, you old geezer! Are you picking a fight with the Three Realms Parlor?!”

One man kicked the wall with a loud *thud*, drawing a flinch from the innkeeper. If his ribs had taken the force of that blow, it would have killed him.

“I-I wouldn’t dream of it...”

This was the inn that he and his wife had run with such dedication until her death the previous year. He had already overcome all manner of financial difficulties. He couldn’t let these petty thugs cost him his establishment. Even if he couldn’t count on help from the authorities, even if he had no means to fight back, he would hunker down and do his utmost to weather the storm. He would protect the few employees left to him.

“What, ya can’t even afford to buy a single pot?! Then what about that door over there? It’s made of high-quality wood and embellished with brass. You’ve gotta be making a fortune to have something like that! I’ve got a good eye for this stuff. Don’t take me for a fool!”

“You’re wrong! One of the local artisans made that for us out of the kindness of his heart. We are not a profitable establishment by any means. And if I may add, sir, you still haven’t paid your bill from the other day.”

“Hunh?! It was just a meal’s worth of money! Get off our asses! Why don’t ya concentrate on turning a profit from your inn instead?!”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way...”

As the old man carefully chose his words, he had a startling realization. There were nobles staying on the second floor. He had to make sure they didn’t get caught up in this.

The hour of the horse had just begun. That marked the middle of the day, but he hoped with all his heart that his guests wouldn’t come down for lunch. If they happened to draw the attention of these bouncers—these men so fond of

extorting people—it could spell trouble.

*I must warn them not to come here.*

Alas, life never seems to go the way one wants it to. When the innkeeper heard the creak of the wooden stairs past the tavern door, he nearly cast a helpless glance at the ceiling.

*This is bad!*

The couple in question was a well-dressed young nobleman and an undoubtedly sheltered court lady. It was hard to imagine them standing a chance against these bouncers, who were the epitome of violent hooligans.

The innkeeper tried to bolt for the door, only to have one of the men catch him by the collar.

“Are you deaf, old geezer?”

“Urk...”

After giving the old man’s lapels a hard twist, the man suddenly released his grip and dropped the innkeeper onto his buttocks. Sensing the violence that was about to befall him, the innkeeper curled up into a ball.

*Blast it... Whatever it takes, I have to make sure those two stay out of—*

He sucked in a long breath, prepared to shout a warning even if it meant taking a beating.

At that exact moment, however, the door flew open with a *bang*, and it took all his willpower not to curse the Heavens. Were his own old bones not sacrifice enough?

After coming down excited and ready to fill his hungry belly, the guest of honor was sure to become the target of these ruffians. He would be punched, kicked, and subjected to all manner of violence at the hands of these despicable men, who would stoop to any low to get what they wanted. The court lady who was supposedly accompanying him might also become their victim. Should that come to pass, the Good Omens Inn would make an enemy of the entire nobility.

But then...

“Excuse me! One jug of rice wine for this gentleman, please!”

“While you’re at it, bring us shredded tofu salad, stir-fried greens in soy sauce, fresh spring rolls, wontons, steamed meatballs, sweet-and-sour fried pork, and steamed garlic prawns with vermicelli!”

“...Huh?”

As he watched the pair in question place their orders with intense stares—with eyes that didn’t seem to register their surroundings—a dubious look crossed the old innkeeper’s face.

He was onto her.

The moment Keikou quickened his pace, Tousetsu knew that he had figured out her plan. It made sense; she was up against someone with the instincts of a wild animal. It was only natural that she would fall under suspicion if she suddenly offered to pour him a drink after picking fights with him nonstop.

Yet for better or for worse, he had still chosen to accept her invitation. The man radiated a determination to seize the opportunity and beat Tousetsu at her own game.

*Heh... Bring it on.*

As the first to launch an attack, she was fully prepared to suffer retaliation. Since her companion seemed committed to acting out a phony “lunch date” scenario, she decided to play along. She would hold him back in a way that didn’t deviate from the act of dining together.

For a start, Tousetsu decided to order some wine. She was a bit of a lightweight herself, but she had never heard a word about the men of the Kou clan having a high tolerance for alcohol. Her first order of business was to get this man drinking as soon as possible.

“Excuse me! One jug of rice wine for this gentleman, please!” she shouted as soon as she set foot in the tavern—only to be shocked when Keikou immediately started talking over her.

“While you’re at it, bring us shredded tofu salad, stir-fried greens in soy sauce, fresh spring rolls, wontons, steamed meatballs, sweet-and-sour fried pork, and steamed garlic prawns with vermicelli!”

Tousetsu, for her part, hadn’t planned on ordering more than the bare minimum of appetizers. Just how much food did this man intend to eat?

*Look at that. Even the innkeeper is appalled.*

When Keikou went on with a sly grin, however, Tousetsu would finally realize his true agenda.

“Lay it all out in front of this lady here. She’ll clean every last plate. We’re doing a celebratory ‘surfeit.’”

Much like “bottoms up” was a call to finish one’s drink, the Kingdom of Ei had a similar custom known as “surfeiting” for food. Namely, because the food served for festive occasions was imbued with positive qi, the first person to take a bite had to keep eating until their plate was empty. The custom was born out of a desire to ensure that no one held back at a banquet, but it was tantamount to torture for those with smaller appetites. Keikou was out to prove in practice that good intentions could sometimes be used for evil.

In short, Tousetsu couldn’t leave this place until all the food was set out before her—and she had eaten every last bite.

*I think not.*

Speaking loudly enough for the petrified innkeeper to hear, Tousetsu said, “Surely you jest. A mere court lady could never touch her meal before a most esteemed military officer. By all means, please go ahead and eat first.” Then, once she had him in check, she went on the offensive. “But before that, a drink. Allow me to pour it for you,” she offered amiably, casting a quick glance around

the room.

It was then that one of the thugs finally snapped to his senses. “Hey, assholes! We’re in the middle of—” he started to shout, but when Tousetsu noticed that he was holding a jug of wine, she snatched it out of his hands faster than he could blink.

“Behold! Wine! And it was ready before we even had to place our order! The service here is impressive.”

“Huh? Hey, screw you!”

After a moment’s delay, the face of the now empty-handed man twisted in rage, but this was not the time to be concerned with such trivial matters.

Tousetsu gleefully moved to pour a drink for the man she despised. “Here, Master Keikou.”

“What the hell is your problem, you bi—gwah!”

When the man who had been robbed of his drink tried to grab her shoulder from behind, she casually delivered a backhand blow to his face to shut him up.

Interrupting someone else’s conversation was taboo. The head of the court ladies was known to enforce the rules with an iron fist, and that habit had automatically kicked in.

“Nonsense, Tousetsu.”

Yet Kou Keikou, who had watched this all play out, was not to be trifled with. No sooner had he shrugged his shoulders than he snatched the jug of wine from Tousetsu with lightning speed. Not content to stop there, he grabbed hold of her arm with his free hand. The moment he put the slightest bit of force into his grip, Tousetsu felt the world spin around her, and before she knew it, she found herself sitting at a nearby table.

“Wha—?!”

“It’s bad manners to stand and drink. We’d better have a seat. Also, women pouring the drinks is an outdated custom. In today’s society, men ought to



behave like gentlemen and serve the women. Don't you agree?"

His technique had such a light touch that even the woman in question needed some time to process what had happened, but he had just thrown Tousetsu across the room.

*I can't believe how fluid that was!*

While the move may have appeared to rely on raw strength, it actually required a great deal of finesse to flip an opponent's entire body without breaking a single bone. Being an expert in the martial arts, Tousetsu steeled herself for the battle ahead as it dawned on her just how formidable Keikou really was.

*This* was what the heir to the Kou clan was capable of.

"Here, have a cup."

Keeping his grip on Tousetsu's arm even after she was seated, Keikou next tried to shove a wine cup into her open hand. Tousetsu clenched her fist in refusal, but Keikou pried open her fingers one by one with a smile on his face.

"Don't be shy."

After a silent struggle, Tousetsu finally opened her palm, overpowered by her opponent's physical strength.

"Drink up!"

Just when Keikou had forced her to hold the cup and was poised to fill it with a ladleful of wine, something happened.

*Smash!*

Lo, the cup in Tousetsu's grip had shattered to pieces.

"Oh dear, it broke. I'm afraid I can't drink anything now," she muttered in a perfect monotone.

That stunt was enough to make even Keikou's eyes go round. "You'd go that far?!"

If there was but one point that defied Tousetsu's expectations, it was that the man chuckled instead of blanching like her previous suitors.

"Uh-oh, this is getting exciting," he murmured under his breath, licking his lips. There was a twinkle in his eyes.







“Huh? What happened to the cup?”

“How could she smash it to pieces with just one hand?”

Meanwhile, the bouncers wore their bewilderment plain on their faces. These brazen interlopers had interrupted their meal, stolen their booze, and raised a hand against one of their colleagues. Normally, the thugs’ response to such disrespect would be to teach them a lesson on the spot, but frankly, the duo was moving so fast that they had no hope of getting close. It was all they could do to keep up with what was going on.

“Are these guys...negotiating over who has to pour the drinks?”

“That seems to be the gist of it.”

Shortly thereafter, the situation escalated into something that the word “negotiation” couldn’t begin to describe.

*Tmp!*

Her arm still in Keikou’s grip, Tousetsu stood up, kicked off her chair, and leapt through the air. Using her opponent’s shoulder as leverage, she landed a somersault before grabbing Keikou’s throat in a choke hold from behind.

“What the...?!”

“What just happened?!”

“No, I insist. The higher-ranked must be the first to partake,” Tousetsu said dispassionately, heedless of how the onlookers buzzed.

The hand she wound around Keikou’s neck held a shard of the wine cup she had just shattered. It was clear what would happen if she plunged it into his throat.

Using the shard to prevent him from moving, Tousetsu snatched the ladle with her free hand and raised it to his lips. “Come, I shall pour your drink for you. Open wide.”

“Do you understand the gravity of pointing a weapon at me?” Keikou asked,

raising an eyebrow.

“Whatever are you insinuating? This is no weapon,” Tousetsu shamelessly replied. “I merely happen to be holding a piece of crockery that I accidentally broke a few moments ago.”

Waters were often still, but as soon as they began to rage, they could sweep away everything in their path. Although she remained as expressionless as ever, Tousetsu was getting completely absorbed in their match, and Keikou’s smile broadened to see it.

“Sorry, but I’m not in the mood to drink!”

Then, with a grin still plastered on his face, he made another grab for Tousetsu’s arm and threw her over his shoulder. He knew that it would be disrespectful to his opponent to hold back because she was a woman.

Indeed, Keikou could go all out against a female opponent. He was having the time of his life.

“Ngh!”

Sure enough, despite her wide-eyed surprise, the remarkably skilled court lady rolled nimbly across the floor and nailed the landing perfectly.

*Thunk!*

“Argh!”

The ladle flew out of her hands and hit one of the thugs—the same one she had backfisted earlier—square in the face, with such precision that it almost looked like she had been aiming for him, but she had no time to dwell on such matters.

“Sorry for the wait! Here are your stir-fried greens in soy sauce and sweet-and-sour fried pork!” The cook, who must have been tossing food like a man possessed after that threat from the bouncers, rushed out of the kitchen and into the dining area with the stir-fries he had managed to throw together. “The rest of your food should be ready shortly! I implore you, please just leave the

boss and the other patrons—”

Before he could finish that sentence, his jaw dropped. Of the trio of violent bouncers, one had fainted, his hands clutching his face, while the other two stood there in pale-faced shock. In their place, a well-dressed man and woman—a stark contrast to the thugs—were crouching down and calculating the timing of their attacks.

“Huh?”

A flabbergasted silence fell over the tavern.

Tousetsu was the next one to break that silence. “Oho. Shall I take that to mean you’re hungry, Master Keikou? Forgive me for not being more attentive to your needs.”

She cut through the air with a whistle, snatched a plate from the cook, and chucked it at Keikou without hesitation, serving chopsticks and all.

“Have an appetizer to start!”

The centrifugal force was so strong that the juices didn’t have a chance to spill. A plate hurtling through the air at such high speeds was indistinguishable from a deadly weapon. With that much power behind the throw, if it were to hit someone in the skull, the victim would undoubtedly be knocked unconscious.

It didn’t even occur to Tousetsu that she had all but abandoned the pretense of sharing a meal in her quest to incapacitate her opponent. She was too busy tingling with excitement. It had been far too long since she’d last enjoyed a fight that never seemed to end, no matter how serious she got.

*Whack! Smack!*

Keikou kicked off the floor and caught the plate with a flourish. Since he met the plate head-on and caught it mid-spin, not a single drop of soy sauce splashed around him. A beat later, he caught the chopsticks that came hurtling toward him with two of the fingers he was using to hold the plate.

“A-amazing!”

The waitress and the cook broke into a round of applause despite themselves, which Keikou returned with a genial smile. Meanwhile, the two conscious bouncers slowly but surely came to their senses, their eyes bloodshot as their hands went to the hilts of their swords.

“Hey, assholes! Are you a couple of street performers or something?! Quit screwing around!”

“Y-yeah! If you think you can make fools of us, you’ve got another thing coming!”

That was at the bottom of the list of Keikou’s current concerns, however. After setting the plate down on a nearby table, he blocked out the men’s existence as he turned to look at the court lady standing behind him.

“You know what, Tousetsu? I’m having a great time. Why didn’t I have lunch with you sooner?! Strong women are the best!”

“I...beg your pardon?”

That remark must truly have taken her by surprise. For once, the brusque court lady’s mouth was hanging open in shock.

“Still, I’m afraid I’ve got just one complaint. This is too much meat for a pampered rich boy like me. So...”

Narrowing his gaze, Keikou picked up a piece of fried pork and lobbed it straight at her gaping mouth.

“Go ahead and eat first!”

*Whoosh!* The meat whizzed through the air. It sounded almost like a whistling arrow proudly streaking across the battlefield.

Still, for all it oozed juices and whetted the appetite with its tangy aroma, Tousetsu wouldn’t walk away unscathed if she were to take a mouthful of that killer projectile. It looked hot, it was liable to hit her in the throat and knock her out, and taking a single bite doomed her to eat the entire spread of food.

Eyes flashing, the court lady jumped straight into action. That is to say...

“Are you listening, you bastards?! We oughta kill ya!”

“Raaaaah!”

“Pardon me.”

She slipped past the men as they came swinging their blades with a battle cry, stealing the sword right out of one of their hands.

The fried pork soared through the air in a perfect arc. Its juices trailed a second behind, like the tail of a comet. The men boggled as they looked over their shoulders. The scene seemed to unfold in slow motion, as if the whole world around them had slowed to a crawl.

Cold steel flashed. The smooth edge of the blade sank into the lump of meat and sliced through.

*Whoosh!*

“Will cutting it in two suffice?”

Sound returned to the world in an instant.

Next, the woman used the flat of her sword to strike the two halves of fried pork suspended in midair, batting them back at Keikou as if she were playing a game of polo.

“Enjoy your meal!”

The two lumps of meat whizzing across the room in quick succession might as well have been a pair of cannonballs. Even Keikou appeared taken aback, but after an idea came to his mind, he relaxed his stance and flung out his arms in a gesture of acceptance and expectation.

“Thanks, I will!”

“What?!”

He caught the first piece of fried pork firmly between his teeth, then swiftly



snapped up the next one with the serving chopsticks. Not a second later, he flung it back at Tousetsu, whose mouth was agape in shock.

“Righth bah atcha!”

His mouth was full, but it was likely an attempt to say, “Right back at you.”

“Ngh?!”

The fried pork was thrown with such precision that it landed squarely in Tousetsu’s mouth.

Silence reigned once more. The crowd stiffened, helpless to do anything but gawk at this intense skirmish, and the sound of the man and woman munching on fried pork filled the room. Neither of the pair had been wasteful enough to spill a single drop of the meat’s juices over the course of the fight.

“Mm, that was good.”

“Quite delectable.”

After swallowing their respective bites and muttering a few words of praise, the two warriors inexplicably turned to the bouncers for a verdict.

“Did you see that? She was the first to swallow, wasn’t she?”

“As he was the first to put the pork in his mouth, I would argue that *he* counts as the first of us to eat.”

Despite being cast as the judges, it went without saying that the thugs had no obligation to accept the role.

“Like I give a crap! Don’t ask me!”

“Why not?” Keikou asked, closing in on the largest of the men as soon as he started sputtering. “Did you miss it? What happened to all that talk about having such a good eye that you’d never overlook a furnishing?”

There was a smile on his face, but the glint in his eyes was ferocious. As it dawned on the bouncer that this man had overheard his earlier conversation with the innkeeper, his face went taut.

“I-I dunno what you’re talking about!”

“I gather that you’ve been yelling threats at the proprietor and refusing to pay for such exquisite fried pork.”

Upon averting his gaze, he found the woman stalking toward him. While she didn’t radiate the same oppressive aura as her male counterpart, there was an uncanny intensity to her impassive, unfeeling expression.

“Bro!”

Sensing that the odds were against them, the smallest underling of the group gave a subtle jerk of his chin, signaling to his boss that they should get out of there. This was a pair of expert fighters the likes of which they rarely encountered. Their best move was to retreat to the Three Realms Parlor for now and return with reinforcements for revenge.

“Tch! This isn’t over!”

Leaving one of their companions to clutch his face on the floor, the tallest of the men took one last parting shot as he attempted to flee the tavern.

“Tousetsu! Chopsticks, please!”

“Yes, sir!”

*Tmp tmp tmp!*

Just as their hands hovered over the door, the two men lurched forward as something grazed their faces with the speed of an arrow. By the time they could question what was happening, they were already nailed to the door, their mouths pressed to the wood in a kiss. One of the items responsible for sewing their robes in place was the stolen sword. The rest—as unbelievable as it may seem—were chopsticks.

The woman had thrown her sword, and the man had thrown the chopsticks she’d passed to him.

When they saw that those ordinary wooden sticks had penetrated their thick winter attire and wedged themselves deep into the door, the seasoned

bouncers couldn't hide their consternation. "Wh-wh-what...?"

As the thugs flailed and struggled like prey caught in a spider's web, the two Kous slowly approached them from behind.

"For shame. It's quite rude to abscond without answering our questions."

"Nah, I can sympathize with 'em, Tousetsu. They must have witnessed the pivotal moment when you took the first bite. They didn't want to come clean and face the wrath of a scary lady like you, so they decided to make a run for it instead."

"That is obviously false."

The pair exchanged banter that was wholly inappropriate for the situation. One of them—the woman—yanked the sword from one of the thug's sleeves and pressed the tip of the blade to his back.

"Isn't that so?" she prompted him.

Despite its considerable heft, the blade plunged through his robes without the slightest tremor, stopping just a hair's breadth from his skin. At this point, both the man being held at swordpoint and the underling watching this from the side broke into a sweat.

"Eep!"

"Y-you shrew! I can't believe this! What kinda woman goes around swinging a sword?! You're a monster!"

Tousetsu's brow furrowed slightly at the underling's rant. It was obvious posturing, but that didn't make it any less unpleasant to hear.

*I would argue that Master Keikou driving a pair of chopsticks into a thick wooden door is far more monstrous. Why must I endure such exaggerated vitriol just for being a woman?*

Then Keikou said the last thing she had been expecting to hear.

"Fair point. I get where you're coming from."

To her utter disbelief, he sided with the bouncer.

“Throwing a longsword is beyond the pale,” he added, frowning.

Tousetsu felt an icy chill settle over her heart.

*I knew it*, she thought. Men were all crude, idiotic, and barbaric. They loved living in a world where might made right, yet despite that—or perhaps because of it—as soon as a woman demonstrated an iota of strength, she fell out of their favor.

Strangely enough, something about Kou Keikou’s comment weighed far more heavily on her heart than remarks from any of the men before him.

“Situations like this call for a dagger.”

When Tousetsu heard Keikou’s next words, she couldn’t help but stare.

“Pardon?”

His sour scowl was not directed at Tousetsu. He was looking at the hole her sword had left in the door.

“See? Look at what a big hole you made. I bet this is gonna be a pain to repair. And what were you going to do if a customer had been standing on the other side? You have to choose the right weapon for the right situation.”

What a dilemma. His observation was so unexpected—so outside the bounds of common sense—that Tousetsu had no idea how to respond.

As she stood there speechless, Keikou gave her an encouraging clap on the shoulder. “Keep working at it, okay? I’m rooting for you. You can be the first of us to head to the Moon’s Razor. I’ll stand down. You had your eye on one of their daggers, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

“It’s no big deal. On second thought, longswords and spears are more my style. Besides, who needs a dagger when I can get by throwing chopsticks? So don’t hesitate—go for it. I haven’t got a doubt in my mind that the owner will find you up to his standards.” Keikou shot her the sort of smile reserved for a

fellow rascal. “For the record, I only back down in matters of weapons and warfare when I’ve acknowledged someone’s skill. You’re a strong, accomplished woman, Tousetsu.”

“Well now...”

The gamboge gold court lady was calm, composed, and self-possessed, known for offering dispassionate replies without a flicker of expression. On that day, however, she made the rare mistake of stumbling over her words.

“Th-that is quite an honor, sir.”

The tips of her ears were burning. Perhaps there were too many braziers lit inside the tavern.

As Tousetsu’s eyes darted to and fro, they eventually met with someone else’s. It was the old innkeeper, who had been clasping his employees’ hands and watching from a distance.

“Excuse me!” He rushed over to the pair, relieved for the chance to insert himself into their conversation. “Sir, ma’am, we cannot thank you enough for what you’ve done here. I sincerely apologize for relying on your help in a matter we should have handled on our own.”

As if some sort of spell over the waitresses and cooks had been broken, they rushed over one after another and bowed their heads.

“Yes, truly! We don’t know how to repay you!”

“I feel terrible that our ineptitude has caused you such inconvenience!”

“Aww, it was nothing. No need for thanks or apologies.” Keikou put a gentle hand on the old man’s shoulder just as he was about to go down on his knees. “We were just roughhousing over who got to go to the Moon’s Razor first. It was the moment that would determine whether we got a blade we both wanted, so we got a little too heated. We’re the ones who should apologize for dragging you all into it.”

The true reason they had declined to ask the innkeeper about the situation

and jumped straight into “roughhousing” was to avoid a scenario where they were “helping” the establishment. If they lent a hand, the staff would have to thank them. It would’ve been one thing if they were locals, but it would be a burden on such a modest inn to show their appreciation to a nobleman.

Picking up on their intentions, the old innkeeper shook his head in a fluster. “You needn’t worry about the bill, and let’s see... You just mentioned that you were on your way to the Moon’s Razor, correct? The owner is an old friend of mine. He’s the one who made this brass-decorated door for us. If you’re interested in one of his blades, I can put in a good word for you.”

“Truly?!”

At that, Keikou and Tousetsu exchanged glances. Evidently, just as nobles had their connections within the nobility, the townspeople had contacts among their own.

“That’s a tempting offer. Mind if we take you up on that?”

“Not at all. I assume you both want the monthly special? Really, it’s a bit presumptuous of me to consider this a proper thank-you. It’s not even noon yet, so if you left now, I imagine you’d have no trouble buying them on your own.”

“Nonsense! The recent popularity of the Moon’s Razor is nothing to sneeze at.”

Although Keikou had already conceded the dagger to Tousetsu, it seemed he was still interested deep down. Needless to say, Tousetsu couldn’t ask for a better result than both of them getting a weapon, so she lowered her sword and let the conversation run its course.

“Hey, bastards! Let us down already!”

“You’ll pay for this! Nobody gets away with making an enemy of the Three Realms Parlor!”

The bouncers were not being nearly as compliant. Their arms and legs still

sewn to the door, they were putting up a red-faced struggle.

“Hmm, these guys just don’t seem to learn,” said Keikou, his face falling. “It’s going to cause problems if they end up holding a grudge over this.”

He grabbed the men’s heads from behind. Then, in a motion as casual and effortless as drawing a breath, he slammed them both into the door.

“Besides, it’s their fault we poked a hole in a door made by the owner of the Moon’s Razor. What if this ruins his impression of us? We might be in trouble here.”

“What if we tell him that we installed a new man-shaped door knocker? Whenever a guest comes by, they can bang the heads of these men against the door.”

“Bad idea, Tousetsu. The door would get more and more banged up,” Keikou said lightly.

“Good point. I suppose there’s no sense in trying to run from reality.”

After nodding in agreement, Tousetsu examined the door once more with a considering hum. The two men had fainted, slumped against the wood to which they’d been pinned.

“I believe we ought to compensate the damage to this door, Master Keikou.”

“I’m in complete agreement.”

“However, I do not have the money on hand to do so, and in hindsight, these men are to blame for plotting to escape without answering our questions. Therefore, it is my humble opinion that the money should come out of *their* pockets.”

“What a coincidence. That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“Yet these men are clearly too poor to pay for their own food and drink. I propose we ask their employer to cover the expenses.”

“Great minds think alike. I had the same idea.”

Tousetsu and Keikou conversed as smoothly as a pair of longtime partners, nodding along to each other's points. It was easy to glean the underlying idea behind their inane conversation: They would pay for the damage they had caused with their "roughhousing," and while they were at it, they would eradicate the entire organization, lest the inn suffer retaliation from the enraged bouncers.

"Sorry, innkeep, but do you think you could ask the owner to set aside two daggers for us? Something's come up on our end."

"If I may, we would also appreciate it if you packaged our food to go. Put it on our tab. Oh, and our mistress is sound asleep, so we kindly request that you stay out of the room on the second floor."

The two of them were nominally in town to serve as "Shu Keigetsu's" bodyguards. Considering that their plan was to finish their tour of the imperial city by evening and leave the impression that the Shu Maiden had been there, they couldn't impose on this inn for too long.

Still, it couldn't possibly take them more than two hours to wipe out security of this caliber. Perhaps they could finish the job even faster than that.

*With a partner like this, nothing is impossible.*

Tousetsu and Keikou stole a glance at each other before breaking into appreciative smiles.

"The Three Realms Parlor, was it?"

"This ought to make for some decent exercise."

As the staff listened to their exchange with blank stares, the pair bobbed their heads in a bow and left the tavern.

"It will take some time to reach the western entertainment district on foot, Master Keikou. Shall we take the carriage?"

"The carriage? Nah. You and I could make the walk in no—"

Not long after they had departed the tavern and started walking, Keikou



abruptly cut himself off and reached a hand to the sky with a grim expression.

*Flap flap flap!*

The next moment, a silhouette swooped down from above. Its identity was that of a dove with lustrous plumage. After first perching on Keikou's arm, it returned to the skies, landed back on his arm, and repeated the process. A second dove followed close behind, performing the same cycle of movements.

Upon closer inspection, the doves were beating their wings at regular intervals and arcing westward.

"I hear you, No. 1, No. 7. You want us to go west?" Keikou fixed the two doves with a grave stare, then turned to Tousetsu. "Forget what I said. Let's take the carriage. For better or for worse, we just found another reason to hurry west."

Since Tousetsu knew how skillfully her partner could command doves, she raised no objections. If a dove without so much as a letter tied to its foot had an emergency message for Keikou, it was guaranteed to concern his younger sister.

"Yes, sir."

While Tousetsu ran off to talk to the driver, Keikou set a dove on each of his shoulders. Well, at first he did—but after some thought, he transferred one of the doves to his palm and released it back into the skies.

"We only need one dove to show us the way. No. 7, I need you to pass the message on to someone else."

Seemingly aware of its mission, the clever dove shot straight for the Heavens. Keikou's eyes narrowed as he gazed up at the clear winter sky.

"I'm not about to let dark clouds gather over my sister's head. It seems the time has come to use a certain 'cloud' to my advantage."

At that exact moment, Tousetsu returned with a shout of "Master Keikou!" The man's eyes went wide to find that she was riding not in a carriage but on horseback.

“What happened to the carriage?”

“I instructed the driver to follow us. I assumed it would be more efficient for us to travel light, so I borrowed a second horse.”

Apparently, she had reasoned that a horse capable of tight turns would be a better means of pursuing a dove than a covered carriage.

“Good thinking. You really are the greatest!” exclaimed Keikou, offering the quick-witted head court lady a sincere compliment.

Then, without further ado, he flipped himself onto the horse’s back behind Tousetsu and urged it onward with his heels.

## Chapter 5:

### Interlude

**W**HILE REIRIN SAT at the dice table, working out the trick behind the cheating, Gyoumei was enjoying a game of cards a short distance away and keeping a casual eye on his betrothed.

*Unbelievable. Is that her idea of acting?*

As he watched her throw her hands in the air, spin in circles, and rave about silver, he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep himself from laughing. When the player across from the prince shot him a searching look, wondering if he had drawn a good card, Gyoumei pulled his face into a frown and made a show of sighing. Then he pretended to school his expression, as if he had just noticed the other man's eyes on him. The opposing player chuckled with glee.

*This* was how acting was meant to be done. It certainly didn't refer to the act of shouting, "Oh! Ohh!" at the top of one's lungs.

Kou Reirin was a magnificent woman, one who excelled in all manner of arts and had a great personality to match, but acting was clearly not her forte. At her core, she had no desire to deceive or hurt others with lies.

*No, that's not quite right. When she has a clear goal in mind, she can aim with great precision.*

When he caught sight of the dagger wedged deep in a *particular* part of the mural, Gyoumei averted his eyes and amended his previous thought. Should he ever get into an argument with her in the future, he would have to keep her far away from any blades.

*I always knew she had a strong will...but I never dreamed she could be so belligerent.*

Reirin rose from her seat, her arms full of her silver winnings. From the looks of it, she was on her way to talk to Leelee and Ringyoku in the seating area.

As Gyoumei watched the Maiden with her eyes asparkle, undaunted to be in the thick of a gambling den, he cracked a faint smile and thought to himself about what a brazen, fierce, and *delightful* woman Kou Reirin had become. In his eyes, it was less that her true nature had slowly but surely revealed itself and more that her encounter with Shu Keigetsu had thrust those dormant qualities to the surface all at once.

Shu Keigetsu. An emotional, immature, and ill-fated woman. The object of Kou Reirin's affections.

Her whole life before now, Reirin had been the one-sided recipient of love and care, with no one in whom to invest her own boundless devotion. Since she had nothing to channel her enthusiasm into except maintaining her own health, she had lost the drive to do anything but live out her days in indifference, playing the part of the passive spectator.

That was when Shu Keigetsu came into her life.

For those of the earthen Kou clan, there was no greater joy than having someone to protect and nurture. Reirin had sprung to life in a heartbeat, sparing no effort to help her friend, even pushing herself past her limits on more than one occasion to come to her rescue.

Gyoumei understood Reirin's feelings all too well. He, too, had inherited the blood of the Kou. In the same way that Reirin tingled with excitement when she watched Shu Keigetsu fight her uphill battles, it got his blood pumping to see Reirin running wild for the sake of her friend. Every time she gave him cause for concern, he was tempted to yell at her to knock it off, but the sight of her acting so recklessly made him long to do something to help her.

In the past, she had been the picture of a delicate and graceful butterfly, and the prince had loved her for the glimpses of nobility and willpower he saw underneath. Lately, however, she was better described as "larger-than-life" than simply "strong-willed." In a way, it was as shocking as watching a butterfly shed its skin to reveal a boar underneath, but curiously enough, Gyoumei

wasn't disillusioned by seeing it.

On the contrary, it made it all the more difficult to take his eyes off her. It was like watching a paper doll that had been nothing but a pretty sight come to life. Her newborn soul was as unruly, unsafe, and uncontrollable as an infant. All the same, she was exceptionally innocent and sweet, and she possessed a magnetism that could make one's heart tremble just to look at her.

And so, no matter how rashly she behaved, no matter how much she made him worry, Gyoumei couldn't help but spoil her. So much so that even after she had completely shut him out of the Rite of Reverence, he would still offer to take her out on the town like this.

*Well then. How long should I keep playing?*

Noting that he had a decent hand going, he tossed away the cards he didn't need. Unsurprisingly, this was his first time in a gambling den, but compared to Reirin, a man like Gyoumei was far more accustomed to the act of gambling itself. Regardless of their status or the times, men were wired to butt heads behind closed doors and play cards with a small sum on the line.

"What's up, mister? Calling it quits already?" the bookmaker asked Gyoumei, to whom he had been dealing good cards at every opportunity.

"Yes. I've won enough for this round. I'll try again later," the prince replied lightly, hinting at the continuation of the game.

The enemy was likely keeping a close eye on his and Reirin's every move. How much money could they squeeze out of their wealthy guests? What were their weaknesses? Once the house had their answers, they would gradually saddle both Gyoumei and Reirin with losses and drag them into more dangerous gambles.

Little did they know that while they bided their time, the reinforcements Gyoumei and Reirin had called for were fast approaching.

*It would be a poor idea to let this come to blows when the reversal of the*

*switch is on the line. We can't afford to stay mixed up in this for too long, so our best move is to call upon Keikou and leave him to handle the rest.*

Gyoumei was ashamed to have to send for Keikou, who was supposed to be on a separate mission. Still, it would be too late if they waited until they got back to the imperial palace to take action, and Keikou was the only one he could summon right away via dove. Besides, the man had Shin-u with him. If he left the decoy operation to the captain and came to the parlor by himself, Gyoumei could entrust the matter to him without reservation.

*Keikou knows what he's doing. He would never make the wrong call about a matter like this. The least I can do is pin down evidence of the operation's crimes and make his work a little easier.*

After coming to terms with his decision, Gyoumei focused his efforts on observing the gambling den. Reirin's attention seemed to be caught on the dice, but for some time now, he had been preoccupied with the women dancing on the stage.

*Those dancers...*

The layout of the gambling den consisted of steps leading up to a raised platform in the center, but the stage on which the women danced was built on the partial second floor, high above any of the game tables. His initial assumption was that this was to allow the male patrons a peek up the women's skirts, but that probably wasn't the case. No doubt it was so that the women could read the numbers on the dice from their elevated vantage point.

*Two flicks of the right sleeve, and...three flicks of the left. Her moves don't match the beat of the music.*

The other gamblers, who weren't well versed in the arts, were unlikely to notice how many times the dancer's sleeves fluttered. But after all the expert dances he had seen the women of the inner court perform, Gyoumei could tell there was something off about these, which were neither in tune with the music nor had a theme to convey.

Not long after the woman gave a few waves of her sleeves, Gyoumei heard a voice from a seat somewhere behind him yell, “There it is! Two and three!”

That was all it took to convince him.

*I have a fairly good idea of which woman is in charge of which table.*

Judging by the flow of events, the dancers gave their signals just before the dice were thrown. At first the prince wondered if the dice girls were manipulating the rolls in response to the dancer’s signals, but the dice girls hardly ever seemed to look back at the stage. The ones with their eyes glued to the performance were the bookmakers.

That meant that the dice girls were the ones deciding the numbers. The dancers would read those and pass the information on to the bookmakers. Once the bookmakers knew the rolls, they would steer the bets a certain way.

The reason the house didn’t exert perfect control over the dice and stopped at simply “baiting” the players was probably a measure to avoid an unnatural winning streak. The dice girls—ostensibly the most submissive characters present—were put in charge of deciding the rolls to avoid suspicion.

*Still, as far as I can tell, these dice girls are a bunch of amateurs. Wouldn’t it be extremely difficult to train this many women on how to manipulate the dice?*

That was the part that bothered Gyoumei. Despite their flashy makeup, the dice girls didn’t carry themselves like professionals; in fact, quite a few of them looked downright skittish. What’s more, given how frequently they switched tables, there were a good number of them on the floor. It looked like the girls were among those sold off to pay debts, with the most attractive ones of the bunch chosen for the job, but it would be no easy feat to turn this many ordinary city girls into crooked gamblers.

*Then perhaps the trick lies in their tools—the dice,* Gyoumei smoothly concluded.

Reirin was probably studying the dice so intently because she had the same

idea.

*No matter. There's still plenty of time.*

Given how conservative Gyoumei had been in his play thus far, he had neither won nor lost any money. His foes seemed torn over when it would be best to strike. In which case, his best move was to wait for his allies to assemble, taking his time to cautiously feel out the— “You damned harpy!”

Kugai's enraged shout echoed through the hall, calling Gyoumei to a halt.

Some time earlier, while Reirin and Gyoumei were each investigating the tricks in play, Leelee stared out over the gambling den alongside Ringyoku, stiff as a board. Since both girls were underage, no one dared to make overt advances to them. Nevertheless, it was frightening to see the burly bouncers eyeing them from a short distance away, and the pungent odors, unabashed squeals, and occasional scent of blood that pervaded the hall were enough to drive anyone mad.

*“Everyone here has a screw loose,”* Ringyoku muttered in her native Western tongue as she glared at their surroundings. *“I have to get Lady Miu back...no matter what.”*

The girl clenched her hands into fists, but to Leelee, it looked more like an attempt to stifle her fear than to quell her rage. Ringyoku's hair had a red tinge, and her nose was too prominent to belong on the face of an Ei native. Everything about her, down to the way she balled her trembling hands into fists to suppress her emotions, was too familiar for Leelee to consider her a stranger.

*This girl is the person I could have become.*

Considering the value its people placed on pedigree, the Kingdom of Ei was not kind to those of Western descent. Since this girl had spent her childhood starving on the streets, she must have had it especially hard. It was no surprise that she would feel such profound gratitude and respect for Miu, the one who



had offered her a place to belong. In light of their common Western ancestry, they no doubt shared a camaraderie that transcended a mere master-servant relationship.

How devastated she must have felt to have her emotional support ripped from her by such heinous means. As one who had lost her mother—the sole ray of hope in her life—and been left to cower in the maelstrom of malice that was the inner court, Leelee understood that feeling painfully well.

As she watched the younger girl's hackles rise and her small frame curl in on itself, Leelee felt the urge to pat her on the back and tell her it was going to be all right.

*Just like the time Lady Reirin wrapped me up in a scarlet robe.*

There were people out there who would offer her a helping hand. The memory that had led her to that epiphany was one of Leelee's greatest treasures.

*"Don't worry. I'm sure those two will find a way,"* she whispered, speaking her mother's tongue for the first time in ages.

Ringyoku jerked her head up to look at her, then averted her gaze with a conflicted expression. *"I'm grateful that they came here with me, honest. But how do we know they won't get beaten at their own game and make things worse? Then I'll get blamed for dragging them into this."*

The fact that she could imagine such a specific scenario implied that it had happened to her before.

With a wistful look on her face, Ringyoku watched Reirin where she sat at a game table. It seemed that the well-to-do lady was immersed in a game of betting on whether the sum of the dice would be high or low, and the way she threw both hands in the air in celebration suggested that she had just won a round. Considering how prudent Ringyoku was for her age, the sight seemed to worry her more than it relieved her.

In fairness, although Leelee knew Reirin must have some sort of plan, even *she* felt a little nervous as she watched her mistress exclaim, “Oh, silver!” It was frustrating that the watchful eyes of the bouncers prevented her from questioning the Maiden’s true intentions.

*“The guy seems to be playing with a cool head, but don’t you think the lady is getting a little too into it? This place’s whole game is to let you win up to a point, then take you for everything you’ve got once you’re hooked. Will she be okay?”*

*“Well, she does seem a little...okay, very excited, but she’s not the type to be easily fooled. She’s expressing her joy in a weird way too, which means she’s actually calmer than she looks. I hope.”*

*“But from the way she moves and talks, she seems like a really sheltered, naive rich girl.”*

Apparently, even a country girl could pick up on Reirin’s demure manner.

Leelee faltered. *“Well, you’re not wrong...”*

*“See? I figured. She smacks of a well-bred lady who couldn’t bring herself to kill an insect.”*

*“Not true. She kills the crap out of bugs.”*

The comment that followed, however, she flat-out denied. Kou Reirin took as firm a stand against those she considered her enemies as a farmer did against aphids.

*“I can’t go into detail, but they’re both very distinguished people. And that doesn’t make them easy targets; it means they’re incredibly powerful. Trust me. Anyone who goes up against them ends up like this.”*

To lighten the mood, Leelee playfully slid her thumb along her throat. In the downtown areas, the gesture of slitting one’s throat with a click of the tongue was a way of saying “You’re dead meat” before a fight, and it was far too vulgar to be appropriate in a public setting.

Still, Ringyoku was charmed by Leelee's bravado, and a bit of the tension bled out of her face. *"Sounds promising."*

"Goodness, you two seem to be getting along well."

Then came Reirin, as if summoned by the mention of her. Since she was clutching the silver she had managed to double, she was presumably here to show off her spoils.

"What did that gesture mean?"

It appeared she had witnessed the throat-slitting gesture and elected to oh-so-innocently inquire about it.

As the resident keeper of common sense, Leelee scrambled to brush the matter under the rug. "Uh, it means something like, 'I'll get the job done.' Ringyoku seemed anxious, so I was trying to tell her not to worry."

"My, how sweet!" Leelee's unsuspecting mistress nodded along in admiration, then flashed Ringyoku a tender smile. "Were you worried about us? Thank you for your concern."

"Well, I mean...I don't want to cause you any trouble, and you seemed a little gullible to me."

"Hee hee, you needn't worry on either point. This is no trouble at all, and I'm actually far more worldly than I appear. I swear that I will recover your dear surrogate sister. Please rest at ease."

Reirin's eyes were sparkling. Those of the service-minded Kou loved nothing more than to be depended upon or considered reliable.

Caught up in the moment, she even puffed up with pride and suggested, "I know! Why don't you order a little something to eat? It's my understanding that they serve food in these areas. Yes, I am quite well informed in these matters!"

"Absolutely not! We'll get fleeced!" Leelee yelled, alarmed that her mistress seemed eager to embark on the road to ruin. Didn't she know that places like

this never served food at a reasonable price? Even if she won all her bets, the exorbitant bill alone might be enough to put her into debt.

“Hm? Um, fleeced? Like sheep?”

“It means ‘to overcharge someone’! It’s like the term ‘rip off’!”

“I see... Fleece, fleeces, fleeced, fleecing, fleecer...”

As Ringyoku watched the “well-to-do lady” make an honest effort to commit this new bit of street talk to memory, she tugged on Leelee’s sleeve with concern. She then discreetly stuck out her index finger and twirled it in the air beside her temple.

The gesture roughly translated to: *Is she okay?* That being the case, it was mostly the girl’s brains she was concerned about. Her common sense, to be exact.

“Leelee, what does it mean to twirl the finger like that?”

“‘You appear to be confused,’ more or less! In any case, we don’t need anything to eat!” Ever the worrywart, Leelee steamrolled past the questions in a bid to protect her mistress’s pride.

Ringyoku looked appalled by both Reirin’s ignorance and Leelee’s overprotectiveness. *“Isn’t it better to educate her on these things than to lie about it?”*

Leelee herself was beginning to worry whether her mistress actually had a plan or if she was getting sucked into gambling out of sheer naivete, so she finally demanded to know what was going on. Fortunately, the men had just turned to look at Gyoumei.

“This is no time to be ordering food. Are you sure it’s safe to let the enemy talk you into betting? I certainly hope your winning streak hasn’t made you cocky. You’re guaranteed to lose next time.”

And what awaited her after that was her own demise.

Reirin met Leelee’s apprehensive query with a placid smile. “Oh, there’s no

need to fret. You see..."

She lowered her voice and told the girls that she had enlisted Keikou's help with the bird whistle, that she was investigating the tricks in play in order to leave the matter in his hands, and that she had already formed an idea of the answer. Leelee was relieved to hear that she was keeping a cool head and playing the games to keep her promise, not because Kugai had egged her on.

"I see the full picture now. So all that's left is to stall for time while we wait for Master Keikou to arrive."

"Yes. I've had a good run thus far. The house is likely out to make me lose soon, so I will retire while I still can. I'm not so foolish as to gamble without good reason."

"W-wait!" shouted Ringyoku, who had been listening to their conversation from the side. She pitched forward, clutching at her chest with trepidation. "Y-you're going to leave everything to this Keikou person? Weren't we supposed to save my lady right away?"

Since her mistress had been kidnapped, she wanted to resolve the matter as soon as possible. The fear and impatience the young girl expressed gave Reirin pause.

"My apologies, that must have sounded quite alarming. But he is certain to—"

Just then, a rumbling voice called out to the trio. "Hey, girlies. Whatcha talkin' about?"

Speak of the devil and he shall appear. It was Kugai. He had a horde of henchmen in tow and a cup full of liquor in one hand.

"Hah! You've been at this for an hour, and that's all the silver you've won? You're never gonna get the little miss back at this rate. It's time to start taking more risks."

Sure enough, he had come to goad Reirin into betting more money.

Perhaps realizing that taunts worked better on this girl than flattery, he

flashed his teeth and gave a raucous guffaw. “I guess a prissy little scaredy-cat like you wouldn’t have the guts!”

A vein twitched on Reirin’s forehead.

*Uh-oh!*

As she watched this exchange, Leelee broke into a cold sweat. She knew that underneath her mistress’s seemingly tranquil demeanor, the girl was always ready for a fight. Being mocked for her helplessness was a particular sore spot for Kou Reirin—and the entire rest of the Kou clan, for that matter.

“Perhaps. I’m afraid I have too much decorum for my own good.”

“Hah! You’re never gonna raise the money to buy back the little miss with piddling bets like that! Too bad you hate risk, or I could show you some high-reward games that’d make you rich in no time!”

“I see. So this is how you drive your clearheaded patrons to take riskier gambles.”

To Leelee’s surprise, Reirin’s response was quite mild. She breathed a sigh of relief. The Maiden was exercising decent self-control.

“Aww, you’re no fun at all. Here I was looking forward to seeing ya cry after losing big and becoming one of our barmaids!” Upset by the girl’s refusal to rise to his provocation, Kugai sipped his liquor with a click of his tongue. As soon as he caught sight of Leelee standing next to her, however, his lips curved into a lascivious grin. “On second thought, that redhead would make for a better barmaid. Western women have got such huge knockers on ’em... Oh, watch it!”

When the man reached a hand for her, Leelee reflexively swatted it away, knocking over his cup of liquor in the process. As it was apparently still quite full, its contents splashed onto her skirt.

*Ugh! Now I reek of booze!*

It was despicable how quick men were to comment on the body of any Western woman they saw.

*Well, for better or worse, I've built up a tolerance for leering.*

As Leelee crouched down, debating what to do about her wet clothes, her face abruptly stiffened. Her mistress was wearing what she had dubbed the “aphid smile.”

*Oh, crap!*

Leelee knew how much trouble the Kou Maiden could be when she got like this. The color drained from Leelee’s face, while Kugai and his men roared with laughter, finding the whole thing hysterical.

“Ha ha ha! Check out the drenched red rat! Hey, want us to peel off that robe and dry you off?”

“I’ve got an idea! Why don’t we make *her* bet on something? Let’s ply her with booze and show her a good time, Bro!”

“Hang on, uh...”

Kugai or Reirin? Leelee wasn’t sure who to talk down.

If a spray of fishy water had made this Maiden feel nothing but enchantment, how could she get so angry at the sight of a mere court lady splashed with liquor?

“C’mon! Get on the floor and lick up the booze you spilled, ya wet rat!”

“Squeak, squeak! Ain’t you foreigners supposed to be good at scavenging for food?”

“Stop! I’m begging you to desist from these obscene comments!” Leelee frantically implored the men, but it was too late.

*Wham!*

Before her attempts at diplomacy could bear fruit, a sharp impact cracked through the hall. Reirin had bent down, picked up the cup lying on the ground, and slammed it upside down on the floor.

“I’ll have you know that I *despise* hearing disparaging remarks about rats.”

As silence fell, Reirin murmured, “Odd? Or even?” The very next moment, the cup split in two. Apparently, she had been mimicking the process of turning the dice cup over.

Reirin gazed down upon the fragments strewn impotently over the floor, then rose to her feet and flashed Kugai a smile. “All of a sudden, I feel the urge to make a high-stakes bet.”

While she was at it, she clicked her tongue and made a throat-slitting gesture.

“I shall endeavor to ‘get the job done.’”

*Heeelp! She just told them, “You’re dead meat!”*

Leelee was on the verge of screaming at how her mistress had flipped from self-restraint to such an insanely brazen provocation.

“Watch yourself, girlie.” The sudden insult from a girl who had been acting so prudent brought a scowl to Kugai’s face. “You don’t know who you’re messing with.”

“Dear me. Whyever are you angry that I’m accepting your offer? ‘You appear to be confused.’”

With a contrived look of puzzlement on her face, Reirin twirled a finger next to her temple.

Translation: *Do you have a screw loose?*

“You damned harpy!”

At this point, Kugai’s face was flushed red with rage.

“Hey, boys! This lady is gonna participate in the highest-stakes wager we have here—the Three Realms! Take her to the Crimson Table, even if you hafta tie her up to do it!” he ordered the men around him, gesturing to a red table in the center of the hall. “Mark my words! When you lose, we’re gonna make sure everyone in this room gets a turn with ya!”

It sounded like the “highest-stakes wager,” the one named after the



establishment itself, was about to begin.

“Th-this is bad! What are we going to do?! Why did you go and rile them up?!”

“Rile them up? Whatever do you mean?” Reirin asked, gracefully putting a hand to her cheek. “I’m afraid a sheltered girl like me wouldn’t understand...”

“You! Big! Liar!” yelled Leelee, shaking her by the shoulders. “You were doing such a good job holding back! Why would you agree to wager over a nobody like me?!”

“Come now, Leelee. It pains me to hear you call yourself a ‘nobody.’ You are my valued court lady.” After saying as much without a hint of embarrassment, Reirin brought her lips to Leelee’s ear and whispered, “Besides, this serves my purposes quite well. I was hoping to confirm something.”

Leelee blinked. “Huh?”

Just then, Gyoumei rushed over in a panic, having overheard the commotion. “Hey, what’s going on?!” When he saw that the bouncers had Reirin surrounded, he barged into the circle and glared at the men. “So this is how you do things around here? You force women to sit down and gamble against their will?”

“Against their will? Hah! This wench was the one who came looking for trouble! We’re just giving her what she wants!”

“*She* came looking for trouble? That can’t be right.”

“No, I’m afraid it’s true.” The girl in question gently put a stop to Gyoumei’s attempt to rescue her from the mob of bouncers. “I was overcome with the desire to ‘get the job done’ in a high-stakes wager.”

“You *what*?”

As the prince stared at her in bewilderment, Reirin cast a mild glance in Ringyoku’s direction. “I refrained from making any further bets to avoid causing a stir and ensure that we make our appointment on time...but I cannot let that

be the reason help arrives too late.”

The young girl gasped, her eyes watering with gratitude. “Miss...”

“We must not avoid a fight being waged against us for fear of being delayed. On the contrary, we must rise to the challenge in a timely manner so that we remain on schedule. That is what I’ve learned here today.”

Reirin smiled tenderly and stroked Ringyoku’s disheveled hair, but it was hard to say if that was the right lesson for a Maiden to internalize.

“Come. Take me to this ‘highest-stakes wager’ of yours.” Leaving Leelee to her dismay, Reirin turned back to Kugai and his men. Then she declared, “I shall beat you into submission with a roll of dice.”

For a woman’s voice, it was dripping with menace. Leelee’s shoulders jerked in surprise, and even Kugai took a step back, overwhelmed.

Gyoumei, for his part, cast a silent glance heavenward. There were times when Kou Reirin’s reckless stunts made him want to chide her, and there were times when they made his heart flutter in his chest, reminding him of where her true charm lay.

This was an example of the former.

“The Three Realms is a special kind of game. You’ll be playing against me, the owner of this establishment.”

After forcing Reirin—and Gyoumei, who had tagged along—to take a seat at the game table, Kugai sat in the opposing seat and narrowed his eyes balefully.

“The rules are as simple as it gets. All you have to do is guess the outcome of the three dice the dice girl rolls. There are two rounds of betting, and the winner is the one with the most gold in the end. If you win, no matter if you’re our enemy or a criminal, you’ll pass through the Heaven door and see Paradise in the reception room beyond.” He gave a well-rehearsed explanation, then cocked his head to one side. “Well, guess there’s not much in the reception

room that'd interest a lady. But, hey, the girl you're looking for might be among the apprentices there. Feel free to take her home, if you want. That said..."

He then jerked his thumb at the other door behind him. "You know what happens if you lose. It's through the Man door ya go. Oh, though a woman's always got the option of getting up on the stage and selling her body instead."

The door inscribed with the character for "Man" was where the men had been lobbing daggers at each other earlier. With all the fires blazing on the upper platform, it was difficult to make out the dingy space near the door, but Reirin could still hear the men's screams and cries amid all the hustle and bustle. It was safe to assume that an appalling spectacle was unfolding down below.

By contrast, no blood was shed on the stage where the women danced, but the expressions of the dancers in the back row were glum. It was a choice between being tortured or being ravished. Whether she was chased through the Man door or sent up onstage, all that awaited her was Hell.

"Am I to bet on the numbers of all three dice?"

"Not necessarily. You've got a lot of options. You can bet on whether the sum of the dice will be even or odd, whether it'll be greater or less than ten, or what each individual roll will be. The payout is small if you guess right on the first two options, but nailing the last one can increase your money a hundredfold in a single round."

"Interesting."

A closer look at the game table revealed a set of boards inscribed with the words "odd," "even," "high," and "low," as well as the six numbers corresponding to the sides of the dice. The idea was to place your wager on the possible outcome of your choice. It was up to the player how precise a prediction they wanted to make. Betting on "high" or "low" would give you a one-in-two chance of winning, but the payout would be less. If your opponent decided to go for a riskier wager, you could lose in a heartbeat.

You had to determine your opponent's strategy and outmaneuver them. It was, in large part, a game of psychological warfare.

"I'll take over from here. You're no good at...ahem, you don't *enjoy* mind games, correct?" Gyoumei whispered into Reirin's ear, concerned for his guileless fiancée.

After some thought, she responded with a shake of her head. "No. This match belongs to me. If I lose and must *take the stage* as a dancer, I will bear the full responsibility myself."

She cast a glance toward the stage overhead. Upon following her gaze, Gyoumei blinked. It didn't take him long to figure out what she was implying, however, and he nodded back with a grin.

"Oho, is that so? Then bear the responsibility you shall." He then turned back to Kugai and added, "For the record, I refuse to shoulder her debt if she loses. Reduce this foolhardy woman to a dancer, for all I care. I have no interest in hearing her out if she begs for my help after the fact."

It was a terribly cold thing to say, yet Reirin almost burst out laughing when she heard it. She knew full well that Gyoumei regretted more than anything that he hadn't listened to her pleas during the Lion's Judgment. Hell would freeze over before he would refuse to hear her out a second time.

*His Highness means the opposite.*

He would be sure to save her, no matter the cost.

Knowing this, Reirin immediately shot back, "Oh! You're terrible! I can't believe you!"

Gyoumei glanced up, and the two of them exchanged a fleeting look. Although the prince promptly averted his eyes, the faint smile tugging at his lips proved that Reirin's intentions had come through loud and clear.

Exclaiming "Oh!" was proof that she was acting. What she really meant was this: *Of course you will. I believe in you.*

The couple communicated perfectly without even making eye contact, then faced forward again.

“Even your husband’s left you out to dry? Poor girl.” Oblivious to the truth, Kugai shrugged and sneered. “Sure, we’ll honor the gentleman’s request. You bet for the first round, lady. If you lose, you’re reduced to a dancer, and your man picks up where you left off.”

He seemed intent on dragging Gyoumei, who was clearly loaded, into his own ring.

“And if *you* lose, mister, it’s off to Hell with both you poor bastards.”

“You haven’t accounted for a scenario where we win,” Gyoumei pointed out.

Kugai just snorted a laugh in response. “So, where you gonna place your bet?”

His chin resting in his hand atop the table, he gestured to various points around the hall to preempt Reirin and Gyoumei’s questions.

“For the record, we aren’t cheating. There’s your proof, see? The dice are placed way high up where we can’t see ’em! If you’re still skeptical, you can go look at ’em or even pick ’em up before we get started.” He pointed to the dice, which were placed on a pedestal that was indeed too high to be seen from the game table.

“Or if you think the dice girls are suspicious, pick a few women for yerselves. We have three different girls roll three different dice. I can even blindfold ’em so they can’t read the numbers or give any signals.” He next motioned to a row of dice girls.

Reirin singled out three women at random, who then reverently went down on their knees and poured the drinks before tying black blindfolds around their eyes. Large enough to reach down to the tips of their noses, each cloth was embroidered with the characters for “Heaven,” “Earth,” and “Man,” respectively. The three women would roll three separate dice, it seemed.

Once Kugai had gone to the trouble of letting the challengers inspect the

women's blindfolds, he finally gave the order to roll the dice.

"The time has come for the ultimate duel of the Three Realms, a match worthy of the gods who dwell in Heaven."

"Let us dream the wildest dream of the Three Realms, the envy of all who live on Earth."

"Lay all you have on the line, O Man, for the Paradise of the Three Realms is at hand."

The women took the dice from the pedestals next to the standing braziers and raised them aloft as they said their lines. It was a clear attempt to impress upon the audience the sacredness of this wager.

With an ostentatious gesture, they placed the dice in the cups and shook them vigorously.

"Come, test your fortunes at the Three Realms Parlor!"

"Let us see those lucky numbers!"

"Place your bets!"

Amid the furious cacophony of rattling, Kugai prompted, "So? Where will it be? If you bet on odd, even, high, or low, you get the lowest multiplier of two. If you guess the numbers on all three dice, it's thirty. If you predict a three of a kind, you get the highest multiplier of a hundred and fifty-one, but—"

"My, that sounds wonderful." Before the owner of the den could finish declaring that outcome impossible, Reirin cheerfully cut him off. "Then I will bet on three of a kind."

She took all the silver she had on hand and unceremoniously distributed it across three of the boards—the two of Heaven, the two of Earth, and the two of Man.

"Why two?" Gyoumei asked with a tilt of his head, finding this choice curious.

"It's my favorite number these days," Reirin replied with a smile, then glanced

at Leelee and Ringyoku huddled together in the distance.

No matter how daunting a predicament one faced, they could stay strong so long as they had someone to lean on.

“It’s a miraculous number that can make anyone invincible.”

Her thoughts traveled to other sets of “two,” like she and Gyoumei, who were tackling this challenge side by side—or she and Keigetsu, who had survived life in the inner court hand in hand. If she had someone looking ahead with her, she could move forward with confidence. If she had someone facing the opposite direction, she could trust them to watch her back.

Two was better than one. For Reirin, who had spent so much of her life battling illness all alone, the number symbolized a newly discovered world.

“Is she nuts? No way those numbers are gonna come up.”

“Did she give up?”

The crowd buzzed.

Sneering, Kugai placed a much safer bet. “Ha ha, now that’s a ballsy move! I’ll go with ‘high.’ If the sum of the dice is higher than ten, I win.”

The end result was three, six, and four—a sum of thirteen. It was Kugai’s victory.

A stir swept through the hall. The demise of the foolish woman who had dared to challenge the owner had been all too swift.

“Hah! This was a foregone conclusion! You were never gonna get a set of three twos! So much for beating us into submission, you sheltered little brat! Now put on a sheer dress and go shake yer hips in a dance!” Kugai rumbled a laugh as he threw the loss in her face. “You’re up next, mister. You’re gonna take the game from here, right?”

“Correct.”

Gyoumei maintained his composure even as his opponent turned a glare on

him. He didn't spare Reirin so much as a backward glance as the bouncers ushered her onto the stage.

"Get going," was all he said.

Neither did Reirin make eye contact as she nodded back and said, "Of course."

Judging by the amount of light in the hall, more than two hours had passed since they first entered the gambling den. The dove had to have made it to Keikou by now. It wouldn't be long before he came to their rescue.

*I have a theory about how they're rigging the dice. All that remains is to prove it.*

If she was going to do this at all, she had to be thorough. Holding her head high with dignity, Reirin stepped onto the stairs that led to the stage.

\* \* \*

"Mmm, this liquor packs a punch! And the meat is so fresh. The skill of the cook speaks for itself, but there's something to be said for the caliber of the ingredients."

"Enough!"

While Kou Keishou happily stuffed his mouth with meat, the girl sitting next to him, his gorgeous celestial maiden of a younger sister—or the girl wearing her face, Shu Keigetsu—smacked him on the knee out of sheer discomfort.

"Why are you letting him entertain you?! Quite frankly, this is making you look like the worst person in the room!"

"No, no, it's no trouble at all! I *am* making you wait!" the man who was pouring their drinks insisted in a fluster. In stark contrast to his brawny physique, he looked terror-stricken. Blood oozed from the side of his head and his throat.



Yes, this was indeed the same variety store owner whom Keishou had subdued during the man's attempted assault on Keigetsu.

After taking a beating from Keishou and being asked to lead the way to his boss, he had invited the pair to the Three Realms Parlor with an ingratiating attitude that was a far cry from his earlier demeanor. According to the vendor, his boss was a man named Kugai, the owner of this gambling den. He had offered to call for Kugai right away, requesting that the guests wait in the reception room in the meantime.

The reception room—the Heavenly Lounge—was luxuriously outfitted, full of stunning furnishings and its every wall and table adorned with fine food and drink gathered from all over the continent. In the center of the room, scantily clad dancers writhed and twisted.

If anything, the sudden hospitality had put Keigetsu on her guard, but Keishou had been won over in the blink of an eye. He was drinking the liquor the man had recommended, leaning back in his chair without a care in the world.

“The Heavenly Lounge is where we entertain the winning players. Only the finest women and booze here. I'm so glad you seem to approve.” With a smile plastered on his face, the man obsequiously added, “If I may ask for something in return...would you refrain from reporting to my bro about my business? Kugai comes down hard on subordinates who screw up, y'see.”

*Aha.* Keigetsu finally understood why the man was acting so deferential: He was even more afraid of his own boss than of Keishou. It sounded like this Kugai had ties to the underworld, and he was involved in pimping in addition to running his gambling den and selling off pawned items. He wouldn't hesitate to cut loose any lackey who was careless enough to get caught reselling by a regular customer, so this man was desperate to entertain Keishou and convince him not to report to Kugai.

“This isn't what we agreed on,” said Keigetsu. “We only came here because you said you would take us to your boss!”

“Oh, hush. What do you say, mister? If you’re not satisfied with the dancers you see here, I can always call some over from the gambling den. It’s connected to this room via the Heaven door there. We get fresh new faces every day, so you’re spoiled for choice.”

“Wow, really?”

Keishou leaned forward a fraction, not even bothering with a token protest, the sight of which drew a scowl from Keigetsu.

*He’s unbelievable! He pretends to be some righteous warrior, but he’ll look the other way if you bribe him with women?*

Worse yet, he was going to invite a dancer to his side when *she* was already sitting next to him.

“Oh, yes! Judging by your female companion, I assume you prefer them on the petite side? In that case, we have a few that are still as young as twelve or thir—”

Interpreting Keishou’s response as positive, the man rambled on with more fervor, but he never got to finish his sentence.

“Absolutely obscene.”

Why? Because Keishou had shrugged his shoulders and splashed his drink into the man’s face.

“Aieeee!” His eyes burning from the potent alcohol, the man staggered backward. “Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!”

“What does it look like? I’m disinfecting the place. What kind of lowlife offers up a little girl to cover up his own misdeeds?”

“Bastard! That’s rich, coming from the guy who came along drooling!” the man yelled, abandoning his attempt at decorum as he clutched at his eyes.

Keishou kicked the crouching man all the way to the floor, looking deeply offended. The dancers’ first reaction was to shriek, but perhaps pleased to see one of the house employees getting his just deserts, they exchanged

conspiratorial looks before stealing glances in Keishou's direction.

"Could you refrain from such misleading comments? I simply took you at your word when you said you would take me to your boss. Had you betrayed your organization and apologized, I would have let you off the hook. Such a shame that you chose the most despicable approach imaginable."

Considering how dearly Keishou loved his younger sister, he was absolutely sickened to see girls of such tender years sold into sexual slavery.

After casting a frosty glance at the man who was now sprawled on the floor, Keishou abruptly smiled and held out a hand to Keigetsu. "Come. It seems the boss is here somewhere, so let's try the gambling den next."

"Not to belabor the point, but I think you lost the high ground when you reveled in the food and drink."

It was all well and good to beat up bad guys, but Keishou was so overwhelmingly strong that it almost made *him* look like the villain of the scenario.

"Aww, you think?" As Keigetsu's face twitched, Keishou gave an oh-so-innocent tilt of his head. "If I'm being honest, I wasn't doing much reveling. The drinks were strong, yes, but they had no class, and the meat may have been fresh, but it wasn't well aged. Also..." He winked at her. "This is such a key piece of information that I debated whether to reveal it, but I actually prefer tall girls to petite ones."

"That has to be the most useless piece of trivia ever uttered! Keep it to yourself!"

"Is it? By the way, *this* piece of trivia is so useless that I debated whether to say anything...but there's a huge mob of bouncers coming this way."

As soon as Keishou started doing warm-up stretches, Keigetsu ceased her yelling to gape at him. "Excuse me?"

Right on cue, the door behind them—the gilded door emblazoned with the

character for “Heaven”—slammed open, and in burst a group of skilled fighters.

“Hey, looks like yer having fun in here! We want in!”

“Ha ha, the poor sucker had no idea we had him surrounded!”

“You’re dead, asshole!”

The men all brandished their weapons in a frenzy of drunken excitement.

“Hmm, I figured. He invited us into the reception room and feigned humility to stall for time. What a textbook example of cowardice.”

While Keishou was taking his sweet time warming up, Keigetsu had begun to tremble. Upon noticing this, he cocked his head to one side.

“Something wrong, Keikei?”

“Tell...”

“Hm?”

Not a second later, Keigetsu’s screech filled the room. “Tell me that sooner, you jeeerk!”

“Ha ha ha!” As he flattened the first man to charge him with a single spectacular knee strike, Keishou gave a hearty laugh. “You sure do love to glare and yell!”

As soon as he had evacuated Keigetsu under the table with a graceful flourish, Keishou dove into battle, his eyes alight with amusement.

## Chapter 6:

### Shin-u and Unran

**“P**LEASE COME AGAIN!”

“Of course.”

When Shin-u sensed the store clerk behind him make a deep bow, he gave a curt nod before pulling his bamboo hat back down over his eyes. It was about a half hour’s walk to the place where he had tethered his horse. For the first time in quite a while, he disappeared into the hustle and bustle of the northern market without a word.

The hour of the snake was coming to an end. As noon approached, the area was buzzing with activity, especially around the food stalls.

“Roasted chestnuts! Get your roasted chestnuts here!”

“We’ve got piping hot boiled crab! Perfect to eat on the go or take home!”

“Try our rouge imported straight from the West! What better way to put a smile on the wife’s face?! How about it, sir?”

Although Shin-u was exceptionally tall and well proportioned, his black hair made it easy for him to blend into the crowd once he hid his azure eyes under his hat. Ignoring the voices of the hawkers calling out to him from every corner, mistaking him for an ordinary traveler, he pressed a hand to his chest.

*The Moon’s Razor always goes above and beyond. Even their daggers are works of exquisite craftsmanship.*

The item Shin-u had hidden in his breast was one of the ten renowned blades sold each month. Needless to say, he was another name among those who had been smitten by the wares of the Moon’s Razor, that hidden gem of a weapons shop, and eagerly awaited its monthly sale.

The Gen clan was the bloodline of water and warfare. The arms industry

flourished in the northern territory, and for that matter, the owner of the Moon's Razor happened to be a northern native himself. For a Gen like Shin-u, it was no surprise that the shop was one of his favorite haunts.

Its premium blades were sold on a first come, first served basis, so he had left the gamboge gold to handle the chatty Kou Keikou and split off from the group. Now that he had successfully acquired his dagger, nothing was stopping him from returning to the inn, but the notion was so tiresome that he planned to rejoin them outside the palace in the evening.

*The Moon's Razor used to be such a well-kept secret, but lately it's been making a name for itself in the imperial capital. What a nuisance.*

As Shin-u recalled the line of customers behind him, his face twisted into a grimace. If those of the Kou clan wanted to see the object of their affections adored by all, the Gen were the exact opposite. They preferred to keep what they loved cupped tightly in their own hands. They wanted their treasures all to themselves, never allowing anyone else so much as a glimpse. That tendency held true even when it came to a favorite store, so Shin-u was somewhat displeased to see the Moon's Razor making great strides in popularity. The men of the Gen clan were prone to possessiveness.

That digression aside, Shin-u drew his newly acquired dagger from his breast and gazed upon it with satisfaction. Although the scabbard had no gilding or other such decoration, it boasted an elegant lacquer finish. Where the hilt was often wrapped in leather, this one had fine grooves for ease of grip. When unsheathed, the blade appeared well forged and had a gorgeous tempering line.

The only problem was that the sleek, slender blade felt a touch insubstantial in Shin-u's big hands. If anything, it seemed most suitable as a self-defense weapon for a smaller man—which, granted, would be the standard for a man from Ei—or a larger woman.

*Should I give it away?*

At the thought of “a larger woman,” one person came to Shin-u’s mind. A woman who would grip a dagger without hesitation. A woman who would sometimes use that blade to break a venomcraft curse, and other times use it to cut up a snake and steep it in medicinal wine.

Indeed, he thought of the body-swapped Kou Reirin.

*I doubt she’d have use for it in her own body, of course.*

Kou Reirin, the crown jewel of the Kou clan and the prince’s butterfly, was perpetually surrounded by an army of defenders—her brothers and the skilled Tousetsu among them. It was unlikely that she would ever find herself in a situation where she had to wield her own blade.

It was likewise hard to imagine Shu Keigetsu ever wielding a dagger in her own body, but he had a feeling that the body-swapped Kou Reirin would be delighted to receive such a superb blade.

*“My, thank you so much! Would you mind if I tested its edge on a potato right now?”*

*“Dear me! It’s so sharp that even the potato doesn’t know it was cut!”*

*“I imagine it would make a good throwing knife as well. Oh, look, a bird! Take that!”*

Shin-u had never given a gift to a woman before. It was hard for him to imagine how one would normally react to receiving a little something. Curiously, he could vividly picture *her* reaction, and it was all so amusing that he couldn’t help but crack a smile. His subordinate, Bunkou, loved to describe him as “a man with facial necrosis” or “the boss in the iron mask,” but strangely enough, the corners of his lips would often quirk when he interacted with that particular woman.

*Well, why not? There’s no need to worry about a dagger going bad, so one can never have too many.*

Perhaps it was the euphoria permeating the market that spurred Shin-u to

make that uncharacteristic decision.

A gift of jewelry or poetry would carry connotations of a romantic relationship, but in light of their respective positions as the captain of the Eagle Eyes and a Maiden, it wouldn't be inappropriate for him to give her a weapon. Besides, that Maiden would get herself kidnapped, assaulted, dropped into a spring, or shoved down a well the moment anyone took their eyes off her, so she was better off having as many options for self-defense as possible.

*Would it be too impolite to hand it over as is?*

Shin-u blinked wordlessly, realizing that if he gave her the dagger by itself, he might be suspected of brandishing a weapon at her. He had never given anyone a gift before, so he didn't know the proper etiquette, but in retrospect, the "gifts" or "tokens" that women gave him were always wrapped in several layers of cloth or packed in a box. No doubt the moment of opening a gift was the most exciting part, and it was important to wrap it securely to maximize that joy. He could imagine that much.

With impeccable timing, the vendor of a nearby variety store called out to him. "Can I interest you in wrapping cloths, handkerchiefs, or silk scarves? They're all luxury items sewn by a first-rate seamstress!"

Shin-u stopped in his tracks and peered down at the fabrics lined up on the stall. There were sturdy wrapping cloths, delicately embroidered handkerchiefs, and scarves woven out of glossy fabric. All practical items. If he wrapped the gift in one of these, she could reuse the cloth after opening the package. Assuming that a woman would prefer something beautiful and glitzy, his first instinct was to reach for one of the embroidered handkerchiefs.

Then Shin-u withdrew his hand.

*She's a master seamstress herself.*

She might be all the more disappointed to receive an inferior craft.

"Ooh, sir, you have good taste! That's a handkerchief sewn by one of the best



seamstresses out there!”

Ignoring the hawker addressing him from the side, Shin-u next reached for one of the silk scarves.

“Ah, were you looking for something without a pattern? Fair enough! A solid color conveys more commitment than a flashy design. Let me guess: a betrothal gift?”

The vendor must have taken one look at Shin-u and assumed he was dealing with an important customer. He was quick to adapt his sales pitch. Yet as soon as he heard this, Shin-u pulled his hand away from the scarf.

What kind of “commitment” was this man talking about? Obviously this was no betrothal gift. All he wanted was to...

*All I want is to...what?*

Unsure how to finish his own thought, Shin-u scrunched his shapely brow into a frown. After mulling it over for a while, he finally came to a conclusion.

*It's a thank-you gift.*

“Shu Keigetsu’s” efforts during the Rite of Reverence had allowed the Gen clan to settle an old grudge. He was in possession of a high-quality dagger that was unsuitable for his personal use, he had someone to whom he owed a debt, and the dagger just so happened to be a perfect match for that person. That’s all there was to it.

*I'll go with a wrapping cloth.*

Having narrowed down his options for the unsentimental reason that something large and sturdy would be more practical, he compared the colors and patterns. As a member of the Gen clan, he was tempted to go with the safe choice of black—it went well with everything, and it was hard to spot bloodstains on it—but he figured it was best to avoid his clan’s signature color. It might complicate matters if he was perceived as giving the gift on behalf of the whole family.

*Then I'll match her own style and go with gold... No, if I plan to give it to her when she's switched, should I pick vermillion? That's too on the nose. There's no reason to choose another clan's color either, so I might as well avoid the five colors altogether.*

The more he thought about it, the deeper his brow furrowed. He never would have imagined that choosing the cloth to wrap something else in could take so much effort.

"Er... You want a wrapping cloth, sir? Are you buying it for yourself?"

"No. It's for a female acquaintance of mine."

"A lady? Hmm, in that case, you might want to pick something a bit more fashionable..." the vendor said awkwardly. Shin-u was looking over the sturdiest and cleanest of the offerings, judging them on the criteria of their utility for camping or how easily they could be torn and turned into a dishrag. "Shouldn't you go for something that doesn't look quite so businesslike? Try something with a little more oomph!"

"Oomph?" Shin-u parroted, then picked up a cloth of a shade that could only be described as purple mottled with maroon.

It wasn't any of the clan colors, and blood would stand out even less against maroon than black. There was some sort of bizarre spiral pattern on it, but surely that just added a bit of flair.

"I'll take this one. How much is it?"

The vendor was suddenly much more timorous. "Uhh... How about ten mace of silver?"

Just as Shin-u was about to hand over the money without hesitation, an energetic voice rang out from behind them.

"Damn, that's crazy!"

The pair whipped around to see who it was. Standing there was a young man with a bamboo hat hanging around his neck, his traditional traveler's garb worn

in a way that gave it a more casual and debonair feel.

“Are you kidding me?! Ten mace of silver for that rag a country bumpkin would use to clean the house?! Prices in the capital are nuts! And you were willing to pay that?!”

His voice was breezy and had a pleasant ring to it, even when he was using it to put others down. He had a lithe physique that somehow made the way he spread his hands in disbelief look good.

“Not to mention, why’d you pick something the color of a bruise? What’s with the ugly pattern on it? Were you seriously going to give that to a girl?”

In a rare display, Shin-u’s eyes widened in surprise when he saw that face with an exaggerated frown and innate air of frivolity. He recognized the person standing before him, this man handsome enough to make it as an actor in the imperial capital.

“Something tells me your taste in shopping is busted.”

“What are you doing here, Unran?” Shin-u muttered to the man who mockingly tapped his temple with his finger—to Unran, who was supposed to be serving as the chief of a southern village.

“Huh, so this is the place? It’s fancy, but it’s smaller than I thought it’d be. Well, I guess fooling around doesn’t take all that much space. And why’s the furniture so stuffy? Ooh, are the beds behind that door? That must be where all the action happens.”

As Unran’s eyes darted curiously around the room, Shin-u rebuked him with a surly look. “Shut up and sit down.”

Having migrated from the northern market to the western entertainment district, the pair now found themselves in a teahouse called the White Hearth. Even after being shown to the upper floor of the two-story building, Unran continued to gape at his surroundings, his country bumpkin roots on full

display.

Shin-u's scowl deepened at the sight. "Sorry to disappoint, but this is a teahouse. No matter how hard you look, you won't find any beds here. Now stop pacing and have a seat."

"Oh, c'mon, where's the fun in sipping tea with another man? I only came along 'cause I thought you were taking me to some kind of brothel. You tricked me!"

"Arrogant words from a sponger. Besides, what kind of brothel would be open in the middle of the day?" Heedless of how Unran whipped around in surprise, Shin-u took his place at the table and repeated, "Sit. I'm not the sort to enjoy a cup of tea with someone else myself. Let's get straight down to business."

The real reason they had come to this teahouse was because Unran had whispered to Shin-u that he had something important to discuss.

About half an hour had passed since the pair had met in the northern market. On behalf of Shin-u, who had no talent for shopping whatsoever, Unran had picked out a new fabric, haggled down the price, and acquired a much more sophisticated handkerchief, all in the blink of an eye. With that done, he had finally looked back at Shin-u, flashed him a triumphant smile, and said, "You owe me one."

They were an odd pair: one man captain of the Eagle Eyes and a descendant of the emperor, the other little more than the chief of a tiny village. In most cases, the latter would never be in a position to take such a cavalier attitude with the former, but Unran wasn't terribly preoccupied with the expected order of things. As far as he was concerned, "we fought together in Unso" was reason enough to dispense with formalities and speak to Shin-u as an equal.

When asked why he was in the capital when he ought to have been far away in Unso, he responded that he had come to deliver a letter on the occasion of the emperor's birthday, one that thanked His Majesty for the "kindness"

extended to the village and extolled his virtue as a ruler. It had been a request from the new magistrate, Lord Koh's successor, who hoped to gain favor with the capital.

"We owe His Majesty and His Highness for stripping the name of 'Untouchable' from our village. I came to present a letter of thanks and some local specialties."

Residents of a distant backwater didn't get many chances to visit the imperial capital. Brimming with anticipation now that the opportunity had fallen into his lap, Unran had pooled his money with the other villagers to buy himself some nice clothes, then hopped from ship to ship to make his way to the capital.

Unfortunately, upon arriving at the imperial palace, his hope for an audience with the emperor had proven to be a wild fantasy, and he had left the letter and offerings with the gatekeeper before finding himself summarily dismissed. Looking around, he had seen several other countryfolk in the same predicament. At last he understood that what was a once-in-a-lifetime honor for them was just one of many birthday amusements for the emperor.

Still, Unran was nothing if not adaptable. He had quickly bounced back, deciding to use what little money he had left to do some sightseeing in the capital and have a little fun on the side.

Those from the southern territory were fascinated by all things northern. He had thus opted to take a tour of the northernmost part of the imperial capital, and while he was wandering around, he had spotted a familiar face: Shin-u.

Shin-u had wasted no time in attempting to part ways, but Unran had held him back, unabashedly proposing, "Our meeting here must be fate. Say, how about you treat me to a nice 'dream' in the capital, since I haven't got much money for sightseeing? Consider it repayment for the favor I just did you."

The captain, for his part, was used to having Bunkou—his cunning subordinate—pester him for a free meal, so he had no problem treating the man to lunch. He was about to hand over the money and leave to spare himself

further trouble, only for Unran to call him to a halt again.

Then the man came out with a surprising request: “I came all the way to the capital, and you want me to eat and go home? If I’m already here, I might as well surround myself with some eye candy.”

“Excuse me?”

He had brazenly demanded that Shin-u take him to a brothel.

Unlike Unran, Shin-u had no interest in sleeping around, so he couldn’t understand why anyone would want a woman to service him in broad daylight. His first response had been to refuse outright, but then Unran lowered his voice and said, “Between you and me, I have a confidential matter to discuss regarding the Maiden—Shu Keigetsu.”

The “Shu Keigetsu” Unran spoke of was the body-swapped Kou Reirin. As the switch involved the forbidden Daoist arts, Shin-u couldn’t ignore his request for a consultation. That said, no brothel would be open at noon, and Shin-u had no reason to give in to the man’s demands dressed up as a business conversation. Instead, he had brought Unran to a teahouse. Before the reigning emperor tightened the laws around the sex trade, prostitution in teahouses had been tacitly accepted, so it wasn’t a *complete* lie.

The White Hearth appeared to be a rather prestigious teahouse. On the first floor, there was a hall that could accommodate a large group of guests, and upstairs, there were several private rooms available for an extra fee. In his usual fashion, Shin-u had forked over a large sum of money without bothering to negotiate the price—whereupon the look in the proprietor’s eyes had changed, and he’d shown them to the most luxurious room at the far end of the second floor.

The attentive proprietor had offered to clear the area, but Shin-u had declined, figuring it would be inadvisable to have too much secrecy around the meeting. He was technically the son of the emperor, so it would be a scandal if he were suspected of treason. He had instead ordered some tea from the

openly nervous waitress—possibly a new hire—and that brought them to the present moment.

It wouldn't be long before the waitress came back with the tea, so now was the best time for that "confidential discussion."

"If we came all this way just for you to tell me it was a ruse, I suggest you get out of here while you still can."

"Oh, don't fly off the handle. It's easier to start a conversation like this over some booze. Are you a drinker?" Unran met Shin-u's incessant prompting with a shrug, then picked up the menu sitting on the table. "Uh... Is this the name of a liquor? Or a tea? A bird, maybe? No idea... How do you read this?"

As Unran traced the characters with the enthusiasm of a child learning to read for the first time, Shin-u found himself staring.

*This man has mellowed a great deal.*

Shin-u's first impression of Unran was that of a kidnapper who had turned a blade against a Maiden. Later, when he witnessed the man risking his life to save his village, he had come to appreciate his conscientious nature—but it was still true that Unran had started out with the aura of someone who painted himself the villain and refused to let others into his heart.

Now, however, he had the candor and passion to ask how to read a word, even if it meant flaunting his own illiteracy. Perhaps that was the most significant change that "Shu Keigetsu" had brought about in him. The way he was now, he was probably fitting in just fine with the rest of his abrasive but friendly village.

"Jintan Sparrow's Tongue."

"Huh?"

"That's how you read the name of that tea. Most tea names are a combination of its place of origin and the name of the blend. It gets the 'Sparrow's Tongue' part from the shape of its shoots, which are small and

resemble a sparrow's tongue. If you feel like ordering a second cup, go ahead and give it a try."

Shin-u's matter-of-fact explanation prompted Unran to lift his face and stare.

"Talk about sophisticated... Where did all this class suddenly come from? I guess it's true that you've got imperial blood running through half your veins."

"What exactly did you take me for?"

"A lunatic who starts throwing punches or swinging his sword without a hint of emotion," Unran replied immediately.

It seemed the poor first impression went both ways.

"Only because you kidnapped a Maiden. I seem to recall playing a big part in nursing the villagers back to health and getting revenge later."

"Right, of course. I stand corrected. You're the man who boiled bucket after bucket of water to save our village." When Shin-u furrowed his brow, offended, Unran playfully spread his hands and gave a small chuckle. "No, I mean it. Believe it or not, I am grateful. At first, I wondered if you were made of ice, but now I know you're at least human enough not to dissolve in hot water."

Then he said, "I'd appreciate it if you gave me some advice out of the *warmth* of your heart," and retrieved something from the breast of his garment. It was a piece of paper folded enough times to fit snugly in the palm of his hand. "Take a look at this."

"What is it?"

"A letter. The Maiden gave me a dove a while back. Said she wanted to cherish the bonds she forged down in the south. As a matter of fact, we've exchanged secret correspondence a handful of times now, and she corrects my writing while she's at it. This isn't some kind of social pleasantry either. A Maiden from the capital seriously takes the time to write letters to a former untouchable like me."

Unran brushed his hand over the letter as gently as if it were fragile glass, at



which Shin-u gave a soft snort.

*That idiot. Someone might suspect her of infidelity.*

The subject of his sigh was Kou Reirin. Shin-u knew that she adored Unran and had accepted him into her inner circle. He could imagine her wanting to honor his bravery in risking his life for his village. Still, keeping in regular correspondence with him after returning to the imperial capital was taking things too far. There was no telling what might tip someone off to the swap or the Daoist arts, and the crown prince's betrothed shouldn't have been exchanging letters with a man she wasn't related to in the first place.

"Did you come to the belated realization that this is above your station? Did it leave you wondering if you should break off contact? I can answer that question for you: yes. Desist immediately," Shin-u said with finality. "I'll give the dove back to her."

"No, that's not it! I want you to read it!"

Unran leaned across the table and unfolded the letter. The series of neat brushstrokes bore no resemblance to the real Shu Keigetsu's handwriting. As he looked down at the string of beautiful, flowing letters, Shin-u's brow creased into a frown.

*One must first saturate their darling to the brim, halt as it flourishes, and sprinkle a rivulet of moisture should fissures form. I heed the principle, yet I struggle to comply, and I fret over whether to beckon company within my sash.*

*What do you think, Unran?*

It was an awfully profound composition, though that may have been a simple result of keeping the character count short enough to fit around a bird's foot.

As Shin-u glanced up again, a dubious look coming to his eyes, he found Unran resting his elbow on the table, covering his mouth with one hand, and

shyly averting his gaze.

“So, uh... What do you think?”

“About what?”

“Don’t make me spell it out! Look, to give a little more context, there was a time not too long ago when her letters suddenly stopped coming. I sent her a letter, like, ‘What’s the matter? I’m worried. Is something on your mind?’ And this is the reply I got.”

When Shin-u remained indifferent, Unran went on to explain further, so jittery it was as if he was torn between telling and keeping it a secret. According to him, “Shu Keigetsu” had initially “saturated” him with a flood of letters, then one day “halted” communication, and when Unran grew concerned, she had finally sent a single short letter of reply. Considering the contents of the letter in combination with her own behavior, Unran had come up with the following theory: “Do you think this is...a romance tactic?”

“Do I think *what*?”

Shin-u was surprised to hear his voice come out much more menacing than he had intended. But who could blame him? It went to show just how stupid Unran’s idea had sounded.

Flustered by his companion’s icy gaze, Unran thrust out his palms and rushed to make excuses. “What else am I supposed to think?! First you ‘saturate’ someone with sweet nothings, then as soon as they’re interested, you ‘halt’ all interaction, ‘sprinkling’ just enough attention to keep cracks from forming in the relationship. It’s one of the classic tricks for getting the opposite sex to fall head over heels for you! Maybe she’s confessing that she was trying to do that with me!”

Back when he was derided as an untouchable, Unran had used his wild good looks and strategic sweet talk to toy with the hearts of the townswomen. It was precisely because he knew all the tricks of the game that he had arrived at this conclusion.

“Then she says, ‘I heed the principle, yet I struggle to comply’! That could mean, ‘I know how this is supposed to work, but I couldn’t stop myself from writing a letter,’ or ‘I know the proper order of things, but I can’t help having feelings for a lowborn man’!”

“...”

“And for the kicker, she wants ‘company within her sash’! That has to be an invitation to undo her sash and make love to her, right? She threw some pretty naughty language in there too! ‘To the brim’? ‘Moisture’? I just know I’m right!”

For someone who had started out seeking a second opinion, Unran sounded pretty sure of himself.

“Not a chance,” Shin-u responded emphatically.

“Scuse me?” Unran glared back at him in a huff. “How can you be so sure?!”

“Because...” After struggling to find an explanation for why he had denied it so vehemently, Shin-u quickly added, “Because it’s a battle tactic.”

“Huh?”

He had brought up a familiar concept in the heat of the moment, but once he said it out loud, he found it a reasonably persuasive argument. “It’s the first thing any *educated* person would have thought of. Only a fool would get so swept up in his excitement, blind to the obvious answer.”

“Say whaaat?!”

Unran was starting to grow irritated with the man casting him a thin, derisive smile. In reality, even he understood that an exalted Maiden would never send sweet nothings to a country bumpkin like himself. He had his reasons for showing Shin-u this letter.

Still, wasn’t a man allowed to dream a little? Couldn’t he at least be proud that she felt comfortable enough to tease him? Maybe feel a little bashful about it?

*Besides, no woman in the world would bring up battle tactics in this context!*

It was clearly the other man's own subjective opinion. A completely outlandish guess. And even if he had never seriously entertained the idea, Unran was still annoyed to hear Shin-u deny his chances outright.

In his frustration, Unran banged his fists against the table. "What part of this sounds like a battle tactic to you? Huh?!"

"You don't see it? First saturate, then halt as it flourishes, and sprinkle moisture if fissures form. In other words, deploy a large force to overwhelm the enemy in the first battle, retreat if it drags on too long, and deploy your troops more carefully as tensions rise. She's been obsessed with chess lately, so it was probably weighing on her mind."

The man's reply was so smooth that Unran almost believed him, but upon closer inspection, his azure eyes were looking slightly off to the side.

*Why does he even know what the Maiden's latest hobbies are, anyway?*

Unran narrowed his eyes and cocked his head to one side. "Oh yeah? Then what about the 'beckoning company within her sash' part?"

"It means she's considering whether to get the enemy in her pocket... That is, whether to win them over to her side."

"I bet you think that was clever, but it's a real stretch."

If that were the case, she would have written "pocket" instead.

Propping his elbows on the table, Unran leaned toward the handsome man doing his utmost to affect nonchalance. "Read it again, and this time be honest with yourself. It's clearly about a woman pining for a man and struggling with whether to give herself over to him."

"It's a battle tactic."

"The hell it is!"

The door behind them had just opened as the anxious waitress brought them their tea, but by this point, Shin-u clearly didn't see the need to hide their

conversation. The way this man never entertained a word of what he was saying was another point of frustration for Unran.

“You could ask a hundred people, and they’d all say the same thing! Hey, back me up here, sweetheart!”

With a huff, Unran whirled around to look behind him. Women tended to side with him, so it was a go-to move of his to rope a girl into the conversation when he sensed he was at a disadvantage. The waitress of fifteen or so—a foreigner with striking red hair, perhaps assigned to them out of consideration for Shin-u—started in surprise when she was spoken to.

“Um...”

“Get this! This stick-in-the-mud here can’t read a letter full of innuendo for what it is.” One of the survival skills Unran had honed over the course of his hard-knock life was to win women over on sight. He spoke glibly, making an effort to ease her nerves. “Let’s say someone told you they should ‘saturate their darling to the brim, halt as it flourishes, and sprinkle moisture should fissures form.’ What would you think? And what if they followed that up with, ‘I heed the principle, yet I struggle to comply, and I fret over whether to beckon company within my sash’? What image would that bring to mind?”

“Huh?” The girl hung her head and tugged at her sleeves, seeking to hide her emaciated form behind her waitress uniform. “W-well...”

“Hm? What’s up? You can go ahead and say it. Oh, wait, can you not speak our language?”

Unran casually peered into the girl’s face. One of his favorite techniques was to smoothly lean in close enough for a kiss.

“A...” The girl swallowed hard and backed away, holding her tray like a shield. “A seedling.”

“Huh?”

“A seedling?”

Her voice had the squeak of someone desperately hoping that answering his question would mean she could leave. “B-before it sprouts, you have to saturate it with water... Once it starts to grow, you stop and keep the soil just moist enough to prevent fissures from forming... M-maybe that’s what it means.”

Her explanation came as a eureka moment for Unran and Shin-u, and the two men exchanged glances.

*A seedling.*

Shin-u was the next to speak up, his interest piqued. “What about the ‘sash’ part?”

“It’s easier for a seed to sprout in a warm place... The more impatient farmers will sometimes, erm, warm a germinating seed within their sash and hasten its growth.”

Shin-u and Unran realized they had arrived at the truth.

*“I heed the principle, yet I struggle to comply, and I fret over whether to beckon company within my sash.”*

In other words, “I know the proper methods to induce germination, but I’m getting so impatient that I’m debating whether to warm the seed.”

“Ha ha...”

Unran slumped back in his chair. *Yeah, that tracks*, he thought. She was the sort of woman who would use a conversation with an eligible bachelor to earnestly confide her gardening woes.

Yes. That was the girl Unran knew.

“Where did *that* come from...? Oh, was it because I asked if something was on her mind? So she confided in me about her recent troubles? And she wanted my opinion because I’m a farmer?”

Shin-u nonchalantly picked up his teacup. “Hmph. I thought as much from the start.”

“Don’t lie!” Unran yelled, pounding his fists on the table. The girl flinched at his outburst, so he hurried to change the subject. “Sorry, hon. Still, I’m amazed you know so much about the topic. Any chance you’re from a family of farmers? I hear the daughters of poor peasants often end up working in brothels. Is that your story?”

“Stop treating this place like a brothel. And how many years ago did you hear that? Ever since His Majesty issued his Edict of Agricultural Aid, farmers have enjoyed more protection under the law than the merchants.”

“Wait, really?” Unran, who was out of touch with politics, blinked at this new piece of information.

“The penalties for trafficking impoverished farmers into the sex trade are particularly severe. You’ll be arrested within the day if you lay a hand on a peasant girl. Not that it matters in this case, because this is a teahouse, not a brothel.”

“Excuse me...” As soon as Shin-u gave that explanation in his usual monotone, the girl lifted her hanging head and craned forward, clutching her tray to her chest. “About what you just—”

“Hey, Miu! You’re sure taking your sweet time in here.”

At that exact moment, the bamboo blinds parted, and in walked an elderly man. Dressed in fine robes and sporting a luxurious beard, this portly man was the same one who had led Shin-u and Unran to their private room earlier, the proprietor of the establishment.

“Not busy chatting, I hope?”

When the proprietor dropped the pitch of his voice a fraction, the waitress named Miu turned pale and shrank back. “Ah...”

After she responded with a furious shake of her head, he told her, “Hurry back to the *kitchen*, dear.” Even more color drained from her face, and she left the room with unsteady steps.

Once Miu was gone, the proprietor beamed at the two men. “Sorry about all that, gentlemen! Some of our waitresses still need to learn how to mind their manners. I always tell them not to interrupt our patrons’ conversations. She didn’t say anything to offend you, I hope?”

Shin-u and Unran exchanged glances before offering a short reply in unison.

“Nope.”

“She didn’t.”

“I’m relieved to hear it.” The proprietor gave a relaxed nod and a deep bow. “Here at the White Hearth, we have a special menu that’s not listed on any of our signs. Please don’t hesitate to inquire if you’re interested. Feel free to ring the bell on the table if there is anything else you require. Enjoy,” he said cordially, then left the room with one last jiggle of his potbelly.

“Teahouses sure are tough on their waitresses.” Unran inclined his head as he watched the proprietor go. “A little chitchat never hurt anyone. Right? I mean, it’s all thanks to her that we solved the mystery of the letter. Man, that girl was sharp! Anyone would read this and assume it was a love letter. How’d she figure out it was about a seedling?”

Shin-u sipped his tea in silence, not even bothering with a token reply.

The awkward tension weighing on him, Unran raked a hand through his hair. “Say something already! You’re making me look like an idiot! Look, I get it, I got all excited over nothing! Not that you look any better for bringing up military tactics.”

“...”

“For the record, you’re as big a dumbass as I am. You agreed this was a love letter, and that’s why you were so hell-bent on denying it. Am I wrong?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” When Unran resorted to picking a fight out of sheer desperation, Shin-u scowled back in annoyance. “I knew that wasn’t a love letter from the start.”



“Yes, yes, of course you did! Well, so did I! I had enough sense to think that even if it was a love letter, it was probably meant as a joke! How could I not? One of us is a former untouchable, and the other is a Maiden important enough to get her own biography!” Unran snapped, throwing himself back against his chair—and that finally prompted Shin-u to lift his gaze.

“Biography?” A question danced in the man’s piercing blue eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“What kind of question is that? Our current Maiden is a woman extraordinary enough to save an entire village in need, so the plan is to write her biography and share her story with the masses.”

Shin-u squinted in suspicion. “What? Is that wishful thinking on your part?”

Unran drew back, confused. “Uh, no? Aren’t you the ones in charge of it? An official came to the township and everything. Since I was a key player, I got interrogated to hell and back about the miracle.”

Upon hearing this explanation, the muscles of Shin-u’s face tensed.

*He was interviewed about the “miracle”? By a bureaucrat?*

The instincts he had honed on the battlefield were sounding a shrill alarm. Something was wrong here.

After the death of a member of the imperial family, the grand scribe would sometimes compile information about their past accomplishments and write a historical chronicle. But no bureaucrat would bother to compose a record of any living official, let alone a Maiden.

“What kind of questions did he ask you?”

“Huh? Like I said, he wanted to know about the miracle. You know, that whole chain of events where it started raining out of nowhere, the skies cleared, and my wound swapped to someone else’s body.”

“Did he frame it as a miracle brought about by the Maiden, not the crown prince?”

Unran furrowed his brow, unsure where these questions were going. “What’s the difference? Didn’t the miracle happen because the crown prince prayed, the Maiden danced, and the god of agriculture was satisfied? Come to think of it, the official was pretty focused on that point himself.”

His answer chilled Shin-u to the bone. In contrast to his earlier stabs at interpreting a love letter as military correspondence, a thought came to the captain with the utmost conviction: someone suspected “Shu Keigetsu” of wielding the Daoist arts.

Unaware of the gravity of the situation, Unran reclined in his chair and tried to retrace his memories. “Oh, right, he asked me to tell him about any miracles I thought the Maiden might’ve had a hand in. For example, he wondered if maybe my wound had swapped because she touched it. What else? He asked if any fires had suddenly flared up. Wanted to know if I’d witnessed any unusual phenomena, stuff like that.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Hm? I told him the truth. I said it was reform that the Maiden brought us, not a miracle. The skies clearing up and the wound switching places happened because His Highness prayed for it. In short, it was all thanks to his dragon’s qi. The Maiden said as much herself and sang the prince’s praises.”

Since the ideal Maiden was a modest woman who deferred to her husband, he had made a point of boosting her reputation a bit.

As he watched Unran tack on that last part with a knowing smile, Shin-u felt a wave of relief. It was a good thing this man was so wise in the ways of the world. So too was it fortunate that he had been in a semiconscious daze when the group discussed their strategy to use the Daoist arts. On the off chance that he had blabbed about “Shu Keigetsu’s” exploits, it would have spelled the end for her.

Only someone high up the chain of command could send personnel all the way to a backwater township to investigate the involvement of magic.

*His Majesty the Emperor, for instance.*

Once the curtains had closed on the Rite of Reverence, the emperor had issued a secret order to place the Maiden Court under surveillance. Despite its supposedly confidential nature, he had made a point of putting it in writing, and he was generally inclined to honor the vassals from his predecessor's reign. Shin-u, too, had assumed that it was issued as a formality to appease said vassals. A sham edict, so to speak. He had even felt that Gyomei's so-called countermeasure of heading into the city was an overreaction. But what if the secret service was already on the move?

Shin-u clenched his hands into fists, a shiver running down his spine.

His father, Genyou, was an inscrutable man. He loved learning and music and always maintained a placid demeanor, but there was a part of him that seemed to have renounced everything of the world. Despite his reputation as a wise ruler, it was not his strong political will that made him such; rather, his ability to govern the state without letting personal feelings interfere had allowed him to achieve a perfectly harmless reign.

Shin-u couldn't imagine his father harboring such hidden ambition that he would resort to trickery and deceit to issue an order.

*But because it's so hard to imagine...that makes it all the more terrifying when it's true.*

On the battlefield, warriors would occasionally feel a premonition of sorts. Sometimes it might turn out to be a groundless fear, but in most cases, it was wise to follow one's intuition. Shin-u himself had cheated death countless times this way.

*I have to stop them.*

Too impatient to sit still, Shin-u kicked over his chair and leapt to his feet.

At noon, Kou Reirin and Shu Keigetsu planned to meet at a tavern near the western market to reverse the switch. They had assumed it would be safe to

use magic outside the inner court, but if the secret service was already on the move—if they had already traveled all the way to a rural township—then *nowhere* in the imperial capital was safe.

If anything, going to the trouble of meeting in the outer city was bound to convince the enemy that magic was afoot. Perhaps that had been the true purpose of the written order all along.

Shin-u headed for the door, determined to stop them as soon as possible—and then stopped in his tracks.

*Would it look too suspicious if I rushed to the tavern?*

If the whole trip to Unso was under investigation, then he might be under surveillance himself. Ostensibly, Captain Shin-u of the Eagle Eyes was there to guard “Shu Keigetsu” on her tour of the city. It would be one thing if he turned back to the inn where she was supposed to be resting, but it would make no sense for him to go running to a tavern in the opposite direction.

*It’s better if I don’t let on that I know about “Shu Keigetsu’s” magic.*

Not for his own safety, of course, but to give him an advantage in the investigation. The less anyone knew about his relationships with Kou Reirin and Shu Keigetsu, the better he could shelter them if worse came to worst.

“Unran, can you call that dove of yours right now?” Shin-u asked in a low voice as he stopped and glanced around the room.

He didn’t sense anyone else in the teahouse, at least. Once they were out on the busy street, however, it would become more difficult to detect pursuers. He had to stay put and make contact from there—say, for example, using the dove that traveled between Unran and “Shu Keigetsu.” Sending a bird through the skies was a more discreet and expeditious way to pass on a message than pushing his own way through a crowd.

“Huh? Sure. If I blow my bird whistle, it should come if it’s somewhere nearby.”

“Do it, then. I have something urgent to tell ‘Shu Keigetsu.’”

“Why so intense all of a sudden?”

Unran didn’t bother to hide his consternation, but seeing as it was almost feeding time anyway, he went ahead and sounded his bird whistle. He faced the window and blew on a rustic wooden flute.

After waiting a while and getting no response, he tilted his head to one side. “Huh? It shouldn’t be too far around this time of day. Did it get sidetracked?”

Just to be sure, he flung open the window and blew the whistle one more time.

“Well, it should show up within an hour at the late—”

As he was leaning out the window, a grim look settled over Unran’s features.

“Look over there.”

“Where?”

“At the base of this teahouse. Near the kitchen. Isn’t that...the proprietor and the girl from before?”

A look at where he was pointing did indeed reveal the redheaded girl and the potbellied man standing in the shadow of what appeared to be the kitchen. Miu was huddled on the ground, so terrified that it was clear to see from a distance, and the proprietor was kicking her around.

“Don’t you dare...you hear me?! I swear, if you say...I’ll...tongue! Give it...these rooms. Don’t think...away.”

Given the distance, Shin-u couldn’t catch all of what the man was saying. But Unran, who had developed a keen ear out in the countryside, could hear every last word of it.

““Don’t you dare go running your mouth, you hear me? I swear, if you say so much as a word to anyone, I’ll cut out your tongue. Give it up—you’re doomed to spread your legs for a man in one of these rooms. Don’t think for a second

you can run away.’”

“You can hear them?”

“Yeah, more or—hey, you’ve gotta be kidding me! That bastard!”

Before Unran could nod in response to Shin-u’s question, he gasped at the ensuing spectacle below. This time, even the eagle-eyed Shin-u could tell what had happened. The proprietor had taken a burning chopstick from the brazier beside him and pressed it to Miu’s arm.

“Ghk...!”

The girl was probably biting down a scream. Her lips parted, but she made no sound. The way she desperately stifled her voice, got right back on her feet and rolled down her sleeve, and then staggered over to pick up her tray suggested that this was an everyday occurrence for her.

“Screw this!”

“Wait.” As Unran started for the kitchen, the blood rushing to his head, Shin-u grabbed him by the arm. “What are you planning to do?”

“What do you think?! I’m gonna beat the crap out of that asshole! He’s abusing her, and he’s forcing her to sell her body in a teahouse!”

Despite the enraged shout directed his way, Shin-u didn’t so much as flinch. “It’s up to the establishment to decide how to discipline their staff. Prostitution in teahouses is illegal, but it’s not our job to enforce that. If you have concerns, contact the local authorities and have them look into it later.”

“Later?! What if she dies of her burns now?!”

“Did she ask for our help? Did she scream? No. She’s doing her best to adapt.”

In a flash of anger, Unran grabbed the other man by the lapels, but Shin-u calmly brushed his hand aside. As the type to fixate on only one special person, he couldn’t care less about the misfortunes of some unknown girl in a teahouse. As far as he was concerned, it was enough to investigate and administer justice within the bounds of the law. What mattered right now was warning “Shu

Keigetsu” about the danger she was in.

It was different for Unran. He wasn’t the type to go around saving everyone and anyone, like the benevolent Kou clan, but his strong affinity for fire meant he wouldn’t let an insult against him go unchallenged.

Unran had seen himself in Miu. As he watched her, terrorized, swallowing down the cries she should have made, he had seen the version of himself who had once been derided as an untouchable and driven to despair.

“You know *why* she doesn’t scream? It’s because she doesn’t have the power to do anything about it on her own.”

His voice hitched as he spoke. In his mind’s eye, he saw a woman reach out to touch his cheek with a bloodied hand.

*“You loved your father, didn’t you? You felt sad for your mother, didn’t you?”*

It was the woman who had seen through his villainous charade to the thoughts and feelings he had kept bottled up inside.

*“I swear to protect you no matter what, so you must protect this village as its ruler.”*

It was the woman who hadn’t hesitated to lend Unran a hand even after he had surrendered himself to his torment and given up asking for help. The woman with unwavering faith in him, who had told him to take a stand, who had promised to protect him.

“She doesn’t ask for help because she’s already given up. Because no one has ever helped her. The people around her—people like *you*—are the ones who made her that way. Obviously she wants somebody to save her! Obviously she’s suffering!”

Ever since he met *her*, Unran had stopped hurting women for the hell of it. Instead, he had admitted something to himself: In his heart of hearts, he didn’t want to toy with women or treat them with contempt. What he truly wanted was to help the downtrodden and vulnerable—like his mother, who had been

brutalized, or his younger self, who had been pushed to his breaking point—and become their salvation. Those were his true colors.

Shoving Shin-u aside, Unran picked up the bell on the table and gave it a harsh rattle.

Moments later, the proprietor came rushing in from downstairs. “Yes, sir! How may I help you?” he asked with a fawning smile.

Unran demanded arrogantly, “Bring back that waitress.”

“Huh? Ah... Was she to your liking? Very well. I’ll call for her right away.”

Drawing his own conclusions, the proprietor was more than happy to fetch Miu, the leering grin on his face widening.

“It must be dull to drink nothing but tea. I’ll bring you some liquor at once. As you can see, this girl has a tremendous figure, so I’m sure even a foreign man will find her to his satisfaction.”

No longer hiding the fact that they were serving alcohol in the middle of the day, the proprietor dropped the implication that the men could do whatever they wanted with the girl, then left the room.

Unran clenched his fists to ride out a flash of anger. Once the proprietor was completely out of sight, he spoke to Miu. “Hey. Are they forcing you to sell your body here?”

“Ah...!” The girl looked up with a start.

“At the very least, I know they *do* beat you. Sorry, but we saw what happened earlier. Stuff like this makes me sick. I’d be more than happy to kick that scumbag’s ass for you—so do you think you could ask for our help?”

As soon as she pleaded her case, he would have cause to act. He could also lodge a complaint with the local authorities. In Unran’s imagination, this was the part where Miu would immediately nod her head. She would be relieved that help had arrived and latch onto her saviors without hesitation.

Yet contrary to his expectations, she began to shake and tremble, her entire



body turning cold. She backed away, clutching at her sleeves and shrinking into herself as far as she could.

Unran realized what was happening as soon as he saw it. This girl was afraid. The teahouse proprietor had threatened to cut out her tongue if she said a word to anyone. She had no idea if these strange men who had swooped in to save her would actually keep their promise; on the other hand, the proprietor was almost certain to make good on his threat. Asking for help might make her situation worse. Hence her refusal to scream.

To make matters worse, someone stepped into the room at that exact moment. “Oh dear. And here I believed you were interested in her... So *that’s* what this is all about?”

The proprietor had brought their drinks.

“I really must protest. You can’t run around leveling accusations against our establishment based on your own wild fantasies. I’m running an honest business, I’ll have you know. Why, I ought to file a complaint with the authorities for obstructing my operations. I’m on good terms with the local officials, you see.”

“My own wild fantasies? Yeah, right. This girl—”

“And any naughty waitress who lies to our guests has to be punished.”

Just as Unran was about to launch into a tirade, he saw the cruel smile that came to the proprietor’s eyes as the man set the drinks on the table, and he bit down the rest of his words.

“Bastard...” Unran growled. He whipped around to look at Miu, but fear held her so firmly prisoner that she refused to meet his gaze. It was going to be difficult to get a confession or accusation out of her now. “How cowardly can you—?!”

“Fair enough. It was not our intention to cast aspersions on your establishment, sir. You’ll have to forgive this man’s wild imagination. We will

take our leave at once. I'll pay for the drinks you just brought."

When Shin-u cut Unran off before he could finish and attempted to force the conversation to an end, the latter's eyes widened in shock.

"My, I'm glad you're so understanding. However, the drinks I just brought you are a special kind, so expect it to cost you. This is the liquor we serve when a customer requests a waitress by name."

"I don't care. Name your price."

"Ha ha, such an accommodating patron! What do you say, sir? Would you care to have this young lady to *serve* you as per your original order? For each jug of liquor you drink, she will entertain you for half an hour."

"Not interested."

Shin-u carried on with the conversation without batting an eye. Perhaps his diplomatic approach was how citizens of the imperial capital did things. Perhaps their policy was to leave the oppressed to their fate and find a smarter way to help when the opportunity arose.

By this point, Miu was crouching down and covering her ears, her heart tired and worn. Her breath came in gasps, and her whole body shook.

The moment he saw that, Unran thought, *This is wrong*.

Someone right in front of him was threadbare and despondent. And the so-called right answer was to talk his way out of trouble and find a way to help later?

*Like hell it is!*

Once upon a time, Shu Keigetsu had plunged a blade into a man's throat the moment he assaulted her. When a community fell ill, she had struck down the malady before calamity could spread. She had met the township's plot to raze the village with swift retaliation. Never once had she waited or let a moment go to waste. That was how she had managed to bring them complete salvation in the span of only a few days.

“Oh, I see. I’m very sorry to hear that. In that case, we hope to see you—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Unran interjected, hands balled into determined fists. “Bring me another jug of that liquor. Hell, I’ll take your whole stock.” When the man stared back at him blankly, he snorted and declared, “I’ll go along with your rules and buy this girl’s time. She and I will ‘chat’ while I drink. No problems on your end, right? And don’t worry, this guy here will cover the whole bill.”

“Hey,” Shin-u protested with his usual deadpan expression, drawn into the situation against his will, but there was no time to dwell on his reaction.

“C’mon, a well-paying customer is asking for more booze! Leave the girl here, wag your tail like a good little dog, and go bring us another jug!”

“My, aren’t you a spirited fellow? Still, I would advise you to limit yourself to a single jug.”

When Unran shot him a glare, the proprietor covered his mouth and tittered like a woman. Revealing himself for the wily merchant he clearly was, he tilted his head and shot back, “I see you’re unfamiliar with drinking etiquette in the capital. In establishments like this, you must always finish the drinks you order. Customers with money to burn who order more alcohol than they can drink might just find themselves reported to the authorities.”

Unran furrowed his brow in dismay, struggling to discern if this was a real custom.

“It’s true,” Shin-u said with a sigh beside him. “It’s how brothels work, at least. If you can use etiquette as an excuse to get customers blackout drunk on strong liquor, it frees up time for the prostitutes, and you can give your bouncers an excuse to escort unruly patrons out by accusing them of leaving their drinks unfinished.”

*Aha.* If the alcohol served was particularly strong, it could lay the customers flat in the blink of an eye. The man probably assumed that even if he left Miu with the guests, she wouldn’t have time to share any inconvenient truths.

“You sure know a lot about this.”

“Only as much as anyone else.”

Scowling, Shin-u once again tried to end the conversation with, “There’s no reason to give in to his unreasonable demands,” but Unran brushed him off and turned to the teahouse proprietor.

“That so? Then I’ll just have to drink every last drop. Fair warning—I can hold my liquor.”

“Hey.” Shin-u was openly frustrated with Unran’s insistence on picking this fight. “Why would you undertake such a ridiculous challenge? The alcohol they serve in places like this is almost always hard liquor. If you drink too much, you’ll die. Why take that risk when no one is even asking for your help?”

“You never know, she might ask for it later. If she sees someone going crazy for her sake, it could change her mind.” Unran’s response to his protests was firm. “She’s no relative of mine, and I have nothing to gain from this. If she knows there’s a guy stupid enough to give his all to save her anyway...it might be the push she needs to ask for help.”

Miu had been listening to their conversation in a daze, but her eyes widened the smallest of fractions at that comment. Even Shin-u gave a blink of his azure eyes. He knew exactly who this young man was attempting to emulate: the so-called “Shu Keigetsu.”

Unran looked Shin-u straight in the eye and said, “It’s what *she* would do. I’m sure of it. Hell, if a little drinking is all it takes to save someone, then sign me up. Now stop your whining.” His lips quirking into a grin, he added, “Why don’t you just sit tight and pay the bill? That way, I can send my dove off with the - message that I did all the work on behalf of a certain wuss who can’t hold his drink.”

“ ... ”

Leaving Shin-u to his stony silence, Unran snatched the jug of liquor from the

proprietor. He sloppily poured it into a cup and then drained its contents in a single gulp. The alcohol content was indeed quite strong, and it burned his throat as it went down.

Yet Unran didn't let a hint of that show on his face as he tossed the now-empty cup into the air and caught it. "See? That was nothing. One piddling jug of this booze isn't gonna satisfy me. Hurry up and bring me the next one."

"Oho. I would be happy to bring you your next jug, sir."

The proprietor narrowed his eyes, alarmed to find his guest a better drinker than anticipated. After shooting Miu a glare that held a reminder of his previous threats, he made to briskly depart for the kitchen when another voice called him to a halt.

"Wait."

It was Shin-u. When the proprietor turned around, the blue-eyed man did something completely unexpected.

"These jugs are pretty small."

Lo, instead of drinking from a cup, he grabbed the jug and chugged straight from it. He gulped and gulped until finally, in a graceful motion, he turned the jug upside down in full view of the astonished proprietor. Only a single drop of alcohol trickled out, proving that he had already emptied its contents.

"Wha...?"

"Bring us three jugs."

Once Shin-u had sent the proprietor off with that last command, Unran gaped at him in disbelief. "You..."

"You have one hour. I'm stuck here until the dove arrives, so I'll indulge your nonsense while I wait."

While Unran struggled for words, debating whether he ought to thank his companion or not, Shin-u bluntly declared, "I can't even hope to get drunk on such weak alcohol. Didn't anyone ever tell you that men of the northern

territory use liquor to ward off the cold? We're the strongest drinkers on the entire continent."

At that, Unran burst out laughing.

*What's this guy's deal? He looks so apathetic, but he's actually a huge sore loser!*

Apparently, Unran's earlier insult had triggered something inside the captain. Fine by him. No one could outdo a southerner in the belligerence department.

"Eh, I've got my doubts! Us southern men sweat a lot and move water through our systems fast, so alcohol doesn't stay with us for long. Hope you aren't crying come morning, old man."

"We're about the same age."

"What, seriously? You look way older! Doesn't help that your facial muscles are dead."

Shin-u took his seat at the table, bantering all the while. Unran reached over to where Miu was huddled in a corner.

As the girl hunched in on herself with a start, Unran laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and murmured as soothingly as he could, "I know I can't expect you to trust us right away. In that case, come join us for a round of drinks. We'll drink, and all you have to do is sit there. Once you feel ready to talk, we want to hear your story."

The dove would probably reach them within the hour. Once it arrived, they would have the option to stay with Miu and send the bird to call for help. By that time, she was bound to have opened up to them.

No. They would make *sure* she did.

As Unran came to that decision, he got up to meet the proprietor, who had hurried back with his arms full of liquor jugs.

Half an hour had passed since the two men had begun their operation to buy the girl time.

“So, goin’ back to that earlier conversation, do you go to brothels a lot? How d’you know so much about ’em?”

“I don’t know that much. My subordinate drags me along sometimes.”

“What?! But isn’t your subordinate, like, y’know? Isn’t he lackin’ parts down there? He still goes to brothels? Beats me what he’d even do there. Ha ha ha, there we go—maybe he *beats* off! Wait, that still ain’t possible!”

Unran had started out making a concentrated effort to spice up the conversation and lighten the mood, but his buzz had made him more and more convivial, until the event was well on its way to becoming a plain old drinking party. He tended to be a cheerful drunk, and for some time he had been roaring with helpless laughter over every little thing.

As he cracked up and slapped the table at the slightest provocation, Miu shot him timorous, puzzled glances, while Shin-u coolly tossed back his own drinks. Incidentally, the proprietor was currently running to the kitchen to fill a jug with liquor for the umpteenth time.

“The Eagle Eyes will kill you if you tease them too much about that. A lot of them have a hidden inferiority complex.”

“Hmm. You’re the only one with a package, right? I’ll bet your guys have hard feelings about that. Hm? Wait, *do* you have one? Something tells me you’ve got too pretty a face for that. So is that a no?”

“I see you have a death wish,” Shin-u replied evenly, then gulped down the rest of his drink. He twirled his empty cup in front of Unran’s face, a sneer rising to his lips. “Oh, still working on yours? You’re quite the modest drinker, *miss*.”

“Asshole...”

For a man like Unran, who had exploited his reputation as a handsome lady-killer for all it was worth, there could be no more humiliating a taunt. Lips

twitching, he made a point of filling his cup to the brim and downing it in a single gulp.

“Are you blind? Can’t see how many drinks I’m knockin’ back?” He slammed his cup on the table, pulled the jug close, and snidely filled Shin-u’s cup. “How many cups have you had? I think that was my...twentieth. Hah, I’m finally startin’ to feel nice and toasty.”

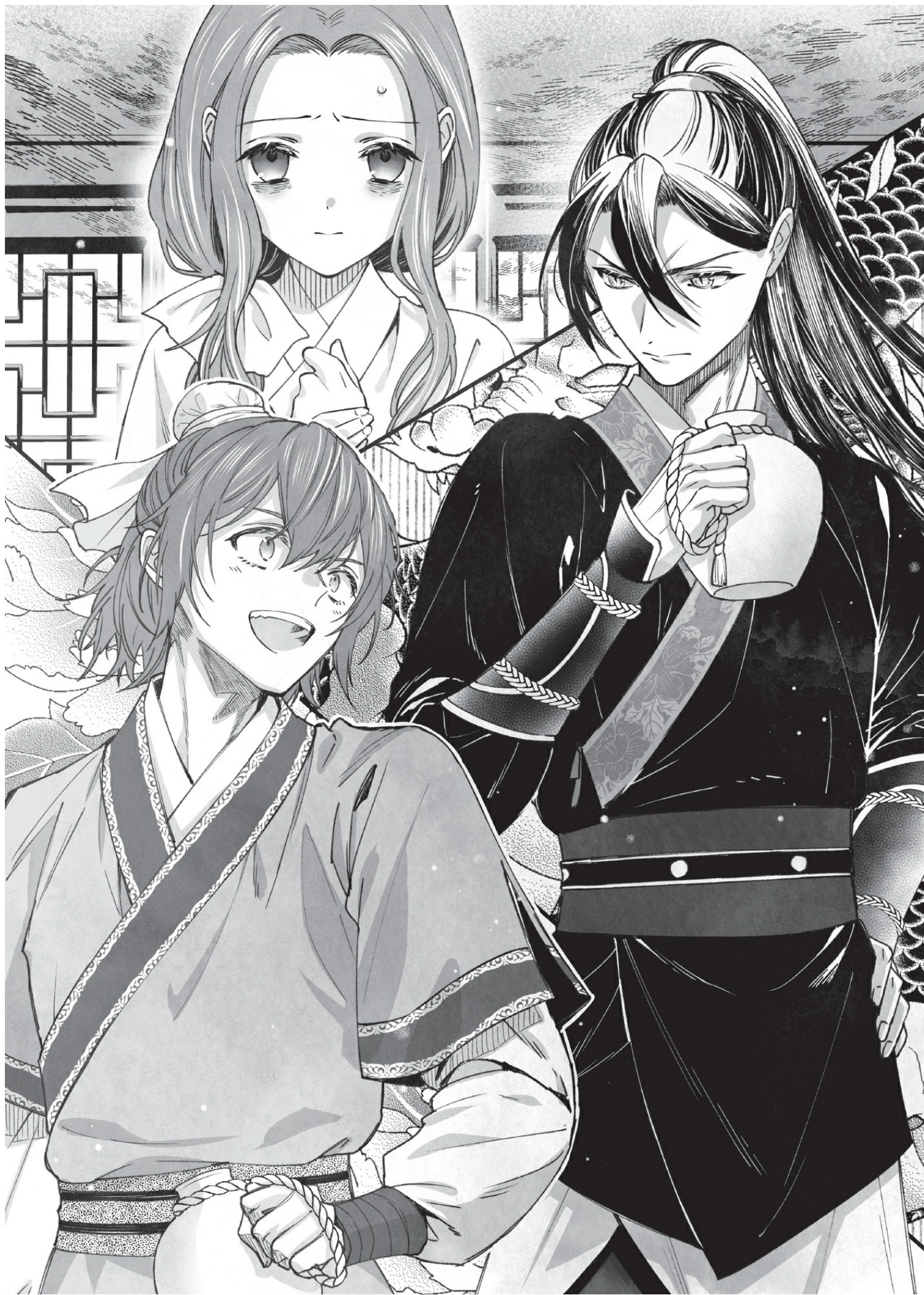
“Hmph. How petty of you to keep count. I believe this is my...twenty-second.”

“Stop trying to one-up me! And who are you to talk when you’re counting down to the single digits?!”

“Fine. It’s my thirtieth.”

“That’s rounding too far up!”







Since they were pouring the drinks and sniping at each other at the same time, it was easy for their hands to slip. When Unran rushed to bring his cup to his lips before it could spill, he managed to hit his nose with a comical sputter.

Shin-u pointed at him with a completely straight face. “Hilarious.”

“You’re pretty soused, aren’t you?!”

It was disorienting how even when his self-control was impaired, his expression never changed.

The captain lowered his finger with an unaffected expression, only to pout a few moments later. “I am not drunk.”

“You definitely are. Your reaction time is way off. Here, how many fingers am I holding up?”

“Yes, two for me, please.”

“I wasn’t taking your order!”

When he saw Unran holding up two fingers, for some bizarre reason, Shin-u gave an affirmative grunt and held up two fingers of his own, as if he were requesting a couple bottles of hot rice wine. Though he didn’t *look* particularly tipsy, that was proof enough that he was wasted.

“C’mon, this is too much... Why are we both stickin’ up our fingers like this?!”

Unran was far gone enough to laugh at the drop of a hat, so it wasn’t long before he was doubled over with mirth at the image of two men facing each other with their fingers in the air.

“Wait, hold it. Why are we even havin’ a drinking contest in the first place? We’re supposed to be helping li’l Miu over here.” Not a second later, he was talking to Miu in a voice thick with drowsiness. “Oh, looks like we’ve gone through ten jugs already. That means you’re free for at least four more hours, Miu.”

His whole body felt so leaden that he had to rest his cheek on the table. As he

relished the cool feel of its surface, Miu cast a hesitant glance down at him. Some of the fear was gone from her eyes.

“Apologies for the wait, sirs! I’ve brought you your next few jugs.”

Just then, the proprietor returned with an armful of jugs, out of breath from running. The fact that Unran and Shin-u had yet to black out was so far outside his expectations that he was starting to panic. The reason he nevertheless insisted on keeping up the appearance of a drinking party was because he knew this was the most effective way to keep his customers’ mouths shut. The establishment would provide the alcohol, and the patrons would drink themselves into a coma. Management would bear no responsibility in the matter.

*Gotta admit, this is getting a little rough,* Unran thought to himself, though he kept the cocky grin on his face.

He had always prided himself on being the strongest drinker in his village, but even he had never consumed so much alcohol in one sitting before. His head felt light and euphoric, but his limbs felt as heavy as if they’d been stuffed full of lead. Somehow, he had a vague hunch that the paradisaical bliss he was feeling was about to take a sharp turn into Hell.

*Oh well. A real man wouldn’t quit here.*

With an unsteady hand, he reached for the next jug.

“That’s mine.”

Shin-u reached out from the side and snatched it from his grasp.

“You sip on some of this cheap tea.” Shin-u downed the entire contents of the jug, shoving the teapot in Unran’s direction with his other hand. “If water moves through your system fast, it means you get drunk fast too. I’ll handle the rest of the drinking. You can either serve me or provide some entertainment.”

It seemed he was prepared to take over the fight on behalf of Unran, who was nearing his limits. And yet, for all that his complexion hadn’t changed and he

retained his unruffled demeanor, he was clearly quite inebriated himself.

His chin still resting atop the table, Unran flicked his gaze up at Shin-u. “Wow, you’re a supportive guy.”

“Only as much as anyone else.”

“No, I’m serious! Admit it. I bet other people tell you that all the time.”

When his drunken companion doubled down, Shin-u paused for a moment before tilting his head in thought. “Not particularly. I’ve never had meaningful enough interactions with others to be appraised for my personality. I’ve been treated as a nuisance since the day I was born.”

He spoke dispassionately. It was not the tone of someone drunkenly wallowing in self-pity but of someone stating a pure fact. Shin-u was the son of a foreign slave, but he still carried the blood of the emperor. Despite his complicated lineage, he had managed to survive by dedicating himself to his menial work in the inner court. Much like Unran, he must have given up on wanting things for himself due to the circumstances of his own birth.

Half of the blood that ran through his veins assured him of the ultimate glory, yet he was forbidden to covet it. Nor did he feel the desire to. He resided in a stone-cold world encased in ice. And so, as soon as a flame ignited in his heart, it shook him to his very core.

When he noticed Unran’s gaze boring into him, Shin-u immediately turned his head aside in protest. “Stop staring. If you have nothing better to do, entertain us.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Unran chuckled and gave a lazy wave of his hand, then opted to comply with Shin-u’s demand. With his chin still pressed into the palm of his hand, he began to sing.

*“Spring forth spring forth O golden flowers...”*

There was no deep thought behind the gesture. His mind was growing more

jumbled by the minute, while his arms and legs were starting to feel like they had put down roots. Since his body was no longer capable of full range of motion, the only performance he could provide was a song. And as a country bumpkin with no knowledge of popular music, the best he could do on that front was a rice-planting song.

And yet...

*“Come forth come forth O golden crop...”*

That was when Unran noticed that Miu had started to cry beside him. It was the one and only outburst she, who had fought so desperately to repress her emotions, had allowed herself. A possibility occurred to him, and he crooned the rest of the lyrics.

*“Come be upon us O god of rice...”*

Tears welling in her eyes, the girl nodded in time to the beat. She knew this rice-planting song.

*Good for you, Miu.*

Although the melodies might vary slightly from region to region, the lyrics of rice-planting songs were essentially the same everywhere. The ones Unran and Miu knew must have been very similar. And that meant she was a farmer.

*See? You did it. You managed to ask for help.*

The human trafficking of farmers was a serious crime. If they could prove that Miu came from a peasant background, it would be a simple matter to have the teahouse proprietor arrested.

Sensing as much himself, the proprietor blanched and jumped to his feet. “Miu, it’s quite rude to cry in front of our customers. Stop this at once. Go back to the kitchen and—”

“You know, I’ve been doin’ some thinking,” Unran cut in, raising his voice. “I accepted this drinking challenge in the heat of the moment, but on second thought, isn’t this all kinda pointless?”

Shin-u turned to him with a frown. “I’ve said that from the start.”

“I mean, this guy is obviously the villain here, and Miu is obviously the victim and a peasant. I did my best to imitate *her* and get the victim to cry for help—but now that I think about it, she reached out to me before I even had to ask.”

“What are you prattling on about?” the proprietor asked with a dubious look.

Unran groped around for an empty liquor jug...then turned around and smashed it with all his might.

*Bang!*

“Wha—”

Next, he lunged at the stupefied proprietor, pried open his mouth with one hand, and shoved one of the sharp-edged shards into his mouth.

“Eeeek!”

““Don’t move. Unless you want me to slit your throat from the inside.””

As he echoed that nostalgic threat, a chuckle escaped Unran’s lips.

“Yeah, there we go. This is the right way to do things. *This* is what she taught me.”

He really had learned a lot from her. She had taught him to reach out to the weak without hesitation or delay, to push himself beyond his limits to gain someone’s trust, and one more thing... She had taught him that—regardless of whether someone explicitly asked for help, regardless of whether there was solid evidence—it was best to skip the preamble and act as soon as one deemed a situation urgent.

Straddled on the floor by another man, the proprietor tried to plead with Unran to get off him, drool leaking from his open mouth. “G... G-ge...”

“Ugh, my whole body feels heavy. My hand just might slip,” Unran grouched, groggily shaking his head.

“Don’t break a perfectly good container. Use the proper tools.”

Shin-u tossed Unran a weapon, which the latter caught with one hand and a grunt of surprise. It was the same sleek, gorgeous dagger that had started it all.

“Huh? Is it okay if I use this? This old man’s blood and slobber is gonna get all over it.”

“Absolutely not. Don’t you dare get it dirty.”

“First you tell me to use it, then you tell me not to... Is this some kinda Zen dialogue?”

Unran’s first instinct was to complain, but soon even their farcical exchange seemed amusing enough to draw a laugh from him. Right—instead of playing by the enemy’s rules, he should have pulled this man in from the very start and knocked the teahouse proprietor flat.

*He’s a surprisingly supportive guy, after all.*

Just when Unran had expected his companion to leave both him and the girl out to dry, he had stood by them the whole way through. Also, he was a surprisingly funny drunk.

“How long do you plan to keep sitting on him? Knock him out and be done with it.”

Irritated to watch Unran do nothing but grin with the shard and dagger in hand, Shin-u swung his foot down on the proprietor’s head and struck him unconscious without a moment’s hesitation.

“Ha ha ha ha ha!”

With a hearty laugh, Unran privately added one more thing to the list: *He’s also got a way shorter temper than he seems!*

The two men sat the dazed Miu in a corner of the room, then untied the proprietor’s sash and bound him as efficiently as two drunkards could manage. They asked the girl what exactly had been done to her, how she had ended up here, and if there were any other men around who might give her trouble. Though she stumbled over her words more than a few times, Miu answered

every last one of their questions.

It was proof that she had begun to trust Unran and Shin-u.

According to her, the teahouse was run by a gambling den called the Three Realms Parlor, and it was a dumping ground for young girls who had been kidnapped as collateral for debts. They were all the daughters of artisans or merchants, presumably a calculation on the part of the teahouse to keep them out of trouble with the law. Miu had likely ended up there because they had judged her not to be a peasant, based on her exotic appearance. The brawny bouncers sent by the gambling den denied the girls an escape, leaving them no choice but to endure their torment.

Since there were supposedly only two employees on duty during the daytime, Unran and Shin-u had Miu summon both men to the room, then knocked them out just like they had the teahouse proprietor. All that remained was to call for the authorities. Seeing as Miu hailed from a peasant background and Shin-u held more authority than any local official, the game was as good as won.

“Seriously, why didn’t I just force your hand and take these guys out from the start?”

“I’ve been saying that all along.”

“That’s bull. Back in the beginning, you were all set on abandoning this poor girl. That’s why I started going in circles, thinking I had to figure something out on my own.”

Keeping the captive men in the corner of their vision, the pair bantered back and forth while they guzzled some tea to sober up. With a little more pep in her step now, Miu left the room to fetch some water.

*Flap flap!*

Just then, the two men heard a light flap of wings and whipped around to look out the window. The dove had finally arrived.

“Sorry, but I need to borrow this. I have an urgent message for ‘Shu



Keigetsu.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

His face taut with tension, Shin-u ripped up the handkerchief he had gone to the trouble of buying and scribbled a quick message with a brush he’d borrowed from the teahouse. Unran watched him intently.

The man composed his sentences without regard for his surroundings. He had someone dear to protect and something he needed to tell her at all costs—his sense of urgency, a rarity for someone like him, was almost palpable. This was Shin-u’s first true fixation, one that he himself had yet to recognize.

“So, hey...”

People like the Maiden and the captain of the Eagle Eyes lived in such a far-off world that there was no way a mere villager like Unran could begin to guess what they felt in their interactions with each other. Nor was it his place to know.

But he had seen it with his own eyes once. He had seen this man scoop up a lock of the Maiden’s wet hair when she was fresh out of a bath. He had watched this man gaze with a latent fervor upon the woman who was to marry the crown prince.

“I debated whether to tell you this, but I owe you for drinking that jug on my behalf.”

Goodwill had to be repaid with goodwill. This man may have been unapproachable and ruthless, but he had enough humanity in him to assist in an act of charity with little more than a beleaguered sigh.

“What? This is quite the change in attitude.”

“Kou Keikou is spying on you,” Unran said tersely.

Shin-u lifted his face and stared back unblinkingly. “He what?”

“This dove used to belong to Kou Keikou, not the Maiden. As you know, he helped save the village...and he’s continued to lend us aid via messenger bird

ever since. During one of those exchanges, he asked me for a favor. He said that if I ever got the chance to come to the capital, he wanted me to investigate your true motives.” Unran considered whether to couch the next part in euphemisms, but in the end, he said it bluntly: “You act like you have forbidden feelings for the Maiden. He wanted me to find out how deep those affections go.”

One day, Keikou had sent Unran a letter to this effect: *If rumors of her infidelity were to spread, dark clouds might gather over the head of our beloved Maiden. Would you mind clearing the skies for me?*

“I don’t know why someone from the Kou clan is so worried about a scandal involving the Shu Maiden...but I couldn’t say no to someone I owe a debt, and I don’t want to see the Maiden disgraced either.”

Kou Keikou always had a cheerful smile on his face, but sometimes he’d let a glimpse of something impenetrable slip through. Moreover, he was the savior of the village. Unran was in no position to refuse him.

“So that’s why you invited me out to eat. Was your question about the letter also a lie?”

“The part where I came to the northern market was planned. It was a coincidence that we ran into each other. It’s true that I got excited and delusional over the letter. But...I also thought I could use it to test your reaction. That’s why I showed it to you.”

“And? What do you plan to tell him?”

“That depends on you.” Unran picked up the dagger he had tossed aside and held it out to Shin-u. “You’re surprisingly supportive, and you’ve got a hot temper. So when you see the Maiden pushing herself past her limits, you can’t help but want to look out for her—that’s one way I could frame your actions. But if you give her an expensive gift, that’s going to be a stretch.”

For a while, Shin-u stared at the proffered dagger in silence.

“You advised me to wrap my gift in a nicer handkerchief and picked out a new one for me.”

“I know.”

“First you tell me to give it to her, then you tell me not to. Is this some kind of Zen dialogue?”

“Sorry,” Unran mumbled.

Shin-u exhaled a long breath and took the weapon. “There’s no need to be. I had no intention of giving it to her in the first place. I already ripped up the handkerchief. Forbidden feelings? Don’t be ridiculous. I only needed to maintain a certain proximity in order to fulfill my duties.” As he returned the dagger to his breast, he added, “Kou Keikou worried too much for nothing.”

Unran opened his mouth to say something, but he thought better of it. The captain himself seemed to be the only one who didn’t realize the passion with which he’d looked upon the Maiden during their township stay. Still, if those feelings could never be dredged to the surface, perhaps it was best to let them sink quietly into oblivion.

“Say, uh... You wanna take this chance to stick that dagger down the proprietor’s throat?” Unran ventured.

“Don’t even suggest it.”

After scowling in abject displeasure, Shin-u seemed to put his feelings behind him, and he attempted to tie the cloth with his message around the dove’s leg.

*Flap flap flap!*

However, the bird was flapping its wings too furiously to let him.

“Hey, stop struggling. Any bird that can’t do its job might find itself roasted for dinner.”

An unimpressed look crossed Unran’s face at the other man’s blasé threat. “Uh, would you mind not threatening my pet bird?” Then, as he watched the dove more closely, his eyes went round. “Wait, hold on...”

The dove sat on the windowsill, then flew through the air, came back to perch, and repeated the process again. Twice it flapped its wings from its perch. Twice it drew an arc through the skies. Twice it flapped its wings the next time it landed.

“This is bad. There’s been an emergency.”

“Explain.”

“When I asked about how to raise a bird, this is one of the things I learned. If this little guy ever repeats the motion of flapping its wings and circling in the air twice...” Turning back to Shin-u, who had grabbed him by the shoulders, Unran gulped. All his buzz and awkward feelings had evaporated in an instant. “It means that the Maiden is in danger, and I should drop everything to follow the dove.”

“Oh...!”

All the lingering emotional turmoil vanished from Shin-u’s face as well. A horrifying possibility had occurred to him: What if the secret service was already on “Shu Keigetsu’s” trail?

Shin-u turned briskly on his heel. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, uh... Shouldn’t you be keeping a little distance?” Unran asked haltingly, a reflexive response.

The captain matter-of-factly replied, “This is part of my duties.”

He then released the bird through the window and, so as not to lose sight of the direction it was going, planted his own foot on the windowsill.

“Ughhhh...”

Unran scratched at the back of his head, conflicted. When it came to the young girl, the captain had taken the stance that it would be fine to investigate later, yet when Shu Keigetsu was in danger, he rushed to the scene without a moment’s delay. Was it really justified to write that off as a matter of professionalism?

*Well, he's a surprisingly supportive guy, and he clearly takes his job seriously, so I guess it's not that much of a stretch? It's not not a stretch? I dunno anymore.*

He clearly hadn't completely shaken off his intoxication, as it was hard to get his thoughts in order.

Frankly, so long as Shin-u kept his feelings to himself, it didn't make a difference to Unran whether the man was attracted to the Maiden. Even he had a soft spot for the freckled girl who had saved his home, and it went without saying that he would drop everything to lend her a hand if she were in trouble. It was a sign of his deep respect and loyalty. His heart may have soared at the seemingly intimate tone of her letter, but anyone would be happy to have their affections for someone reciprocated.

The point was, as long as it didn't invite any pesky rumors of infidelity, the more people who fell head over heels for the Maiden—that is, the more people who were willing to come to her aid—the better.

*Or, no, maybe it doesn't work that way for the nobility? Besides, one's a man and one's a woman, so things could get messy if one of 'em gets hot and bothered enough to put the moves on... Hrm...*

Knowing his own tendency to move fast with women, Unran couldn't say with confidence whether it was possible to have a wholesome relationship of respect between two members of the opposite sex.

"Why are you staring into space? This is *your* dove. We're going after it."

"R-right!" Unran blurted.

Now wasn't the time to worry about romantic drama.

"Apologies for the wait. Here's your water—eep! Wh-what are you doing, mister?!"

"Sorry, but we have to head out for a bit! We made sure to tie them up, but if the proprietor or his cronies come to and start making noise, hit 'em over the

head with that tub of water and put 'em back to sleep!”

Heedless of the surprise it gave Miu, who was panting as she heaved a bucket of water, Unran followed Shin-u’s lead and jumped out the window.

## Chapter 7:

### The Gang Reconvenes

**“A**LL THAT BIG TALK for nothing! Even her pretty-boy husband turned his back on her, and she was reduced to a dancer in no time. Who woulda thunk it?”

“Can she even attract customers with a freckled face like that?”

“Poor girl. Maybe I oughta throw her a bone!”

The crowd at the Three Realms Parlor was going wild. They had just witnessed the foolhardy girl, who dared to challenge the owner, suffer an instant defeat.

It was fun to watch the feistier patrons. It was *more* fun to watch them get their legs swept from under them. Even after the bouncers had chased the pitiful woman onto the stage, men drunk on booze and bets roared with laughter, far from sympathetic to her plight.

“Aww, and she was such a nice girl. Look, the poor thing is scared stiff.” Although the bookmaker who had taught her how to play Odd or Even expressed his sympathy, he looked on with open indifference. As far as he was concerned, this sort of thing was an everyday occurrence. “Don’t you think, Sir Tan?”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” muttered the man being addressed—the same bearded lady-killer who had played the earlier round of Odd or Even—as he took a leisurely sip of his drink. His full lips, the mark of a womanizer, formed a loose smile. “She looks pretty calm to me.”

His eyes, which should have been glassy with intoxication, were surprisingly unclouded as they gazed upon the stage.

The dancers’ moves were far more seductive than any Reirin had ever seen.

*So this is how they dance in a gambling den.*

Turned into a dancer by force of circumstances, Reirin hid her face behind her sleeves in fear—or, well, a pretense of it—and observed her surroundings carefully. It nauseated her to think that she was taking a page out of Houshun's book, but that was neither here nor there.

The women wore flowing ruquns and sheer shawls. Dressed to look like a host of celestial maidens, they were a magnificent sight. Standing among them, Reirin looked downright overdressed and unsophisticated in her city girl disguise.

However, upon closer inspection, she found that only the women in the front rows danced with confidence, decked out in lavish jewelry and furs, while those in the back wore plaintive looks and moved awkwardly. Lacking accessories and clad only in sheer dresses, their attire was scandalously revealing. If one had to guess, the back row consisted of those who, much like Reirin at the moment, had been forced into their role. They were probably amateurs who were sometimes forced to sell their bodies on the side.

The women in the front were professionals there to enhance the quality of the overall performance. These dancers were not victims exploited by the gambling den but part of the management staff. As proof, the front row of the stage provided a clear view of the dice at each game table.

*Before the dice are rolled, they are always set on a display pedestal near one of the standing braziers. It would be a simple task to read the number when it's in that position.*

As the pieces of the puzzle clicked into place, Reirin cast a casual glance around the hall. When her eyes met the worried gazes of Leelee and Ringyoku, she silently conveyed, *Apologies for giving you a fright.*

Her goal had been to stand on the stage herself and establish proof of her theory. Now that she had accomplished that, there was no reason to give them further cause for alarm.

She shot Gyoumei a glance, which he immediately noticed and returned with



a furtive look of his own. For a moment, she debated what signal to give him, but then the perfect idea struck her, and she snuck a throat-slitting gesture in the shadow of her sleeve.

*I got the job done.*

Or, as most would know it, *“You’re dead meat.”*

Gyoumei almost burst out laughing, then hurried to school his expression.

Kugai, who hadn’t noticed their exchange with his back turned to the stage, gloated, “Well, it’s finally your turn, mister.” After ordering the dice girls to pour a round of drinks and don their blindfolds, he instructed them to take their tools in hand. “However the dice fall, this one decides it all. Now, where to place my bet?”

The final wager against Gyoumei was about to begin.

“Hey, lady! Who said you could daydream in the front row?”

At that same moment, a dancer whose entire frame was luxuriously bedecked with fur and jewelry pushed Reirin out of the way with a *thud*. Cloaked in the scent of white powder and perfume, the woman narrowed her crimson-lined eyes and glared at the intruder on her stage.

“What are all these heavy clothes you’re wearing? Take them off. You amateurs are supposed to shake your hips in the back row. Having a girl like you front and center will tarnish the name of the Three Realms Dance Troupe,” she berated Reirin, her words gruff.

As the leader of the dance troupe, she appeared to be in charge of telling the owner what numbers to expect. In fact, it was this woman who had been dancing in the middle of the stage during Reirin’s earlier wager.

After giving “Shu Keigetsu” a once-over, the woman lifted her rouge-painted lips into a mocking sneer. “How good a dance could you hope to perform with that lumbering, hulking figure of yours? Step aside, you ugly cow.”

“...”

As the woman stepped forward, she deliberately bumped into Reirin, who watched her with a smile.

*You mustn't get angry, Reirin. This is a simple difference of opinion. I'm not so petty as to lose my temper at each and every person who fails to see the appeal of Lady Keigetsu's body!*

What happened next was little more than an unfortunate twist of fate. Just as the woman was about to kick Reirin in the shin as she brushed past, the latter inadvertently—oh, yes, simply out of reflex to dodge the attack—lifted her own leg out of the way.

*Thud!*

As a result, the woman tripped and landed in a graceless heap.

“Agh!”

“Oh dear, my foot slipped. I'm afraid I can't help it, what with this hulking body of mine...”

“You...you she-devil!”

“Oh, my deepest apologies, your robes are all disheveled. Allow me to straighten them for you. My, was it supposed to go like this? Or this?”

After smacking her jaw against the hard floor, the woman attempted to pick herself up with a menacing scowl, but Reirin made a swift grab for her sleeves and hem and tied them all together with her shawl.

“Oops, I appear to have gotten them all tangled! Oh, how lumbering I am!”

Incidentally, she had gone with a hitch knot that was particularly difficult to get undone.

With all four of her limbs immobilized, the woman could do nothing but flop about like a fish, her body arched backward. After throwing the freshly caught dancer one last smile, Reirin stepped toward the edge of the stage and looked defiantly down at Kugai, who was glaring at her from his place below.

*That friggin' shrew!*

Kugai gritted his teeth. It was all well and good to have reduced her to a dancer, but he never imagined that she would topple over his cue-giver.

The dice girls had already begun to roll at his command. The rattle of the dice in the cups stirred Kugai's frustration to a fever pitch, until he finally shouted, "Hey! The bet is off! You've got some balls to raise a hand against one of our women!"

"Oho, you're getting awfully worked up. I wouldn't expect the owner of a gambling den to get so upset over a quarrel between two of his dancers. If you want to break up their fight, it can wait until after our wager. The dice have already been cast," came the measured voice of the slender gentleman sitting across from him. "Or do you hesitate to pick your numbers without the signals from your dancer?"

He spoke with insufferable composure. The way he was all but announcing that he had seen through the house's tricks had Kugai pounding his fists against the table.

"I've heard enough of yer slander! What, you think the dancers are manipulating the dice? How could they manage that from such a far-off stage, huh?!"

Next, an airy voice rained down from the stage. "They don't. They simply read the numbers and relay the information. We have a clear view of the dice from here."

Before he even had to turn around, Kugai knew that voice belonged to the freckled woman who had lost her bet in a crushing defeat.

"The dice girls have stopped rolling, but I can venture a guess as to which numbers will come up when they turn over those cups. It should be one, four, and five." She leaned over the stage and pointed down below with a smile.

“Before they’re placed in the cup, the dice are always set on a pedestal near a bright, warm fire. The side facing up at that juncture is the number that will come up when it’s rolled, correct?”

“Wha...?!”

The owner was speechless at how fast she had gotten to the bottom of the matter. No patron of the Three Realms Parlor had ever seen through their trick before.

“Oh, it all makes sense now.” Gyoumei nodded along with Reirin’s explanation, immediately picking up on what she was getting at. “So they load the dice by means of temperature.”

“Yes.” Reirin gave a graceful bob of her head from the stage. “The dice are always placed near a warm brazier, and just before they’re thrown, they’re handled by dice girls who have cooled their hands on cold alcohol bottles. I imagine there’s some kind of liquid inside the dice that hardens when chilled.”

Fat, for instance.

“It’s no surprise. Fat *does* stick to the pot as soon as it cools.”

Citing the hot pot she had eaten earlier that day as an example, Reirin looked quite pleased with herself. An idea like this could only occur to her because she’d been exposed to the life of the common folk. She was delighted that she had become so much more worldly in the course of a single day.

“The dice are made of tin to better conduct temperature,” she went on. “When the dice are placed near the braziers, the liquid pools at the base. When it cools, the fat sticks only to the bottom surface, making it heavier. If the dice are thrown in that state, the side to which the fat adhered is most likely to end up on the bottom, while the face that was visible from the pedestal will end up on top.”

Gyoumei smoothly continued for her, “So the dancers read the numbers when the dice are on the pedestal, and they communicate that information to

the bookmakers through their choreography. I suppose they've chosen a more circuitous method to make it harder to detect their cheating." The prince looked at Kugai with a grin. "'We aren't cheating,' you said? You have some nerve."

"Why, you...!" Red-faced with anger, Kugai kicked his chair over. "Hey, boys! Shut the mouths of these noisy-ass patrons once and for all!"

Upon realizing that he couldn't talk his way out of this one, he resorted to brute force. The bouncers who had been standing guard around Kugai surrounded Gyoumei, and the ones who had been hanging back near the walls stormed over to join them. Even the stairs leading to the stage were swarmed by men looking to hunt Reirin down.

"Eep!"

"Uh-oh..."

As the atmosphere took an abrupt turn for the tense, Leelee, Ringyoku, and the same spectators who had been laughing their heads off all let out a petrified yelp.

"You know why this tablecloth is red? It's so it can soak up the blood of cocky bastards like you! How 'bout we start by breaking a few of your limbs, then move on to gouging out your eyes?"

The burly men numbered twenty. Meanwhile, their targets were but one slender man and woman. Confident he had the upper hand, Kugai drew his trusty dagger from its sheath and ran his tongue along the blade.

"Don't lay a hand on 'em just yet, boys. As the master of the Three Realms Parlor, Kugai the Wicked Tiger is gonna personally teach 'em a lesson. I'll stick my blade into the pretty little whites of their eyes and—"

Unfortunately for him, he never got to finish his sadistic spiel.

"Your villain monologues always drag on and on."

*Thunk!*

With a sigh, Gyoumei kicked the massive table. It soared through the air with a dull *whoosh*, flattening Kugai and his cronies beneath it.

“Gah!”

Caught off guard, the men gave a garbled cry as their legs were crushed under the side of the improvised weapon. Seizing the opening, Gyoumei smashed a dice cup and hurled its splintered fragments in quick succession. Some punctured the bouncers’ eyes, others their necks. When hurled at their vitals with tremendous velocity, these pottery shards were far more formidable than any dagger. In the blink of an eye, five of the men landed flat on their backs, screaming.

“Now that we’ve figured out your tricks, we have no more time to waste waiting around. Since you men seem up for a fight, let’s get this over with quickly.” Gyoumei looked coldly upon the men backing away from him. “Bring it on. Come at me all at once.”

Despite instructing them to “bring it on,” he didn’t actually wait for the men to come to him, instead leaping off the overturned table and landing a roundhouse kick on several bouncers who were frozen in fear.

“H-hey! Wait! We didn’t ‘bring it’!” the men exclaimed, cowed by the stark difference in skill on display.

“Sorry, but I’m in a hurry,” Gyoumei replied flatly.

The prince dropped two men flat, driving his elbow into one’s face and digging his heel into the other’s stomach. He ripped the sword from the hands of a man attacking him head-on, then used the blade to deliver a crippling stab to an opponent who was aiming a punch at him from behind. As the clincher, he hurled the stolen longsword at the legs of a bouncer running up the stairs to the stage.

“Aaaaagh!”

The man who was leading the charge missed his next step, and the rest of the

men went tumbling down the stairs in a chain reaction.

Reirin beamed and waved to him from her spot on the stage. “Thank you! That was very helpful.”

Gyoumei breathed a sigh of relief. “Don’t mention it. Keep your guard up.”

“Damn yooooou!”

At that moment, a man who had been watching for a blind spot came up behind Gyoumei and charged at him, his club raised high overhead. Before the prince even had time to turn around, however, his assailant was already writhing on the ground and screaming in agony. There was a length of burning cloth draped over his head.

“Goodness, the fur is even more flammable than I anticipated,” Reirin muttered, bemused.

As soon as she saw that Gyoumei was in danger, she had thrown a brazier and a fur pelt she had taken from the dancer.

“Thanks. That was helpful.”

“Don’t mention it! Please do keep your guard up.”

The crown prince and his Maiden exchanged subdued smiles, heedless of the man frantically rolling around in an attempt to put out the fire.

And thus were the men dominated in the blink of an eye, leaving Kugai as the only conscious man standing.

“Damn it! What are the guys in the Heavenly Lounge doing?! Those useless assholes!”

From the sound of it, the reinforcements that were supposed to rush to the scene at times like this had yet to show up. Cursing out his underlings, Kugai limped to his feet, only to crumple to the floor before he could so much as glance at the Heaven door.

The reason being that Gyoumei had chucked a die at his forehead with

enough speed to send it screaming through the air.

“Hitting the face gets us a tael of gold.”

The well-aimed blow sent Kugai tumbling backward, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

By this time, Reirin was leisurely descending the stairs from the stage. “And hitting a vital gets us ten mace of silver, correct?”

“You’re thinking of the limbs. He’s already passed out, so let’s leave it at that,” Gyoumei gently told his fiancée when she scanned the floor for something to throw.

Right on cue, there came a commotion from behind the Heaven door, and it swung open a few moments later.

“Ooh, this must be the—wait, what? Why are they all knocked out already?”

“Hold it! We can’t just go from brawl...to brawl...! Let me catch my breath for a moment!”

The one who had kicked open the door with a smile was none other than Keishou. Keigetsu was gasping for breath beside him.

Reirin’s eyes widened at the unexpected encounter. “Goodness! Whatever are you two doing here?”

The dove was supposed to have summoned Keikou. Had her worrywart eldest brother perhaps called upon the second son and his companion for help?

While she was still processing her shock, the door labeled Earth opened next.

“Here we are! This must be the front door, right?!”

“In cases like this, I believe it’s better etiquette to go around to the back gate, Master Keikou.”

The man puffed up with pride was Kou Keikou. The woman next to him—who was preoccupied with manners in a situation that certainly didn’t call for them—was Reirin’s head court lady, Tousetsu. Judging by the dove perched on



Keikou's shoulder, they must have rushed over in response to the call.

"Damn, it reeks of blood in here."

"Indeed. This must be the scene of the crisis."

At almost the exact same time, someone opened the Man door that led to the so-called "garbage dump." The ones to jump out were Unran, who was supposed to be back in Unso, and Captain Shin-u of the Eagle Eyes.

"What happened here?! Are you all right?!" Shin-u howled, assuming a fighting stance. But as soon as he and Unran noticed the groaning men sprawled on the floor, as well as the blank stares everyone else was shooting them, the looks on their faces turned dubious. "What's going on here?"

In a twist of fate, the whole gang had assembled through the Heaven, Earth, and Man doors respectively.

"Erm, you see..." Reirin herself couldn't help but be surprised by this turn of events, so she put a hand to her cheek as she answered Shin-u's question. "We were on a quest to expose this gambling den's deceitful tricks and rescue that girl's—Ringyoku's—kidnapped mistress. We did indeed call for reinforcements, but still... What are you all doing here?"

Keishou was the first to reply. "While we were shopping, we stumbled upon a vendor who was illegally reselling pawned bracelets, so we came here to get revenge." Keigetsu shot him an exasperated look when he said "revenge," so he quickly corrected himself. "Rather, we wanted to bring the operation to justice, so we tracked down the reseller's boss. That's how we ended up here."

"Oh, so you weren't summoned by dove, then! What a coincidence," Keikou spoke up after nodding along with his little brother's explanation. "Speaking of coincidences, the same goes for us. There were a bunch of rowdy bouncers hanging around the inn we stopped at. The rascals were harassing innocent people and breaking down doors with no remorse, so we decided to make their employer, the Three Realms Parlor, answer for their crimes. That's when a dove flew in asking for our help, and wouldn't you know it? Its destination was also

the Three Realms Parlor!”

“Goodness!”

There was a trace of genuine amazement in Reirin’s stock response.

Unran was the next to explain, his own confusion evident. “I *happened* to bump into this guy at the market, and we were having tea together...but then my dove started making a fuss, so we followed it here.”

“Back at the teahouse, there was a girl sold as collateral who was being forced into prostitution,” said Shin-u, the “guy” Unran had indicated with a jerk of his thumb. He turned to look at the plaque bearing the parlor’s name that was hanging up in the hall. “The gambling den that sold her off was called the Three Realms Parlor.”

“Unbelievable!” At this point, Reirin was exhaling a sigh of wonder, her hand still pressed to her cheek. “Then I suppose the events can be summarized like so.”

She began to put the pieces of the story together, counting things off on her free hand.

“The gambling den known as the Three Realms Parlor cheated innocent people into accumulating large debts.”

Ringyoku, though dismayed by the sudden influx of people, exchanged glances with Leelee and nodded.

“They illegally resold the goods that were confiscated as collateral.”

Keigetsu shot a wistful look at the breast of Keishou’s robes, where he kept the bracelet he had taken from her.

“They hired unruly bouncers to oppress the populace and prevent them from raising complaints.”

Keikou and Tousetsu bobbed their heads with smug looks on their faces.

“And, if you can believe it, they kidnapped a young girl and forced her into

prostitution at a teahouse. My, what a prime example of pure evil.”

When she was finished counting, Reirin glanced behind her with a sigh. The roots of that prime example of pure evil were currently twitching in a heap on the floor. It was the prime example of a fitting end.

“Then we came running because we heard there was danger, only to find the enemy already defeated,” Unran added to Reirin’s explanation with a faraway look in his eyes. “Man, why did I go to all the trouble of taking a horse? I barely know how to ride one.” His shoulders slumped.

“It doesn’t look like you were attacked by a particularly formidable foe,” Shin-u muttered with relief from beside him, looking around at the faces of the other patrons.

Just then, a bell rang outside the gambling den.

“It’s noon,” Gyoumei mumbled.

Reirin buried her head in her hands, only to glance up at Keigetsu with a giggle to hide her distress. “L-Look! We met up at the appointed hour! All according to plan!”

“None of this is according to plan. What was the point of splitting up if we all joined back up in the end?” Keigetsu retorted, narrowing her eyes.

She had a point.

“Well...for the time being, let’s deal with the situation at hand, then revise our plans from there,” Keishou suggested, clearly embarrassed that he had shown up despite not being among those summoned.

True enough, between the unconscious bouncers frothing at the mouth, the dice girls paralyzed with fear, and the dancers who had presumably escaped from the Heavenly Lounge flooding the room, chaos seemed ready to break out at any moment.









The whole group exchanged glances, shrugged their shoulders, and set out to do their own part to clean up the mess.

“Oh dear...”

Reirin, who had left the task of tying up the thugs to the men, was about to retreat to the wall when she realized she had kicked something underfoot and blinked. Looking down, she found the object to be a gold-painted tin die. It was one of the house’s tools for cheating, and in the end, Gyomei had thrown it to knock Kugai unconscious.

After bending down and picking it up on instinct, Reirin broke into a smile. “I suppose we truly did ‘beat him into submission with a roll of the dice.’”

Three twos never did come up during her wager. Even so, two had come through the Heaven door, two had come through the Earth door, and two had come through the Man door. Thanks to the pairs of “two” who had appeared from Heaven, Earth, and Man, Reirin had managed to deal the Three Realms Parlor a sound defeat.

It was a miraculous number that could make anyone invincible. Two truly was better than one.

*Allow me to keep this as a memento of this day.*

After brushing her fingers over the “two” side of the die, Reirin gently tucked it into the breast of her garment. Then she retreated to the wall and sneaked a glance at Keigetsu, who was tearing into Leelee, yelling, “How did you get yourself caught up in another big scandal?!”

The flow of events might have changed somewhat, but they would be reversing their switch shortly after this. If the Maiden Court was truly under surveillance, it was unlikely that Keigetsu would ever use her body-swapping spell again. Once Reirin returned to her sickly original vessel, she would never have another chance to go out on the town. This was the last time she would be

in the middle of so much fuss and excitement.

*I am truly sorry for all the trouble I've caused you, Lady Keigetsu. And thank you for everything.*

A reed leaf that had been used to wrap zongzi. A loaded die. These useless odds and ends were some of Reirin's most prized possessions.

Reirin would continue to gain more and more precious treasures until the very last moment before the swap was reversed. Even the tightness she felt in her chest at the thought was something to be thankful for.

*This is the last time.*

She gave her breast pocket a single, firm squeeze.

"Come. Let's do this with a bang."

A moment later, Reirin snapped her head up and chanted the spell to sever her lingering attachments—but little did she know that half an hour later, she would discover that this wasn't the "last time" at all.

## Chapter 8:

### The Finale

**T**HE EMPEROR HAD DISPATCHED his secret service in earnest, not for the sake of appearances, and they might already be on the move. Shin-u relayed this piece of information in hushed tones once Gyoumei, Reirin, Keigetsu, and Keishou had all boarded a carriage together.

This was after Leelee, Ringyoku, and Unran had gone back to the teahouse to retrieve Miu—whereupon Ringyoku had thanked everyone in tears—and Keikou and Tousetsu had left for the inn and the Moon's Razor. Now that they were already together, the group had discussed the idea of undoing the switch inside the gambling den, but Shin-u, who had volunteered to stay behind, found the carriage Keikou had sent over and instructed them to get in with a deadly serious look. When everyone climbed in despite their questions, wondering if he wanted to send them back to the tavern, he gave Gyoumei a report under the pretense of conducting a security check on the carriage interior.

"Your Highness," he said. "We may be under observation, so I advise you not to reverse the switch today."

In short, Shin-u wanted a private room where no one could spy or eavesdrop on them. When the quartet gasped in response, he went on to explain the following: Just recently, an official who presumably served under the emperor had gone to the village from the Unso trip and, under the pretext of compiling a biography, verified whether the "miracle" that had transpired there was a product of Daoist magic. Unran had saved the day by answering that it was caused by the dragon's qi, but they couldn't afford to let their guard down if someone was moving in the shadows.

It was possible that the emperor had mentioned "limiting the surveillance to the Maiden Court" in writing to get them to tip their hands, and one of his spies was already lurking in the capital to catch the pivotal moment when a spell was



cast. Therefore, to prevent the fact that Reirin and Keigetsu were swapped—that they were actively engaging in a forbidden art—from being detected, it was better to postpone the reversal of the switch. Their best move was to disguise the true purpose of this outing as an incognito tour of the city. After lunch at the tavern, they would return to the imperial palace as if nothing had happened.

Once Shin-u had relayed all the necessary facts, he quickly left the carriage to avoid arousing suspicion. He planned to stay behind at the gambling den and hand over the case to the local officials.

“This is terrible,” Reirin murmured in a daze as the carriage took off toward the tavern.

She had been so sure that leaving the palace would allow them to destroy the evidence of magic at play. She never would have guessed that the enemy had been one step ahead of them all along.

No, technically, they had split up and created a decoy in preparation for such a possibility, but having that “possibility” turn to reality sent a chill down her spine. Their opponent’s unfathomable designs were closing in on them fast.

Reirin had done her best not to make self-flagellating remarks in front of Keigetsu, but she couldn’t stop her pale lips from forming a distressed soliloquy. “It’s all my fault that things have come to this...”

When Keigetsu heard this from the seat next to her, she grabbed her friend by the shoulders and gave her a firm shake, forgetting all about her previous reluctance to put the blame on Kou Reirin. “It is! How are you going to fix this?! I thought I could afford to take this in stride, and now it turns out I’m already under investigation! It’s all your fault for making me use my magic so irresponsibly! I’ve worked so hard to keep anyone from suspecting I was a cultivator! I’ve shown so much restraint—”

Keigetsu abruptly stopped, recalling how she had snapped and almost used her magic to burn a man to death earlier that very day.

“So much restraint...in a sense...”

*Come to think of it, didn't Lord Keishou mention that one of the fires around the market flared up?*

In that case, if one of the spies had been monitoring “Kou Reirin,” Keigetsu might very well have framed her as a cultivator.

“Some of the time...”

She let her arms drop and sank back into her seat, covering her face in her hands.

“I'm sorry. You were forced to rely on your magic in public because I didn't keep a close enough eye on you.” As Keishou watched Keigetsu droop across from him, his face twisted into a grimace. “I'm a failure as a guard. I won't make excuses for myself.”

While his three companions took more and more hits to their morale, Gyomei, who was sitting next to Keishou with a somber expression on his face, took his turn to speak. “No, this all started because I jumped to the conclusion that venturing outside would solve the problem. Forgive me, everyone.”

When the crown prince apologized, some of the group covered their faces, while others dropped their gazes, shook their heads, and refuted him.

“You exercised the utmost caution, Your Highness. The blame all comes back to me.”

“As far as today goes, I may have been the one to make the biggest blunder... In the market, you see, I, uh...”

“No, that was my fault.”

“It's mine.”

The three Kous were the self-blaming sort by nature, and Keigetsu was haunted by an undeniable screwup of her own. With the way everyone had cast their eyes downward, the carriage might as well have been bound for a funeral.

Just when Reirin, Gyoumei, and Keishou had let their heads hang to the point where they could bend down and kiss the floor of the carriage, they all snapped to attention at once.

“Well, no point in playing the blame game!” said Keishou, thumping his seat.

In a flash of desperation, Gyoumei slapped the windowsill in response. “Exactly right! We can’t change what has already come to pass. What we need now is a plan of attack!”

After her brother and cousin had said their piece, the younger sister of the group gave an overly vigorous nod. “So true! Why, if anything, it was going into the city that alerted us to the lurking danger! In a way, we were very fortunate!”

Her reaction seemed to come half from a place of resignation, but she managed to force herself toward a fresh outlook.

“Precisely! We would’ve been in deep trouble had we attempted to reverse the switch in the Maiden Court. Going into the outer city was the right choice!”

“You’re so right, Brother Junior!”

“Looking at it another way, it’s a good thing that we’ve preserved the switch to this point. No matter how close an eye the secret service keeps on ‘Shu Keigetsu’ hereafter, the body-swapped version of her can’t use magic. Those fools are wasting their time!”

“What an outstanding point! Look at how well we outsmarted them!”

The trio’s momentum was such that, left unchecked, they were liable to start bumping fists and yelling, “Let’s show some backbone!” It was often said that three heads were better than two, but it was possible that three Kous were just more overzealous.

Keigetsu’s lips twitched. She was astounded by the resilience and pragmatism of the Kou blood, which could plummet all the way to the ground only to burst forth with enough force to break through the earth.

“I-I suppose...that’s true...”

Still, the strangest part of all was that their bizarre assertiveness actually served to ease her fears.

“It most certainly is! The secret service is currently concentrating their efforts on ‘Shu Keigetsu.’ Since I—the current Shu Keigetsu—can’t use magic, so long as they don’t find out about the switch, they’ll eventually conclude that I am no practitioner.”

“Exactly! It’s all good as long as they don’t find out about the switch!”

“Yes. We just can’t let them find out about the switch.”

Gyoumei and Keishou nodded in agreement, but after a moment of staring at Reirin in silence, they both turned to Keigetsu.

“Say...would it be possible to quickly undo the switch while we’re in this carriage?”

“We’re bound to come under suspicion if we leave things like this.”

Reirin stared in disbelief at the two men who had pulled the rug out from under her. “Huh?”

Keigetsu ignored her friend’s reaction and cleared her throat. “Well, about that... I wish I could, but I think we should refrain if there’s a chance our carriage is being watched from the outside. A large-scale spell will always cause a fluctuation in the surrounding qi. A star might shine brighter, a fire might rage harder, or there might be a flash of light. It’s always accompanied by some sort of minor phenomenon.”

When the spy interviewed the villagers, he’d asked if any fires had suddenly flared up. That meant he was using those “phenomena” as a clue to determine if someone had used magic. In which case, it was important to avoid that.

Finding Keigetsu’s claim to be a reasonable one, the two men frowned.

“So it needs to be done in a completely secluded space... No, that alone wouldn’t be enough. It has to be someplace where no one could see the

phenomenon happening nearby.”

“What if we took a different approach and disguised the source of the phenomenon? We could make it look like it was caused by my dragon’s qi, much like when we timed the casting of the spell to my prayer on our trip. During the Rite of Reverence, suspicions arose because the mirror my father was holding was portrayed as the cause. He knew for a fact that it wasn’t his own power.”

“Good idea.” Keishou snapped his fingers. “In that case, we had better arrange a compelling stage. We need a scenario that will convince everyone it’s clearly a result of your dragon’s qi... Say, Your Highness, do you have any plans to fly into a sky-shattering rage in the near future?”

“I don’t lose my temper on a schedule, you fool.” Gyoumei scowled, disgruntled, but he gave the idea some thought. “The secret service won’t have room to complain if I manifest my dragon’s qi for the sake of the kingdom rather than as an expression of my own emotional turmoil. In a month’s time, there will be a Repose of Souls Service to put a disaster area to rest. I’m supposed to offer a prayer there, so that should do nicely.”

“Great idea! It gives us the perfect angle to keep them in check. ‘You dare suspect an auspicious omen that appeared for the good of the kingdom to be Daoist magic?’ Besides, the secret service should have their hands full guarding His Majesty during the event proper.”

“All right. For the next month, we should conduct ourselves in a way that doesn’t give the swap away, reverse it during the Repose of Souls, and refrain from casting any more magic for a while. That’s our solution.”

“And that gives us plenty of time to investigate His Majesty’s true motives.”

The wise crown prince and the military officer known as the future emperor’s right-hand man proposed plan after plan as casually as if they were making small talk. Reirin and Keigetsu, who had been quietly listening to their conversation, exchanged glances.

“My...”

“This is impressive.”

The girls were astounded by how optimistically and efficiently the men dealt with the problem, never once stopping to point fingers. If Reirin and Keigetsu had tried to figure everything out on their own, they would have no doubt lost themselves in despair. It was amazing how much relief it brought them to have added the other two to their ranks.

“You’re both so dependable,” Reirin said sincerely.

“Hm?” Keishou shot her a wink. “What did you expect? Don’t forget that we have a few more years of experience under our belts than you girls.”

“If only you hadn’t shut us out of the Rite of Reverence, we could have done more to help you back then,” Gyoumei added with a note of reproach.

Ashamed, Reirin hunched and muttered, “M-my apologies.”

The prince didn’t appear to be interested in hounding the humbled Maiden further. The faintest of rueful smiles rose to his face. “It’s all right.” He then declared, “No one will lay a hand on my Maidens as long as I have anything to say about it. I swear upon my name as the crown prince that I will defend you both.”

“Then I swear it upon my name as your older brother,” Keishou chimed in, offering Reirin and Keigetsu a serene smile.

Keigetsu pressed her clenched fists into her lap, overcome with a surge of emotion. If she didn’t pin her legs down somehow, she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from getting up and pacing around the carriage.

*I have people to protect me,* she thought.

She was allowed to rely on others. She was allowed to put her trust in someone else.

By “Maidens,” Gyoumei had been referring to both girls present. His strong sense of responsibility meant that he would protect Keigetsu, not just his

beloved Reirin. The same went for Keishou. He had made his vow to both Reirin and Keigetsu. Perhaps it was only because she currently inhabited his sister's body, but he was still offering her a helping hand.

"Then I swear it upon my name as your friend, Lady Keigetsu." Reirin, who was sitting next to her, gently laid a hand over her clenched fists. "I shall take responsibility for this mess and protect you."

"Excuse me, but you're one of the people who need protection here. Behave yourself and let people look out for you," Keigetsu grumbled, narrowing her eyes, but she didn't shake off the hand.

"We can make it. Let us all do this with a bang."

Reirin gave Keigetsu's hand a squeeze. That was the part where the latter could have told her off for being overzealous, but she settled for a snort instead.

*It's not that I feel reassured or anything... Yelling at her in front of His Highness or her doting brother would make me look bad, that's all.*

In her corner was the brilliant crown prince, the bearer of the dragon's qi. A quick-witted military officer. A powerful friend who would shower her with a truly inordinate amount of love. She had people she honestly trusted not to betray her. So what if she had caught the emperor's eye?

Feeling such relief that even she found it surprising, Keigetsu turned her gaze to the window. "We're coming up on the tavern."

Reirin nodded. "Now that we have a plan in place, I'm starting to feel peckish. Perhaps we really should stop for lunch."

"Oh!" Keishou exclaimed from the opposite seat, suddenly slapping his knee. "All this talk of food just reminded me! We have to pick up Keikei's berserker balls after the hour of the horse!"

Keigetsu's face twitched as the man jovially dragged up her blunder from a few hours earlier. "Hey..."

“Berserker balls?”

“‘Keikei’?”

Unsurprisingly, the other two stared back intently, their interest piqued.

“Wait, hold on.”

“You’ve got to hear this, Your Highness! You see, when we were shopping in the market...”

“Stop right there.”

“She got us in line for a sesame ball stand, and when it turned out to operate on a reservation system, you’ll never believe what she—”

“I said knock it off!”

As Keishou gave an explanation punctuated by stifled laughter, Keigetsu scrambled to slap a hand over his mouth.

“It’s dangerous to stand up in a moving carriage. Hee hee, I’m glad to hear you had such a good time, Lady Keigetsu.” Reirin smiled with delight at the sight of her red-faced friend. “Let’s make sure to buy plenty of sesame balls. Lots and lots of them.”

As she said this, she gently pressed a hand to her chest. It was where she kept her reed leaf wrapper and the loaded die.

*Two is better than one. Two and two make four.*

No matter how daunting a predicament one faced, they could stand and fight as long as they had a friend to lean on. If the outlook was still bleak with two, the answer was to recruit more comrades. Two would become four. Four would become six. Maybe even more.

“Let us buy a mountain of souvenirs to take back home.”

“Just how much are you planning to buy, exactly?” Keigetsu, who had become Reirin’s very first “two,” looked over at her in dismay.

In stark contrast to the beginning of the journey, a harmonious atmosphere



pervaded the carriage as it rolled along at a leisurely pace.

\* \* \*

The gambling den known as the Three Realms Parlor was under siege by a crowd of local officials who had rushed to the scene. It was an inevitable outcome, as the ones who had called upon them were not civilians but the captain of the Eagle Eyes, who reported directly to the crown prince, and a military officer from the main palace who was reputed to be highly skilled. It would hurt to lose out on the generous bribes from the gambling den, but they couldn't afford to turn a blind eye any longer.

In fact, to hide the collusion between the local authorities and the parlor, those with guilty consciences had been the first to arrive and taken a hard stance in apprehending the suspects. The house employees had put up a fight and loudly announced the officials' secrets in an attempt to go down together, but the interrogators always had the upper hand in situations like these.

That being the case, a security perimeter had been formed around the gambling den to ensure that not a single rat escaped, and it was still holding strong an hour after the initial report had been made.

A man dressed in a military officer uniform sauntered over from the direction of the Earth door, his shoes scuffling against the floor. "I have a message from upstairs," he said.

No one present recognized his face, but his neatly trimmed beard, polished movements, and uniform all suggested that he was a military officer from the main palace. There was a good chance that *he* was the Kou military officer who had reported the parlor in the first place.

Assuming as much—after all, as local officials, they were in no position to ask his name—the men stood straight at attention and offered him a shallow bow.

"Yes, sir!"

“Now that we’ve confirmed the capture of the gambling den management and all the patrons inside, the remainder of the investigation will pass from the Eagle Eyes’ captain into your hands. Your orders are to disband the security perimeter and transport all those inside to the city office.”

“Understood, sir!”

“I’ll go around to the other doors and pass these orders on to everyone else.”

“Appreciated, sir!”

The man nodded and started for the next door, only to look up as if something had just occurred to him, and he glanced back at the officials. “Oh, right. Your boss has treated me to a lot of good drinks, so I’ll give you this one for free.”

For some reason, he lowered his voice and beckoned them closer with his finger.

Once the men had timidly padded over, he whispered, “The captain of the Eagle Eyes is a strict man. He suspects that the response was so slow because the parlor had you twisted around their finger, and he’s itching to open an investigation at some point.”

“Hrk!”

As the officials gasped, the man gave them a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Nothing to worry about.” His well-proportioned face wore an easygoing, worldly smile. “Times like these call for a human sacrifice. Not all bribes are created equal, right? I bet there are people who made out better than you guys. Put your heads together and give me a name. Actually, it’ll look suspicious if you just give me one, so let’s make it three.”

On the heels of a threat, his proposal sounded tantalizingly sweet. The officials exchanged glances before jumping on the advice.

“Good to know! Thank you very much!”

“If you ask me, the deputy chief is the main culprit...”

“No, in terms of the money changing hands...”

Eager to save their own skins, they rattled off all the names that came to mind. After listening for a while, the man cut them off halfway through, chuckled dryly, and turned away. “Well, good luck with all that,” he said, then walked off without so much as a backward glance. The officials were so absorbed in discussing who to throw to the wolves that they barely even watched him go.

Naturally, they couldn’t have noticed how his expression went blank as soon as he turned his back on them.

“Hoo boy, the names just came rolling in. This ought to be worth reporting to His Majesty.”

As he mumbled to himself, he put more distance between himself and the Earth door. However, it wasn’t any of the other doors he was headed for—it was the main street. The only reason he had bothered to disguise himself as a military officer was to slip through the tight surveillance and escape the scene.

“Whew, the current captain of the Eagle Eyes has got some sharp instincts. I bet he picked up on the surveillance. His Highness is a bright man himself, so this kingdom is in good hands. His Majesty has passed down some fine blood.”

Once he had rounded the corner, he reached a hand into the hair he’d tied back and tugged the cord loose. In the short time it took to pass through the shadows, he flung off his heavy gear, tossed it into a burlap sack, and cracked his neck as a testament to how stiff his entire body was feeling.

The next time he stepped out into the sunlight, there stood a man who looked like a merchant. He had a well-groomed beard, hair that fell loose over his shoulders, and full lips that gave him the look of a womanizer. He was the same man who had been sitting at the Odd or Even table: Tan.

Finding it surprisingly chilly once he had stripped himself of all his disguise gear, he complained, “Damn, it’s cold,” puckering his lips and drawing up his shoulders. He rubbed his hands together for warmth, scowling in annoyance as

his breath turned to white puffs.

“Ugh, it’s downright freezing. I’m tempted to set something on fire to keep warm.”

Not a moment after mumbling that alarming comment to himself, he noticed a crow pecking at leftover food on the street and stopped in his tracks. He watched the bird intently for a while, then eventually resumed walking as if he had lost interest.

“It’s gotta have fur or it won’t burn as well,” he said, chuckling.

In his mind’s eye, he saw the freckled girl who had sat at his table earlier. She was tall, sharp-eyed, and not especially beautiful. Even so, her speech and mannerisms were so elegant that it had been hard to take his eyes off her. She was a terrible actress but quick-witted. She was much braver than he would have imagined, and last but not least...

“Hmm... She never controlled any flames.”

Even under duress, she had started a fire using tools rather than spells. The man raked a hand through his hair, perhaps a habit of his when he was organizing his thoughts.

“Does that mean Shu Keigetsu isn’t a practitioner?”

The six people who had rushed to the scene seemed to have some unique connection to her, but seeing as Tan’s priority had been to evade the notice of the Eagle Eyes’ captain, he hadn’t had the chance to hear their conversation. He still lacked information. And evidence.





Tan's eyes lit up like a child with a new toy, and the corners of his mouth lifted in a grin.

"I do love a good challenge."

And with that, he slouched along and vanished from the scene of the investigation.

**Bonus Story:**  
**Look! Look! Show Me!**

IT WAS A CRISP WINTER MORNING, not long after the sun had finally peeked over the horizon. At an hour so early that the court ladies were still lost in the land of dreams, the beautiful Kou Maiden—or the girl trapped in her body, Shu Keigetsu—dashed down the dimly lit cloister as quietly as she could manage. She slipped out the back gate of the Palace of the Golden Qilin and headed southeast.

Keigetsu passed right alongside the Maiden Court, and after a while, the lavishly decorated Shu Palace and Ran Palace came into view. She ignored both of the main gates and instead took a side route, weaving her way through the gap between the palaces. The well-manicured path grew narrower and narrower, and at the point where it became completely overrun by weeds, a crumbling wall loomed in the distance.

This was the entrance to a certain storehouse at the rear of the Shu Palace—to “Shu Keigetsu’s” secret base, which had been transformed into a common area within the Maiden Court. Lifting the hem of her skirt in what had become a practiced motion, Keigetsu jumped to the other side of the wall. She cast a sweeping look around the vegetable plots, the first thing to enter her vision. There was no one else around.

Then, when she heard a clattering sound coming from the storehouse bordering the garden, Keigetsu’s expression took a sharp turn for the stern, and she stepped into the building.

“Excuse me, Kou Reirin!”

Once the door was closed, no one would be able to hear them regardless of whether they were under surveillance, so she came right out and spoke the other girl’s name—though she kept the volume of her voice down just to be on the safe side.



Sure enough, the freckled Shu Maiden—who currently housed the soul of Kou Reirin—had tied up her sleeves to engage in physical activity at the crack of dawn.

“What do you think you’re doing so early in the morning?!” yelled Keigetsu, berating her friend by way of greeting.

Reirin spun around at the voice. As she extracted the hand towel she had tucked into her sash, she smiled and replied, “Oh, good morning, Lady Keigetsu. As I mentioned in yesterday’s letter, I have just begun a deep cleaning of the storehouse.”

Hearing her friend say that as if it were a matter of course was enough to make Keigetsu lose it. She strode right up and snatched the towel out of Reirin’s hand. “Listen, you! We have a ton of things to be doing right now, like coordinating our stories with the other Maidens or working out our strategy for the Repose of Souls! Why is the first thing you jump into after returning to the Maiden Court a deep cleaning?!”

“Well, I am to spend the next long while as ‘Shu Keigetsu.’” Serene as ever, Reirin picked up a dishrag hanging over a tub, then flexed a bicep. “The Repose of Souls is still a month away. This will be the first time we’ve ever switched places for such a lengthy period. If I am to live in this storehouse for the duration, I must take steps to improve the living conditions here.”

Until the day of the Repose of Souls Service, when Keigetsu and Reirin would cast a spell under the veil of Gyoumei’s dragon’s qi, the two girls had to remain in each other’s bodies. Keigetsu, for her part, had figured they could spend the whole time pretending to be sick in bed, but Reirin clearly had no intention of keeping her head down. According to her, while it was natural for “Kou Reirin” to be bedridden, that excuse wouldn’t work for “Shu Keigetsu.”

Since the large number of court ladies within the Shu Palace increased the risk of blowing her cover, Reirin had resolved to stay in the storehouse, using the excuse that she had voluntarily placed herself under house arrest out of regret



for sneaking into the city and getting mixed up in a brawl. Seeing as the storehouse was a semi-public space, Reirin came and went frequently even when she wasn't body-swapped, so it was the perfect place to meet up without arousing suspicion.

The only issue was that Keigetsu had made a mess of the inside of the storehouse, so Reirin demanded she be allowed to reorganize. Early that morning, she had sent a letter outlining all of this, worded in a roundabout way so that it wouldn't matter if someone else read it.

"It's not *that* messy, is it? I just use it as temporary storage for some documents and useless odds and ends that don't belong in my room in the palace."

Reirin met Keigetsu's criticism with a firm shake of her head. "Wrong, Lady Keigetsu. You have allowed far too much to pile up here." She pointed to various spots around the storehouse. "Look around! When Leelee and I stayed here during the season of the Double Sevens, everything was neat and tidy... Now there are unnecessary papers sticking out of those shelves, cosmetics spilling out of this box, and odds and ends piled up on that desk. How can I relax and raise animals or nurture seedlings in an environment like this?"

"The real Shu Keigetsu wouldn't do those things!" Keigetsu snapped.

"But *this* 'Shu Keigetsu' would," Reirin retorted. "Many people must remember how I gardened and raised seedlings when I lived here in the past. If I were to suddenly stop doing those things, they might suspect that I've been replaced. We must keep our characters consistent."

It was a reasonable enough argument, but it didn't quite follow why she had to be consistent with the version who *did* do gardening.

"Why don't you stop gardening or tidying up instead?!"

"You may as well tell me to stop breathing," Reirin replied with the most solemn of expressions, then reached for a burlap sack. "Whatever the case, it's a fact that the flow of qi stagnates when there's too much clutter. If these items

are as useless as you say, why don't we do away with them altogether?"

With that, she began tossing things into the bag with brisk efficiency.

"Hmm... You don't need any of this makeup. You haven't worn this sash in a while, have you? Let's give it to someone who might want it. Is this all scrap paper? Away with it."

Startled, Keigetsu leaped in front of the shelves and flung out her arms. "I need all of it! Perhaps not now, but I might eventually! I'll use the makeup sooner or later. I haven't worn the sash in a while because it has a juvenile pattern, but I'll wear it if it ever comes back into fashion. And I can write on the backs of all the scrap paper!"

She never had been good at getting rid of things. It would certainly make her living space nicer and tidier if she could just throw everything away, but it was hard to take the plunge when she was afraid the discarded item might resent her for its fate. Although she usually left things lying around because she was too lazy to organize them, she suddenly developed an attachment when it came time to toss them out, wondering if they might have had some real value all along.

"Oh, are these letters? But why are they kept so carelessly?"

With her efforts to organize the shelves thwarted, Reirin next reached for the lacquered box lying abandoned on the floor. When she found a large pile of papers stacked in a disorganized fashion, she pulled a few loose—and then gave a curious tilt of her head.

"What are these?"

What she held in her hands were several letters. All of them were smeared with ink, crumpled, or scorched around the edges.

"They're letters of opinion written by my court ladies," Keigetsu spat. "A while back, they were having a grand old time writing letters to the Shu clan, begging them to switch me out for another Maiden because of my terrible conduct. I

made sure those never reached their destination.”

Reirin shot her an inscrutable look.

“What? Got a problem?”

“No, it simply sounded so much like something you would do... It’s not good to steal other people’s correspondence, of course, but beyond that, the fact that you would keep such hurtful letters is quite...” In a wise decision, Reirin declined to finish that sentence. Instead, she smiled warmly and added, “I myself occasionally receive vicious letters from Lady Houshun, but I always turn them into kindling right away. Her Majesty and my brothers always say that it’s best to burn anything one finds offensive to cinders.”

“Why do the Kou respond to everything with so much firepower?”

The advice Reirin offered in that mild manner of hers wasn’t exactly the most benign, so it drew an immediate retort from Keigetsu. Stealing her court ladies’ letters didn’t leave her much room to talk, but her friend sure could do some nasty things with a smile plastered on her face. In general, the Kou clan’s decisive nature sometimes made them downright ruthless.

As a thought suddenly occurred to her, Keigetsu asked, “Is Lord Keishou the same way?”

Reirin blinked. “Hm?”

“Er... Does *everyone* from the Kou clan burn any letter they find offensive?” Keigetsu’s eyes darted around the room. “None of you are particularly attached to material things. You all seem like the type to toss things out willy-nilly once you’ve decided you don’t need them.”

Even she wasn’t sure why she was bothering to ask about this. It was just that she owed Keishou for accompanying her on her tour of the city, so she had been planning to send him a thank-you letter. She had to pressure him to get that gift for her too. But if there was any chance that he might read her letter, scoff at her terrible handwriting, and toss it into the brazier, she wouldn’t be

able to take it.

It would kill her.

“Do you think so? I wouldn’t say we’re quite *that* indiscriminate about discarding things... Despite how often he encourages me to do the opposite, Brother Junior in particular has a tendency to hoard his possessions.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. He insists upon keeping everything organized. Letters, for instance—even those that are little more than scribbled notes—he will sort by date, tuck away in a box, and keep for years and years.”

“That’s Mr. Clingy for you...”

That was worrisome in its own right, but Keigetsu breathed a sigh of relief knowing that the chances of him throwing her letter straight into the trash were slim.

As Reirin drew her own conclusions as to what that reaction meant, a sparkle came to her eyes. “Could it be that you intend to write Brother Junior a letter? A thank-you note, perhaps? That’s wonderful! Please do! Your letters are a precious rarity, so I’m certain he’ll be delighted!”

“N-not happening!” Her friend was so receptive to the idea that Keigetsu reflexively dismissed it. “And what do you mean by ‘a precious rarity’? Is that your way of pointing out that I avoid writing letters because of my ugly handwriting?!”

When that touch of self-deprecation slipped into her response, it occurred to Keigetsu that she had hardly ever written letters before. And certainly not to any men.

“Of course not. I’m simply happy to see you deepening your bond with Brother Junior.”

“Wh-what is *that* supposed to mean?!”

Now that she was feeling self-conscious, she found herself overreacting to

every inconsequential comment. Her face flushing a bright red, Keigetsu banged on the shelf for no apparent reason.

“You’re making it sound like I want to get close to Lord Keishou, but that couldn’t be further from the truth! I hate men like him!”

Why was there always so much force behind her knee-jerk arguments?

While Keigetsu herself was taken aback by the excuses coming out of her mouth, Reirin’s brow furrowed in disappointment. “Oh dear. You hate Brother Junior’s type?”

“Th-that’s right! I can’t stand flirtatious, mean-spirited, and vindictive men like him!”

“Well, unlike me, Brother Junior *is* quite vindictive... I truly can’t relate.” Assuming the critical perspective that only a little sister could, Reirin nodded without further argument. “Fair enough. I suppose mean-spirited and possessive men can be a bit unpleasant. Forgive me for speaking out of turn.”

Keigetsu cringed when her friend’s response was to simply apologize and turn away.

*I-I didn’t mean to disparage him quite that much...*

It was true that Kou Keishou teased her relentlessly, but in those moments, his eyes always danced with amusement and not a trace of antagonism, so she didn’t actually mind it all that much. To put it in a more honest way, her heart would always race when she saw his shapely lips curl into a grin or his almond eyes narrow ever so slightly in mischief. She chalked it up to nerves.

While she lapsed into silence, struggling to come out and say any of that now, Reirin rummaged through her sleeve pocket and held something out to her.

“By the way, Lady Keigetsu, I imagine you haven’t had breakfast yet. If you’re hungry, would you care to have a snack?”

It was a sesame cake wrapped in delicate paper.

Although she never had many opportunities to eat sugary snacks growing up

or since coming to the Maiden Court, Keigetsu actually had quite the sweet tooth. When she audibly gulped at the sight, Reirin giggled and broke into a smile.

“I’m glad it seems to be to your tastes. You’re rather fond of sweets, aren’t you?”

“I...”

It was a plain fact that there was no deeper meaning behind the question, but it still felt to Keigetsu like the girl was pointing out her own lack of class to her, saying, “Oh, you like cloying confections? You must have been starved for sweetness all your life.” And so her first instinct was to deny it.

“I don’t know where you got that idea. I don’t like sweets.”

“Hm? Really?”

When she saw the blank look on Reirin’s face, Keigetsu wanted to grit her teeth.

See? Her friend hadn’t been making fun of her at all. Why was she always jumping at the shadows of nonexistent malice, saying things for the sake of being contrary? She should have just been honest and admitted to her love of sweets.

Alas, it was too late to take it back. Goodness knew who she was trying to convince as she added, “I prefer savory foods. I hate sugary treats.”

“I see... You *hate* sugary treats, hm?” Reirin stared back long and hard for a few moments. Something seemed to click for her then, and a happy smile rose to her face. “I see. I understand completely.”

Declining to pursue the matter any further, Reirin said, “I’ll leave this here for now.” She set the cake down on a nearby table and spun back toward the box.

Keigetsu spent a few moments staring longingly at the confection, unable to make a move for it under the circumstances, but when she noticed Reirin taking something out of the box, she looked up with a start.

“Oh? What’s this?”

What the Kou Maiden had found were several sheets of paper. The same characters were scrawled repeatedly over the pages, sometimes with smudged lines, sometimes misshapen, and all of them in a child’s handwriting. Next to each jumble of letters was a mark in vermillion ink.

It was a checkmark—a symbol indicating that something was correct, no issues of note. Those papers were from when Keigetsu had asked her mother to correct her handwriting as a little girl.

“Ah...”

She couldn’t help but gasp as memories came flooding back to her all at once.

*“Look, Mother, look!”*

At the time—back when they weren’t in such dire financial straits—Keigetsu had loved to hang off her mother, desperate to get the woman to look her way.

She was a big, unattractive girl. Still, if she had some sort of talent, maybe something could change. If she learned how to write early, for instance. Or if she could read the scriptures with ease. If she could embroider, or sing well, or dance with grace. If she showed even a glimpse of such talent, perhaps her mother would start to pay attention to her. That faint hope drove her to tug on the woman’s sleeve again and again.

Granted, Keigetsu never once awakened the kind of talent her mother was looking for, so her reactions were always curt. Her mother must have been sick of it all: Her rural lifestyle where she was the object of everyone’s ridicule. Her meager livelihood. Her fanciful, irresponsible husband and her lackluster daughter who demanded love regardless.

She had routinely stroked Keigetsu’s hair before the girl learned to walk or talk, but those occasions became less and less frequent over the years, until she eventually stopped meeting her daughter’s eyes altogether. Her compliments became increasingly perfunctory, her reactions weaker. No matter how much

Keigetsu raised her voice and wailed—no, all the more if she did—her mother never did anything but heave a melancholy sigh.

Despite this, the woman wanted to portray a happy family to the people around her. Hence, on a whim, she had agreed to correct Keigetsu's calligraphy. It wouldn't do for a daughter of the nobility to not know how to write.

The result was that vermillion checkmark, so tiny it was as though the grader had begrudged the time it took to put her brush to paper. Now that she was older, that tiny grain of a tick confronted Keigetsu with her mother's complete lack of interest in her. Her younger self, however, had been so thrilled to have her mother look over her work that she stowed the pages away like a precious treasure.







Even now, she left them buried under a pile of scrap paper, unable to bring herself to throw them away.

“This...is my old calligraphy practice.” Keigetsu pointed to one of the pages with a hint of self-derision. “My mother graded it for me. She was pretty hard on me, though.”

At the top of the stack of marked-up sheets, there was a page covered with crease marks. Unlike the other papers, this one had the character for “average” scribbled in one corner.

“That was my mother’s assessment of me.”

One day, a visitor had shown up during one of the grading sessions. Her mother, always so concerned with appearances, had added a proper grade in the corner just that once. “You didn’t make any mistakes, but try to follow the model a little more closely,” she had added as justification, doing her best to play the part of a parent invested in her daughter’s education.

Of the four possible grades of excellent, good, average, and poor, that “average” was by no means a high evaluation. Even when working to maintain her image, the woman couldn’t bring herself to praise her daughter, and bitterness welled up inside Keigetsu at the thought.

Still, it had made her younger self happy enough to jump for joy. After her mother left to receive the guest, she had hugged the calligraphy to her chest before the vermillion ink even had time to dry.

Her mother had looked over her work.

If she worked hard, if she tried her best, she could get someone to look her way.

*“Keep looking at me!”*

Unfortunately, that guest turned out to be her mother’s sleazy paramour, and her obsession with buying his affections would later lead her to ruin.

*“Look at me! Don’t take your eyes off me!”*

Her mother must have made that same wish of her lover.

Alas, the man never did look her way, nor did Keigetsu ever manage to elicit the slightest interest from her mother. All that was left in the end was her mother's debt-ridden corpse and the desiccated ink on a graded paper.

That was the reason Keigetsu hated activities that required hard work, calligraphy practice among them—as well as actions that entailed a response from another person, such as writing letters. She knew her efforts would never amount to anything.

Feeling her chest grow heavy and leaden, Keigetsu curled her lips into a wicked smirk, hoping to dispel the suffocating sensation. “Looking back on it, she was pretty ‘average’ herself. She looked at my writings, but she didn’t assess them. She kept me fed, but she never loved me.”

Her mother never physically abused her or sold her off. Still, the woman berated her constantly and locked her in the storeroom the moment she saw something she didn’t like.

Her mother had given her food, clothing, shelter, and enough of an education to maintain appearances. But she never gave her attention.

And in the end, she made the selfish choice to die and leave Keigetsu behind.

“I see,” Reirin murmured as she gazed upon the marked-up paper.

That soft voice snapped Keigetsu to her senses. When she noticed that her friend's eyes were cast down in melancholy, she began to panic. Having lost her mother in exchange for her own life, Reirin had never once had her calligraphy graded for her. Even if Keigetsu didn’t consider it a particularly great memory, all her talk about having a mother, spending time with her, and—albeit on a whim—receiving lessons from her might have sounded like bragging.

Between having a flimsy blanket that only reminded one of the cold or being completely naked, it was hard to say which was worse.

*But as the trade-off, Kou Reirin was adored by everyone around her. She grew*

*up in the cozy, warm indoors. Meanwhile, I was cast out into a field ravaged by the north wind. So...*

So she was allowed to lament her misfortune, wasn't she?

As soon as she noticed her own efforts to convince herself, Keigetsu pursed her lips into a thin line. Even when it came to bemoaning her bad luck, she was always comparing herself to others and making sure she met the qualifications. She couldn't even feel sorry for herself until she listed off the other person's blessings and assured herself that she was the less fortunate one. And she did it knowing full well that Kou Reirin hadn't lived as privileged a life as it seemed.

Keigetsu hated her own pettiness, selfishness, and cowardice from the bottom of her heart. It made her feel like a mirror image of her mother.

"I'll get rid of those," she abruptly announced, balling her hands into fists.

"Huh?"

"Those marked-up pages, I mean. Like you said, they're useless and offensive. It's time to throw them out."

She knew she had to sever that ugly part of herself. It was childish, weak, and pathetic.

"I have to get rid of them."

If it were Kou Reirin, who never dwelled on the past, surely she would toss them into the "disposal" bag without hesitation.

"There's no need to do that."

And yet, Reirin's actual response was a surprising one.

"Huh?"

Heedless of Keigetsu's wide-eyed surprise, she picked up the stack of graded papers and aligned the edges. She moved them from the jumbled collection of miscellaneous papers into a separate box, then began to grind an inkstone that was lying around in the storehouse.

“Uh, where is this going?”

“Say, Lady Keigetsu,” said Reirin, declining to answer her question. “You truly do take things to extremes. I’m sure that for you, ‘discarding’ something is the same as ‘hating’ it.”

While Keigetsu was lost for a response, Reirin continued to rub her ink stick without a moment’s pause.

“And I’m sure that, in your mind, there are only two choices in all things. You can discard something or keep it close. You can hate something or love it. It’s difficult to pass down such a crucial judgment for every little thing, so you have a tendency to let them pile up.”

“Oh...!”

At this point, Keigetsu was speechless. It was as if the other girl had seen through to the depths of her heart.

Once Reirin was done grinding her ink, she turned back to her friend. “But is it truly necessary to paint things one way or the other?”

“What?”

“You still love your mother for grading your papers, don’t you? Then you ought to love her as much as that merits. You also hate her for coming down hard on you and leaving you behind, don’t you? Then you ought to hate her as much as that deserves.”

After telling her friend to embrace the contradictory emotions of love and hate, the woman known as a butterfly smiled beautifully.

“Hate and love are both piecework. You ought to hate things precisely as much as you hate them, and love them precisely as much as you love them. Neither should misery be a competition in which you can lament only as much as you come out ahead. You must feel precisely as much sorrow over your hardships as they make you feel.”

As those calmly woven words fell like a gentle rain upon her heart, it was all

Keigetsu could do not to break down crying.

*Unbelievable.*

It was absolutely unbelievable. How could this girl be so reckless and carefree, yet so effortlessly say the words Keigetsu most wanted to hear at exactly the right moment? And she did it without dwelling on her own misfortunes, focusing only on providing emotional support for her friend.

*Why is she like this?*

Keigetsu knew that if she opened her mouth to speak now, her voice would tremble pathetically, so she bit down on her lip and turned her head aside.

With a sidelong glance, Reirin serenely began, "If you are unsure how to distribute your love and hate..."

She picked up a brush and wrote a character on a piece of paper. She then tore that section off neatly and glued it to the box that now contained the marked-up papers.

"Give it whatever name feels right and put it aside for the moment."

When Reirin reached up to place the box on the highest shelf, Keigetsu grabbed her by the arm and stopped her.

"H-hold it right there. Why did you label it *that*?!"

The reason being that the character Reirin had written on the letter box label was "excellent."

"Hm? What else was I to call it? These are *your* writings."

"Why are you giving me that blank look?!" Keigetsu couldn't help but yell in response to the other girl's dubious question.

Yet all Reirin did was put a hand to her cheek in confusion. "Doesn't the mere fact that you gave your all to write them as a young girl make them priceless? Why, I deserve credit for not painting directly over the red ink of your undiscerning mother."

“Y-you are way too biased about everything! That chicken scratch isn’t even worth reading! Oh, enough! Throw it out already! Turn it into kindling this instant!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Do you remember the first letter you gave me when we fought during the Rite of Reverence? I still carry it on my person and read it all the time.” Reirin dug around in her sash and smoothly produced a single letter. “See?”

When Keigetsu saw the sloppy letter she had stayed up all night to write—she had been far too distraught at the time to concern herself with the beauty of her handwriting—and discovered that Reirin had carefully folded it up and genuinely carried it around with her everywhere, she almost shrieked.

“Gi...”

“Hm?”

“Give that back!”

She made a grab for it, her face bright red, but the other girl leveraged her superior dancing skills to twirl out of the way.

“Absolutely not. This is the first letter I ever received from a friend. I wouldn’t return it if the skies came crashing down around me.”

“Aaaagh, you are too much! Your friendship is too over-the-top! I said to give it back!”

“Never.”

“I don’t want to risk anyone seeing that messy handwriting of mine! I’ll write you a better letter sometime soon, so hand it over!”

Keigetsu’s desperate shout got the other girl to stop where she was and blink.

“Goodness.” Reirin smiled like a flower bursting into bloom, radiating pure delight. “I’ll hold you to that. I look forward to it.”

Incidentally, despite extracting that promise from Keigetsu, she never did

return the letter. Kou Reirin was just that kind of girl.

From that day forward, Keigetsu was subjected to Reirin's nagging on a daily basis.

"Have you written the letter yet?"

"Did you write another line?"

"I don't mind if it isn't finished! Please let me see!"

Each time, Keigetsu would get frustrated and dive into an angry rant, but as she watched Reirin walk off with her tail between her legs, she would break into a smile so small that even she herself didn't notice it.

Keigetsu no longer begged others to look at her the way she used to. After all, she had someone who would ask to see before she could say anything.

The letter box labeled "Excellent" still sits on the top shelf today, packed full of dewy ink.



## Afterword

**H**ELLO! Satsuki Nakamura here. To no surprise, I packed the main story so full of content that we're back to the usual routine of a one-page afterword. That's *Inept Villainess* for you, loaded with chocolate until the very last bite!

As I announced at the end of the last volume, this time we stepped away from all the sordid conspiracies and scandals and followed the uneventful daily lives of the cast... Well, that was the original plan, but it felt a bit too plain, so I ended up adding a bunch of different incidents.

During the first hour of the dragon (around 7 a.m.), Reirin, Leelee, and Gyomei meet up at the tavern. During the first hour of the snake (around 9 a.m.), Keigetsu and Keishou head into the market. During the first hour of the horse (around 11 a.m.), Tousetsu and Keikou have lunch at an inn, while Shin-u and Unran settle down at a teahouse. And all four groups run into a series of concurrent incidents. Will everyone make it to the rendezvous point by noon?! Stay tuned!

I hope you enjoyed the slight twist on the usual reading experience. I, for one, had a blast shining the spotlight on characters who don't usually get much screen time! I suspect the grin on my face was peeking out between the lines. You'll have to excuse me.

The character who was featured toward the end of the book will play a major role starting from the next volume, so keep him in mind. In the next arc, Reirin and friends finally take on the highest authority in the kingdom.

Last but not least, I would like to thank everyone who contributed to making this volume another brilliant work, as well as my dear readers. Thanks to your support, the *Inept Villainess* series will continue. I hope to see you again in the next volume!





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