



8

NOVEL

Written by
Satsuki
Nakamura

Illustrated by
Kana Yuki

THOUGH I AM AN INEPT VILLAINESS

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

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Bonus
Story Breaking the Ice

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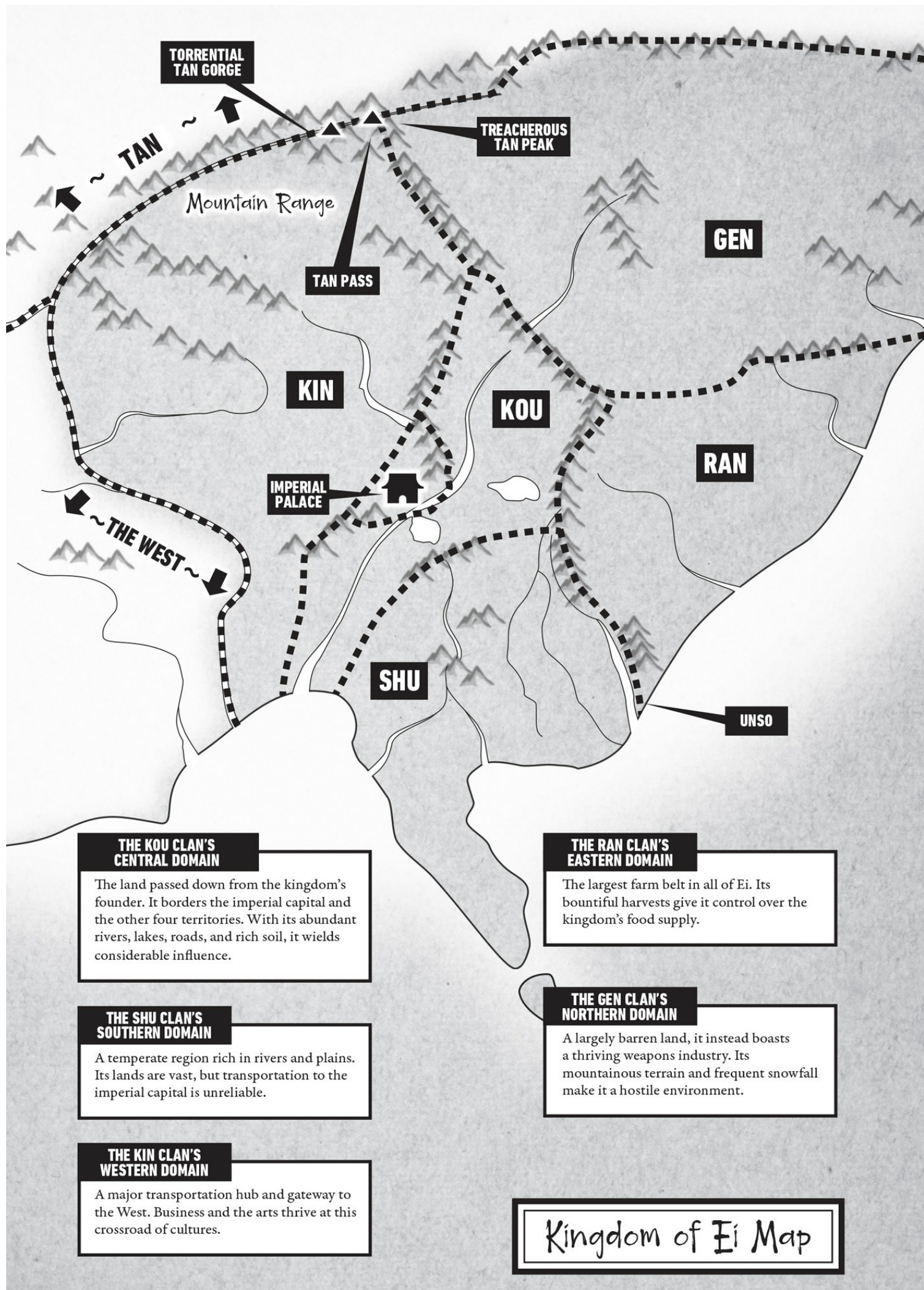


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Kana Yuki



Seven Seas Entertainment



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.

Tan / Akim



One of the Emperor's personal spies.

Ei Genyou



The emperor. Gyomei's father.

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Prologue

EATING THE CONGEE served at breakfast made Gyoumei appreciate how delicious the hot pot in the outer city had been. Whether neatly presented in gleaming silverware or painstakingly garnished with the finest of spices, nothing could make a stone-cold bowl of rice porridge taste good.

“Here we have steamed abalone.”

Another steamed dish was placed on the table, but after being skewered with silver chopsticks during the lengthy poison-tasting, it had turned dry and hard. There was no comparison to the hot pot and its perfectly simmered, melt-in-your-mouth rice cakes.

“How is it, Your Imperial Highness?”

“Excellent.”

“Make a note of that. The steamed abalone passes.”

“Yes, sir.”

Gyoumei preferred eating in the city because there were no pages around. He preferred it because there were no culinary officials to record his thoughts on each and every dish. And he preferred it for one other reason.

“What’s wrong, Gyoumei? You’ve hardly touched your meal. Are you feeling unwell?”

In the city, he didn’t have to be on guard against the person sitting across from him.

“Not at all, Father.” Gyoumei forced a smile upon his handsome, virile features as he replied to the man dining at the seat of honor: his father, Emperor Genyou. “I simply wish to savor the joy of a rare meal with you more than the food itself.”

“Quite the smooth talker, hm? I wonder who you get that from.”

His crown in place before breakfast had even begun, Genyou wore his usual faint smile. Gyoumei had scarcely seen his father make any other expression. Never once had he witnessed the man lose his temper or heave a disgusted sigh over an unappetizing meal.

Genyou seldom visited the Hall of the Parasol Tree, his residence within the inner court. Instead, he slept and ate in the Hall of Violet Rain, a grand building he had erected in the main palace, the complex for official state business.

Although Gyoumei had been appointed crown prince sooner than was typical, even he was not authorized to come and go freely from the Hall of Violet Rain. When he received a sudden invitation to “sit around the dining table as a father and son,” it was only natural that he would be wary.

Granted, it was debatable whether that was an accurate description of eating at two different tables separated by a set of stairs. Genyou and Gyoumei may have been father and son, but in practice, their relationship was closer to that of a monarch and his vassal.

“At your age, I imagine a cold breakfast of congee and steamed foods feels unsatisfying. No doubt you long to emulate the common folk and buy freshly prepared food from the market.”

“Hardly. It has been said since time immemorial that a humble breakfast is the start of a peaceful day.”

It's safe to assume he knows about our trip into the city, Gyoumei thought behind his smile.

It had been twenty days now since Gyoumei had met up with Kou Reirin and Shu Keigetsu in the outer city. In an effort to escape his father's surveillance of the Maiden Court, the group had attempted to undo the body swap in secret. After realizing this was part of Genyou's trap, they'd ultimately returned to the palace with the switch still in effect.

Any use of a large-scale spell would trigger an abnormal phenomenon, and once detected, the caster would inevitably face execution. Thus, the group had

decided to take advantage of the Repose of Souls Service, a national event scheduled to take place a month after their trip into the city. The plan was to pretend that Gyoumei's dragon's qi had been amplified by the ritual, discreetly reverse the switch at the same moment it flared, and pass off his aura as the source of the phenomenon.

During the twenty days since then, Reirin and Keigetsu had held multiple clandestine planning sessions and otherwise kept their contact to a minimum. Gyoumei had knocked out his heavy load of government work ahead of schedule, then focused on setting the stage to ensure that a "miracle" could occur during the Repose of Souls.

Only eight days remained until the big event. Gyoumei took the opportunity to subtly emphasize the thought he was giving to the occasion. It would make the flare of his dragon's qi during the ritual seem even more natural.

"Not to mention, the Repose of Souls—a service to pacify the souls of disaster victims—is right around the corner. Some of my subjects are so malnourished that their spirits require appeasement. To blithely demand a more sumptuous breakfast would be unconscionable."

Genyou ate a spoonful of his congee. "Hm. You care a good deal for your people, I see."

"I am no match for you in that regard, Father. The Repose of Souls is but one example of your generosity. Of all the emperors in history, no one has taken more initiative to distribute alms to disaster-stricken areas and war zones. Why, you even make a point of paying personal visits."

The man only nodded. "You speak far too highly of me." Not even praise had much effect on him.

"No need to be modest. During those sympathy calls, you always offer condolences and even personally help the blind and crippled drink water. Not a day goes by that our people are not profoundly grateful for your charity."

"Well." After Gyoumei paid him another compliment, Genyou abruptly set

down his spoon. “The afflicted regions are often riddled with desiccated corpses. I cannot turn a blind eye to those deaths.”

“Indeed. My heart goes out to the disadvantaged.”

While playing up his role as the crown prince and offering tactful replies, Gyomei privately studied his father. This man was Genyou, the emperor of Ei. His emotionless, clear-cut features; scholarly, reserved demeanor; and preference for musical instruments over martial arts had earned him a reputation as a mild-mannered, thoughtful ruler. From a less charitable perspective, his preoccupation with the balance of the five clans and ready deference to the opinions of his vassals sometimes made him appear weak-kneed.

On the other hand, his reluctance to engage in excessive ethnic exclusion or religious persecution, combined with his habit of offering aid to the weak, led most people to see him as moderate and tolerant. Of particular note, his number of visits to disaster areas and war zones far surpassed that of any emperor before him. Were these facts presented without further context, one might settle on an image of him as a fainthearted yet compassionate emperor.

Alas...that wouldn't explain the Ten-Star Succession Struggle.

As Gyomei stirred black vinegar into his congee, his thoughts wandered. The Ten-Star Succession Struggle was the cutthroat power struggle that took place prior to Genyou's accession. The story went that the previous emperor's ten sons—seven born to the consorts and three bastards born outside the court—killed one another for the title of emperor, leaving only the youngest prince, Genyou, as the sole survivor. Some of the princes renounced their claim to the throne to extricate themselves from the competition, while others fled to the homelands of their foreign birth mothers to avoid harm. Nevertheless, every single one of them was slain by the time Genyou took the throne.

Well, not officially. The records claimed their deaths were due to illness or accidents, and suggesting otherwise was potential grounds for a treason charge.

No matter what the records say, the fact that Father was the last man standing can only mean one thing.

He must have murdered his own brothers to become emperor. Even Gyoumei, a descendant of the victor, found the possibility unsettling. Yet he had never seen Genyou show a single sign of remorse or inner turmoil.

At the time, Genyou's mother, Empress Gen—currently Empress Dowager Gen—was said to control the inner court from the Palace of the Darkest Edge, so there was a chance that his power-hungry mother had been the one behind it all. Perhaps Genyou was nothing more than her unwitting puppet. Still, Gyoumei detected strong self-discipline and unfathomable ruthlessness in his father's unflappable demeanor and unwavering smile.

Besides, what kind of man remains entirely disinterested after his half brothers start dropping like flies?

There was a gag order on the Ten-Star Succession Struggle, and even the gag order's very existence was kept secret. The nine sons born before Genyou were given enough of a presence in the records to look natural, but key facts such as the times and causes of their deaths were strategically omitted.

Just when it seemed Genyou's insistence on residing in the main palace conveyed a passion for his duties, he left his vassals to dictate his policies. Just when his proactive outreach to his subjects suggested compassion, he sat callously on his throne with his brothers' blood on his hands. And just when it seemed he was tolerant of pagan beliefs, unlike his predecessor, he dispatched spies to sniff out Daoist magic.

I can't figure him out at all.

That had never bothered Gyoumei before. This man was no ordinary father; he was the emperor. As the most venerable man in the realm, he didn't need to share a warm relationship of mutual understanding with his son. However, if Genyou was out to harm Gyoumei's soon-to-be chosen family—his fiancées—that changed everything.

“As a matter of fact, I called you here this morning to discuss that very Repose of Souls,” Genyou began as soon as he finished his congee.

Gyoumei sat at attention. “Go on.”

“First of all, I assume you understand the purpose of the Repose of Souls?”

“Yes. The ceremony is held on the day of the year with the strongest concentration of yin energy—the Day of Peak Yin—during which time the soul is known to depart the body. Our aim is to pacify those souls and return them to their respective vessels. The ceremony has also taken on the role of a memorial service, and it is held annually at the imperial palace to put the souls of those who died during the previous year to rest,” the prince rattled off smoothly.

In his mind’s eye, he pictured a map of the Kingdom of Ei. The north was struggling with an influx of immigrants, while the south’s crops had been devastated by a cold spell. The east’s granaries were occasionally hit by drought, and the west was embroiled in constant skirmishes over transportation. Whenever the weather took a turn for the worse, flooding and locust plagues compounded the problems everywhere.

Ei was the largest nation on the continent, but that also meant there were countless disasters to contend with—and an even more staggering number of resulting casualties. Hence, the imperial family provided generous aid to the various disaster areas and war zones, and on the Day of Peak Yin, they held a memorial service to collectively honor the lives that were beyond saving.

Last year in particular, just as the medical relief efforts were winding down in a western war zone, the summer winds had picked up and several regions were hit by floods. Landslides also occurred in farming villages near bodies of water, resulting in an even higher death toll than usual. The government accelerated both the relocation of the flooded communities to higher ground and various public works projects, and the military conducted regular inspections, but there were budget and manpower constraints. Since the backwaters were low on the political priority list, the aid they received was often inadequate—a constant

source of frustration for Gyoumei.

“No doubt many of our subjects desire repose,” the crown prince added with a trace of melancholy.

His father nodded. “Precisely. Furthermore, this year’s Day of Peak Yin will coincide with the first total solar eclipse in twenty-five years, marking it as the Day of Ultimate Yin, when the yin reaches its highest possible concentration. Ergo, this Repose of Souls must be grander in scale compared to previous years.”

“I’m aware. I have made arrangements to ensure that the alms to the afflicted regions and offerings are five times the standard. The prayer will be the highlight of the ceremony, so I have ensured that the altar will be the largest in history. The Maidens are to sing the requiem of tribute as well, and I know they have been practicing a good deal harder than any of their predecessors.”

“Oh? The Maidens will be the only ones to sing? A handful of previous crown princes have performed alongside them.”

Genyou cast his son a rare teasing look, and for good reason. Gyoumei was a terrible singer. The gorgeous crown prince may have been the pride of Ei, bearer of the dragon’s qi and a master of both pen and sword, but musical talent was the one gift he lacked. Word among the gossipmongers had it that this was wrought by the blood of the empress, who never had been fond of the performing arts.

Gyoumei let the comment slide with a smile, unabashed. “Don’t even joke about it.”

Lighthearted banter and bashful grins had no place in an exchange between this father and son.

Genyou himself clearly had no particular intention of livening up the conversation, as he was quick to change the subject. “That should suffice for the requiem of tribute. However, I would like to make one addition to the usual program this year. In advance of the Repose of Souls, I propose that a Congee

Conferment Rite be held in a disaster area with an excess of yin.”

Despite how smoothly Gyoumei’s lips had been forming responses thus far, they froze for the slightest of moments. “A Congee Conferment *Rite*?”

In the Kingdom of Ei, ceremony names fell into one of three categories according to their scale. Services—or sometimes festivals—were major ceremonies that either served a religious function or concerned national prestige. Rituals were traditional ceremonies that had to adhere to certain formalities. Smaller ceremonies of a more private nature were called rites.

In most cases, services or festivals were nationwide events, rituals were led by either the emperor or empress, and rites were entrusted to someone below the imperial couple. If it was a state affair, that meant either the crown prince or the vassals. And if it concerned the inner court, that meant the consorts—or the Maidens.

Getting a bad feeling about this, Gyoumei struggled to keep his voice even. “Is that a request for me, the crown prince, to hold an additional ceremony to distribute congee to our subjects?”

“No. Men should conduct the ceremonies concerning yang, and women should conduct the ceremonies concerning yin. As the purpose of this ceremony is to heal and nurture our subjects, it is not a job for the crown prince. It falls to his wives, the Maidens. You ought to remain in the imperial capital and focus on the preparations for the Repose of Souls.”

Put bluntly, the emperor was proposing that they send the Maidens to a disaster area and have them run a soup kitchen. This also meant that Reirin and Keigetsu would be forced far from the imperial capital—far from Gyoumei—in the lead-up to the Repose of Souls.

It was bad enough that the emperor was tacking on such a significant ceremony only eight days before the main event. Normally, it would take an entire month of planning to send the Maidens out of the inner court. No matter how much they expedited the preparations, making the trip to a remote

disaster area would take a few days minimum. It was questionable whether the girls could even make it back in time for the Repose of Souls. Throwing the Congee Conferment Rite into the mix would spell the end of the body swap reversal plan.

“With all due respect, the Maidens are still mere fledglings. It might behoove us to make it a Congee Conferment *Ritual* and let the consorts take the lead.”

“With three out of four of the consorts unaccounted for?” the emperor asked coolly.

Gyoumei had no comeback for that. Noble Consort Shu had been exiled for dabbling in venomcraft. Pure Consort Kin and Virtuous Consort Ran were under “house arrest” in their respective palaces.

“Our attempts to squeeze in this Congee Conferment Rite may prevent the Maidens from making it back in time for the requiem of tribute. I propose we hold off for half a month’s time. It would displease our subjects to rush the process and offer them insufficient alms. Performing the requiem at the Repose of Souls should take priority.”

“This Repose of Souls falls upon the Day of Ultimate Yin. It wouldn’t do to hold the corresponding Congee Conferment Rite half a month after the fact. For that matter, I expect the future wives of the emperor to be able to adapt to such a trifling change in schedule.” Once Genyou had smoothly shut down his son’s argument, a thought occurred to him. He asked a eunuch to unfurl a map. “I have already determined the region as well as the area assigned to each Maiden.”

“Is this...Tan Pass?”

“Yes. It is a land rife with yin, home to steep mountains, raging rivers, and devastating floods each summer. According to scholars, the outlook for this year is particularly dire.”

Gyoumei nearly ground his teeth as he stared down at the notes. The site chosen for the sympathy call was situated in the northwestern part of the

kingdom, not too far from the imperial capital. It was a mountainous area on the border between the Kin clan's western domain and the Gen clan's northern domain. Just past the mountains was a region known as "Tan." It was home to a large population of nomads, so the area was accordingly dubbed Tan Pass—the entrance to Tan.

Tan Pass was a problematic area. It had always been prone to flooding, but because it was in the mountains that formed the territory border, there was no official consensus as to whether it belonged to the Kin or Gen domain. Whenever Tan Pass proved its value as a trade route, both clans asserted their ownership, but whenever its inhabitants needed aid to deal with an influx of immigrants or a flood, both clans looked the other way. Ultimately, the land had ended up under the direct supervision of the imperial family. With the way it was seen as a blessing or a burden depending on the situation, the place was a political conflict just waiting to happen.

An even bigger problem was the placement of dots scattered around Tan Pass on the map. Of the five dots marking the Maidens' assigned areas for the Congee Conferment Rite, four of them denoted Tan Meadow, Tan Plain, Central Tan, and Tan Valley, all of which were located near the foot of the mountains and easy to reach from the imperial capital. The roads were wide, and there was an encampment in the vicinity. The trip from the imperial capital to the encampment was about two days by horse or two and a half by carriage. It would probably take only half a day's carriage ride to reach each of the respective disaster sites from there.

The final dot, however—the one with the label "Shu Maiden: Shu Keigetsu" next to it—was positioned over an area called Treacherous Tan Peak, deep in the perilous mountains. This area alone was almost an entire day's carriage ride from the encampment. Worse still, the entrance to the mountain wasn't connected to any major roads, so it would take even longer to get there if her entourage spent the night at the encampment first.

In short, to get to Treacherous Tan Peak, she would have to take a different

road than the one that led to the encampment, add an extra day to her itinerary compared to the rest of the Maidens, and spend three and a half whole days in transit.

“Shu Keigetsu made a brilliant showing at the Harvest Festival last autumn. She gave quite an impressive speech for the Rite of Reverence as well. I wish to honor her achievements by entrusting her with the most perilous of the disaster sites. However, its remote location means she will not be able to spend the night at the encampment with the other girls. I imagine it will be a demanding journey, but I have faith that she can handle it.”

Although Genyou phrased this as glowing praise, his true meaning was clear.

Father isn't content just to separate me from the Maidens. He wants to isolate "Shu Keigetsu."

This implied that he had more or less narrowed his target down to the Shu Maiden. If he removed her from Gyoumei's custody and drove her into the mountains all alone, he would be free to interrogate or execute her as he saw fit.

“Let the Maidens handle the Congee Conferment Rite. All I ask is that your preparations for the main event be thorough, Gyoumei.”

For a few brief moments, Gyoumei stared back at his father in silence. Though worded as a request, it was an order. The implication was that if he abandoned the preparations for the main event and came running to the Congee Conferment Rite, there would be consequences.

Think, Gyoumei.

Now was not the time to be discouraged. No argument from the crown prince could possibly overturn this decision. In that case, he was better off accepting the order without a fuss and devising a way to outsmart his opponent.

If anything, this is an opportunity.

With Gyoumei stuck in the imperial capital and saddled with work for the

main event, Genyou would never expect him to show up at Tan Pass. The emperor believed he would have an easy time messing with “Shu Keigetsu” once he drove her off to an isolated mountain. And that was proof that he didn’t realize what his son was capable of.

Gyoumei could work around the change in plans within the day. Plus—unfortunately for the emperor—the body-swapped version of “Shu Keigetsu” wasn’t so easy to catch off guard.

If I knock out my work ahead of schedule and rush to the disaster area, and if Reirin finishes up “Shu Keigetsu’s” part of the Congee Conferment Rite early, we can all meet up at the encampment. And this time, we’ll be outside the imperial capital, far from Father’s prying eyes.

It would be the perfect opportunity to undo the switch. All they had to do was reverse the swap outside the imperial capital, make it back home in time for the ceremony, and audaciously carry out the Repose of Souls. The plan would be unworkable for any ordinary man, but fortunately, the prince was blessed with both the talent to manage a tremendous workload and the technique to command a swift steed.

After swiftly making those calculations, Gyoumei bowed with a solemn expression. “By your will.”

He rose from his seat with the excuse that he had work to be done, leaving half of his congee uneaten. Showing hints of panic would make his opponent lower his guard.

It’s no loss. That congee was dreadful.

He recalled the taste of the hot pot he’d eaten in the city. The delicious flavor of the zongzi Reirin had insisted on sharing with him. The sweetness of the sesame balls he had crammed into his mouth as he and Keishou teased Shu Keigetsu. The life in both girls’ expressions during those moments.

Gyoumei was determined to protect those memories.

Making plans in the privacy of his mind, the capable crown prince briskly departed down the cloister of the Hall of Violet Rain.

Genyou watched with frigid eyes as his son made a quick exit. When he finally finished eating, a court lady cleared away his dishes, the culinary official nervously awaited his appraisal of the meal, and then the pair reverently retreated from the room. Only the scribe who had taken the culinary official's dictation hung back to shuffle his brush out of the way. As he scurried out of the room, his eyes on the floor, Genyou called him to a halt.

"Wait, 'Tan.'"

"Sure thing."

Right on cue, the scribe called Tan lifted his head, discarding all traces of his timid air. His full lips, the mark of a womanizer, curled into a grin. He was the same man who had gambled against Reirin less than a month ago.

"What can I do for ya?"

After making sure no one else was around, he removed his cap and tousled the hair pulled back behind his ears. He didn't appear to be a fan of formal attire. Or perhaps wearing his hair down just made it easier to conceal his true identity. Pulling back the locks that framed his face allowed a glimpse of the small tattoo inked into his right temple—that of a fire-breathing lizard. It was a design no one would forget after seeing it once.

"Why are you disguised as a scribe? I expected your usual routine of hiding in the rafters."

"I would've preferred that myself. More room to stretch out up there. But since His Highness was coming around today, I figured that'd look too suspicious. I dunno if it's his dragon's qi or what, but he's quick to pick up on presences."

Despite standing before the sovereign of a great power, he spoke as

informally as he would with a childhood friend. Genyou didn't rebuke him for his disrespect either. The emperor knew perfectly well what the leader of his secret service was like, and the man was more than capable enough to compensate for his insolence.

"Yes. His powers of perception can be quite a thorn in my side."

Genyou made no further rebuttal, instead standing from the dining table and walking over to the neighboring room. Designed for lounging prior to meetings with his council, the room boasted an assortment of high-grade furnishings—the Shoushin Mirror among them. Buried amid the splendor was a display of the finest musical instruments. These comprised the emperor's personal collection.

He picked out a flute, sat at the writing desk, and began to polish it with a practiced hand. It was this sort of thing that had earned the emperor his reputation as a music lover.

Without bothering to look up at the spy who'd followed him into the room, Genyou ordered, "Give him more work to do. See to it that he cannot come along to the encampment."

The man shrugged. "I already doubled his workload." He went on to mention that the emperor had forgotten something and tossed the map—which had been left unfurled over the dining table—onto the writing desk. "Good move springing the Maidens' Congee Conferment Rite on him, but I wouldn't be shocked if he works around it without breaking a sweat."

"Then increase his workload fivefold." Genyou shoved the map into a corner of the desk in annoyance, then went back to polishing his flute. "Put pressure on the culprit of a minor bribery scandal and make Gyoumei look into it. Intercept some of the written reports to the crown prince. Loosen security against assassins. It would take more than that to kill the boy. Take this chance to push all the petitions from the Kins and Rans onto his desk. And kill his messenger horse. Start a fire if you must."

As the emperor rattled off plan after plan to sabotage his son, his spy couldn't help but heave a sigh. "Sounds like a pain. Wouldn't it be faster to go ahead and torture both of the Maidens under suspicion?"

Genyou's response was to hold up his flute and dispassionately inspect its luster. "I couldn't agree more. Alas, the empress keeps a watchful eye over the inner court. Hurting Kou Reirin in particular is a sure way to invite her wrath. Dragging the girl out of the palace walls will spare us the trouble."

"Gimme a break. Isn't that 'empress' supposed to be your wife? What kind of husband lets his woman walk all over him?"

If it were anyone else saying it, an insult like that would be grounds to extinguish their entire family line, but Genyou didn't appear the least bit offended. On the contrary, he stroked his flute with a faint smile.

"I must exercise more caution this time around."

It was a smile best described as self-derisive.

"Furthermore, I promised a certain someone that no harm would come to the empress. No Kou blood shall be spilled—at least not within the inner court." His tone was mild yet firm.

As the man standing by the wall watched the emperor gaze upon his flute, he muttered, "Dhal." The word sounded foreign, unlike anything from the Ei lexicon.

When the sharp-eared Genyou overheard that, he cast Tan a brief glance. However, he soon turned his icy gaze back to the map sitting neglected on the desk. "Did looking at this map make you homesick, Akim?"

"Golly, now there's a name I haven't heard in a long time. I'd forgotten it myself."

"I find that difficult to believe when you still slip into your mother tongue."

The spy—at times called "Sir Tan," at others "Akim"—had a darker complexion than the average Ei citizen. He had sharp, chiseled features. If he

stripped himself of his plain bureaucrat uniform, put on traditional regalia embellished with glittering gold embroidery, and wore the wide cloth headband associated with his tribe, he would be instantly identifiable as a foreigner—specifically, as a resident of the Tan Region, home to a large population of nomads. The concept of an immigrant spy sounded unusual, but it actually wasn't. Having foreigners in the force made it easier to investigate what other countries were doing.

“A man reckless enough to hold an emperor at knifepoint would not relinquish his thirst for vengeance so easily.”

“Relinquish his thirst for vengeance? Hm, those are some complicated words. Akim no understand.” Akim dodged the accusation, shamelessly posing as a foreigner unfamiliar with the language of Ei.

Genyou refused to play along, murmuring, “Or perhaps it's easy to forget your hatred once you've had your revenge.”

Akim threw up both hands, immediately reverting to his usual way of speaking. “Hey, excuse *me* for getting the job done before you. Lay off the roundabout criticism, would ya?”

Genyou paid no heed to his spy's quips, turning to look out the window. “How does it feel?”

“What?”

“To have taken your revenge.”

His black eyes were focused on the gardens sprawling outside. The recent cold had been harsh, and even now that New Year's had come and gone, there was a cloud of gloom hanging over the trees. The leaves didn't so much as twitch in the breeze, as if they were holding their breath.

“Well, let's see...” Akim scratched his bearded chin and cocked his head to one side. Puckering his lips, he hummed like he was searching for the right words. Then, after a long pause, he gave a defeated shrug of his shoulders. “I'll

have to recommend you find out for yourself.”

It was quite a slapdash answer, considering how long it had taken him to come up with it. Genyou shot him a frosty look.

Before those thin lips could form a rebuke, Akim turned the topic back to his mission. “So my job is to keep monitoring Shu Keigetsu? Rile her up and, as soon as she uses her magic, take her into custody? And the same goes for Kou Reirin?”

“No,” Genyou said abruptly. “You need not concern yourself with Kou Reirin.”

“Huh?”

“I will determine whether she is a practitioner myself.”

Akim chewed on that answer for a few moments, then pulled a rare incredulous expression. “You will? And your target will be Kou Reirin, not Shu Keigetsu?”

“Indeed. When we let them head into the outer city, Shu Keigetsu never once used magic, correct? At this point, I find Kou Reirin more suspicious. Not to say that Shu Keigetsu is in the clear, mind you.”

“Suspect away, but does that mean you’ll be accompanying us to the Congee Conferment Rite? With the big service only eight days away?”

“It does. As I already mentioned, Kou Reirin’s interrogation must be conducted beyond the palace walls, somewhere out of the empress’s sight.” With that casual yet foreboding assertion, Genyou slowly rose from his seat. “And what’s more...this will be the first Day of Ultimate Yin in twenty-five years. On this rare occasion, you-know-who will be sure to visit the land with the greatest yin energy. I must be present.”

He went out of his way to find a cleaning cloth to wrap the flute in as he picked it up from the writing desk. Handling the instrument as carefully as he would the Imperial Seal, he returned it to its rightful place.

“Do not inform anyone I am going until the day I set out. I leave the task of

pressuring Shu Keigetsu to you.”

“I hear ya loud and clear,” Akim replied with a listless wave of his hand.

“This is not a job for your subordinates,” Genyou warned him. “I expect you to handle this yourself.”

“Well, yeah. If you’re gracing us with your presence, I’ve gotta pull out all the stops.”

The comment was meant as a subtle dig.

“Get out,” Genyou responded without sparing the other man a backward glance. Akim gave a small shrug.

The emperor of a great power had no business making a long-distance trip ahead of a major ceremony. Nevertheless, Akim was not in a position to admonish him. He knew firsthand the sense of urgency that came with revenge. With a curt reply, Akim slipped out of the room for good this time, and silence settled over the Hall of Violet Rain.

Genyou stood motionless before his instrument collection for some time, then reached out to touch the flute he had polished to a shine. He traced his fingers over each of the holes, caressed the bark fiber wrapped around the tube, and spoke to the instrument in a low murmur. “Has it been twenty-five years already? I’m sure you-know-who is desperate for this long-awaited opportunity, but the same could be said of me. At long last, I will catch them in the act.”

The flute was adorned with a golden-yellow tassel, and there was a rust-colored stain along its gorgeous trail of knots. Genyou stroked that spot most tenderly of all.

“They shall not escape. Whether Kou Reirin is involved or not, I vow to catch that sorcerer.”

His thin lips usually betrayed no emotion, but for once, the words they formed carried a wistful undertone.

“I will take back what we lost, my brother.”

Chapter 1: Reiren Gets Motivated

“**P**ARK THE CARRIAGE over here. I’ll load the chest straight from the room.”

“Are these all the porters? Where is the organization chart?! There’s hardly any time left before our departure!”

It was midafternoon, and the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion was in a state of pandemonium. Given the circumstances, that was hardly surprising. The Repose of Souls was only eight days away, yet Prince Gyomei had shown up that morning to order “Shu Keigetsu” to hold a Congee Conferment Rite—or, in layman’s terms, to run a soup kitchen in a disaster area.

Telling the Maiden to travel to a disaster area outside the capital *and* make it back to the imperial palace in time for the Repose of Souls was a lot to ask. Alas, when pressed, the prince explained that the Congee Conferment Rite had been added at the behest of Emperor Genyou himself, so there was no fighting against it.

It seemed the other Maidens had received the same order, but “Shu Keigetsu’s” assigned area was particularly remote. If she hoped to make it home in time for the Repose of Souls, she had to depart the imperial capital that same evening. It was quite a rigorous itinerary.

The Shu Palace had been quiet ever since the Maiden confined herself to the storehouse, but now everyone from the high-ranking blazing scarlet court ladies to the low-ranking luggage-bearing eunuchs was running around the corridors and gardens in a panic. To push ahead with the soup kitchen, they had to secure transportation to the disaster area as well as prepare cauldrons, large quantities of rice, fuel, seasonings, court ladies, and escorts, so this was a major undertaking.

“We managed to secure you a ceremonial officer, milady! Master Kou Keikou

has volunteered for the role!”

“Wonderful! Thank you, Leelee.”

In one of the aforementioned corridors, redheaded court lady Leelee was clutching a letter, strapped for breath. Despite the cold weather, the blazing scarlet’s forehead was dappled with sweat, and her mistress—or rather, the girl wearing her face, Kou Reirin—commended her efforts with a smile.

“I had my concerns, since this is all so sudden. Will Lord Keishou be covering for Lady Kei...er, Kou Reirin?”

“Yes. Apparently, His Highness took the initiative to order that Master Kou Keishou be assigned to Lady Kou Reirin and Master Kou Keikou to you, Lady Keigetsu.”

“Oh, what a mercy! I imagine His Highness already has his hands full, and still he took the time to arrange for our food, carriages, and escorts. We are truly in his debt,” Reirin said to Leelee as she watched the servants scurry about the Shu Palace.

As soon as she saw that the preparations were proceeding smoothly, she excused herself and turned back to the storehouse. She’d been using it as her sleeping quarters as of late, so most of her Maidenly essentials were kept there. As an added bonus, its origins as an abandoned food pantry meant it was far too shabby to offer much in the way of hiding places. It was the perfect space to converse without fear of eavesdropping.

Once the pair had cut across the bustling main grounds of the Shu Palace and made it back to the tranquil storehouse, some of the tension bled from Leelee’s shoulders. “The preparations are moving along at an astounding pace, but still... do we really have to head out *tonight*? This is outrageous!”

“Quite so. I must admit, I didn’t see this coming.”

Reirin nodded solemnly as she picked up a few changes of clothes she kept in the storehouse. Without pausing the busy motions of her hands, she reflected

back on the dizzying turn of events.

It had been about twenty days since they'd learned that they might be under the emperor's surveillance—that the secret service might already be on the move—and ended their incognito trip with the body swap still in place. After consulting with Gyoumei and her brother, Reirin and Keigetsu had agreed to undo the switch during the Repose of Souls. Reirin had then placed herself under voluntary house arrest in the Shu Palace storehouse, Keigetsu had feigned illness to skip classes at the Maiden Court, and the pair had avoided almost all public contact. It was vital that they keep the secret service's suspicions in check.

Meanwhile, they had made their case to the other Maidens (well, technically, they'd outright threatened them with, "If anyone finds out we used the Daoist arts, we'll take you all down with us!") and enlisted their help in covering up the switch and Keigetsu's magic. From there, the preparations had proceeded without issue, and soon all that remained was to practice their requiem of tribute and wait the eight days until the recital.

That is, until this anomalous ceremony called the Congee Conferment Rite was dumped in their laps. As a result, Reirin had to depart the imperial capital that very evening if she hoped to make it back in time for the Repose of Souls. The order came across as a deliberate attempt to disrupt their swap-reversing plan and isolate "Shu Keigetsu." It was hard to imagine that Emperor Genyou had come up with the idea on a whim.

"Do you think His Majesty already knows there's magic afoot?" Leelee nervously asked as she helped with the packing.

Reirin gave the question some thought, then shook her head. "If he were truly convinced, there would be no reason to leave us at large. He would take us straight into custody. That must mean he lacks conclusive evidence. His goal here is to put pressure on 'Shu Keigetsu' and catch her in the act. I hear spells can run out of control when a sorcerer is agitated."

If nothing else, “Shu Keigetsu” hadn’t used magic once in the past twenty days. It stood to reason that the emperor might want to watch and see what happened if he suddenly handed her a vital mission or if he threw her into an inhospitable environment outside the palace.

“If the emperor insists on clinging to his suspicions no matter how quietly we spend our days, perhaps we ought to have pushed ahead with undoing the switch in the city... Well, what’s done is done. Let us instead look on the bright side. This could be a good opportunity.”

Leelee blinked. “An opportunity for what?”

Reirin smiled at her. “The truth is, His Highness plans to finish his work ahead of schedule and rush over to the encampment. I likewise intend to finish my charity work in short order, move the itinerary forward, and join everyone else. Once reunited, we Maidens will dedicate a song to our subjects. Moved by the display, His Highness will unleash his dragon’s qi and...well, you know the rest.” The eternally cheerful Maiden yanked hard on the knot of a wrapping cloth. “In short, if we spare no effort to meet up at the encampment, we can reverse the switch somewhere out of His Majesty’s sight.”

“Makes sense.”

“We’re still finalizing the plan, but His Highness proposed that he rush over on his fastest horse and pick me up at Treacherous Tan Peak. That will better guarantee that the three of us meet at the encampment as scheduled. I’ve already sent a secret letter outlining our strategy to Lady Keigetsu.”

Leelee nodded along, impressed, and Reirin shot her a mischievous wink.

“Which Maiden did you send it through this time?” the redhead asked. “Was it who I think it was?”

The Maiden’s smile was supposed to be her greatest feature, yet all traces of expression left her face as she answered that question. “Unfortunately, yes. As much as it vexes me, she is the most versed in matters of deceit.”

Right on cue, there came the tap of soft footsteps outside the storehouse. The next thing they heard was a girl's dainty, babyish voice.

"Ahem! Good day to you. I came to wish you the best before you set out."

Upon recognizing the owner of the voice, Reirin furrowed her brow. For a few moments, she stared at the door with the indecision of someone debating whether to hold their nose and eat their least favorite thing on their plate.

"Is no one home? What a shame. And here I took the trouble of bringing the same treats I shared with Lady 'Kou Reirin.'"

As soon as she heard that loaded statement, Reirin resigned herself, opened the door, and let the person outside into the storehouse. Their visitor was none other than the Ran Maiden, Houshun.

"Come on in, Lady Houshun. It's a pleasure to have you."

Houshun tilted her head with a smile. "Are you quite sure? I could have sworn you spent a while standing in front of the door."

"My response time is dulled, that's all." Reirin put a hand to her cheek and dodged the accusation. "It's still quite cold this time of year."

Leelee cringed as she watched the Maidens exchange a round of giggles. Lately, it was always like this with these two. A bloodthirsty glint would overtake Reirin's tender gaze, and meanwhile—for whatever bizarre reason—Houshun's face would light up with delight.

Just to be on the safe side, Leelee double-checked that there was no one around before pulling the storehouse door firmly shut. Not a moment later, Houshun reverted to her natural way of talking, her sweet smile twisting into something more mean-spirited.

"Your excuses never get any less lame, huh? Amazing how fast you did an about-face once I mentioned I was carrying Lady Keigetsu's letter."

"If only you were a more forthcoming person, I would face your direction from the outset. At least all the turning keeps me active." Reirin met the snide

remark with a rather muscle-brained response. “Now then,” she went on, eyeing the bundle Houshun was carrying, “is that confection ‘the goods’?”

“Yes. I went with a chestnut cake this time. I’ll go ahead and cut it up.”

Houshun settled down in one of the chairs and made herself at home, then took a knife from her breast and cut the cake into equal slices. A small, folded piece of paper emerged from within.

“Isn’t this neat? It’s almost like getting your fortune told.”

“Well, I can’t say I approve of inserting foreign matter into food...but I appreciate it regardless.” Though Reirin pulled a face, thanking Houshun was only the polite thing to do.

The situation was as it seemed. Now that Reirin and Keigetsu had lost the ability to converse in public, Houshun and the other Maidens were helping them keep in touch about how to reverse the swap.

An incurable schemer, the youngest Maiden was an expert in the art of covert correspondence. Sometimes she would sneak a letter onto the bottom of a kitchen maid’s tray, other times she would write the message on the bottom of her shoe and show it to the recipient, and others still she would ask them to analyze a passage from a textbook and alert them to a cipher inside.

Not one for cheap machinations herself, Reirin was torn between feeling impressed and judgmental about how fast the girl could churn out new tricks. Either way, there was no denying that Houshun’s astonishing guile worked in her favor.

Incidentally, Kin Seika served as Keigetsu’s main intermediary (the inhabitants of the Kou Palace were quite fond of her), and Gen Kasui facilitated Houshun and Seika’s exchange of letters by frequently hosting tea parties for the three of them. The previous generation of consorts had always had their fair share of squabbles, but the current crop of Maidens was quite amenable to working together. Reirin thanked her lucky stars that she had entered the court alongside this particular lineup.

“I didn’t expect such a prompt response to my last letter. Whatever could she —”

“Dear me, Miss Reirin! It’s bad manners to eat the ‘filling’ and leave the rest. You must partake of the pastry skin as well.” The moment Reirin made to eagerly unfold the slip of paper, Houshun plucked it from her hands and brought the chestnut cake up to her lips. “Here, open wide.”

As Houshun tilted her head to one side and encouraged Reirin to say “ahh,” the latter shot her a smile as impregnable as an iron wall. “I beg your pardon? You expect *me* to accept *your* assistance? To eat?!”

For a woman of the Kou, who valued self-reliance above all else, that was nothing short of an insult.

As an aside, were someone to try this with Keigetsu, the girl would likely act flustered for a bit before accepting the offer more gladly than she cared to admit. Reirin longed to witness such an endearing display. The rage the gesture provoked in her managed to coexist with the spark of interest it aroused.

“Kindly lower your hand. If you claim it to be proper etiquette, I shall gladly partake of the chestnut cake. *Without* anyone’s help.”

Reirin snatched the cake from Houshun and polished it off with a slight scowl. Houshun watched this happen with sadistic glee.

As Leelee looked on from the sidelines, she reflected on how Ran Houshun was a dyed-in-the-wool bully—the sort who was compelled to do things knowing it would upset the other party.

After devouring the chestnut cake and successfully obtaining the letter, Reirin resumed unfolding the paper, her heart aflutter. On the page, in Keigetsu’s trademark right-slanted handwriting, was an acknowledgment of the plan and the following complaints:



All that aside, this impromptu charity project is a complete fool's errand. I already had my hands full practicing for the requiem of tribute, and now I have to organize aid to a disaster area? Out of the question! I don't even know what I have to get ready! Tell me what to do.

"Goodness! Lady Keigetsu is counting on me!"

"Yuck. Does Lady Keigetsu ever stop begging to be coddled?"

As the pair peered down at the letter, one of the girls brought her hands to her mouth with a spellbound look, while the other leaned back in disgust. Needless to say, the former was Reirin and the latter was Houshun.

Eager to get started on her reply, Reirin rose from her seat. Houshun's brow furrowed into a scowl. "Do you understand your situation? The rest of us head out tomorrow morning, but *you* have to depart the imperial capital tonight. And you're going to a remote location all by yourself. It takes a real oddball to enjoy getting exploited in a time of crisis."

"Exploited? Don't be absurd. Lady Keigetsu is simply coming to me for help. She's endeavoring to make her own arrangements, is she not?" Houshun's scornful protests fell on deaf ears. Reirin grabbed her calligraphy tools off the shelf and happily took to writing Keigetsu some detailed pointers. "She's an incredibly hard worker. And I couldn't be happier that I'm the first one she thinks of when she's struggling. I'm confident that you will all come to appreciate her charms in time."

"Doubtful. I've spent a year and a half with her, and I'm still not seeing it all."

Houshun sullenly shoved her chin into her palm, annoyed to be neglected when she was technically a guest. She also had a lot to get ready before tomorrow's departure, but Reirin clearly didn't appreciate her taking the time out of her busy schedule to pass the letter along.

"Aw, man! If only I were as stupid and useless as Lady Keigetsu, maybe I'd

have Miss Reirin doting on *me*.”

At that, Reirin quietly set down her brush. “What did you just call her? That’s crossing a line, Lady Houshun.”

Houshun briefly faltered, but a wicked smirk soon overtook her face. “I only spoke the truth! You have no idea how behind we are on our song practice because she can’t wrap her head around the lyrics. I know the main focus of the Repose of Souls is the prayer, and the Maidens’ requiem is just a diversion, but there will be a hundred dignitaries and a thousand regular guests in attendance. This is going to reflect poorly on all the Maidens—especially ‘Kou Reirin.’”

As soon as Reirin’s expression darkened, Houshun leaned across the table, her heart leaping with excitement. If she had her way, she would capture the attention of the prince’s upstanding “butterfly” and be rewarded with the same kind of friendship offered to Shu Keigetsu. Sadly, that was never going to happen, so she was fine settling for seething animosity instead. Their verbal spars were one of Houshun’s favorite treats.

“You wouldn’t know ’cause you’ve been under ‘house arrest’ in this storehouse, but our group singing lessons in the Maiden Court have been miserable. Lady Seika’s always mad, and Lady Kasui has to bend over backward to come up with excuses for our instructor. Not that I mind, since looking so ill-tempered hurts Lady Seika’s reputation.”

In truth, the current atmosphere of the Maiden Court wasn’t all that dire. Seika and Houshun had been freed from their consorts’ tyranny, while Kasui had been released from the shackles of revenge, so they were all in a much better place emotionally. Seika held nothing back when lambasting others, but she would never give up on someone trying to perfect their artistry. The mood of the group as they practiced their song day in and day out was probably better described as “heated” than “vicious.”

But Houshun had no obligation to tell Reirin as much. She needed Shu Keigetsu to be the underachieving problem child. That way, befriending the

intelligent, quick-witted Ran Houshun would become an attractive prospect by comparison.

“It’s all Lady Keigetsu’s fault things ended up this way. All she had to do was keep pretending to be sick in bed, but she panicked with the Repose of Souls coming up and started attending practice half the time. Just the other day, she couldn’t answer a single question about a woman’s virtues. She really doesn’t have an intelligent bone—”

“It is said that one’s intelligence is reflected in what they say, and one’s character is reflected in what they leave unsaid.” Reirin cut off Houshun’s ramblings in a dignified voice. “If you claim that Lady Keigetsu’s reticence about the scriptures makes her unintelligent, how does it reflect on your character to propagate such malicious gossip?”

A smile on her face, Reirin quipped that she ought to bring the other girl a mirror. Houshun flushed bright red...and then was shocked by her own reaction. This was the part where she was supposed to get absorbed in their scathing repartee.

“Forget about the mirror. I suggest you get a move on your travel preparations, Miss Reirin. I hear that ‘Shu Keigetsu’s’ Treacherous Tan Peak is a far more grueling environment than the areas assigned to the rest of us.”

Houshun automatically shot back a nasty comment, but her heart wasn’t in it. On the contrary, the unfairness of everything gnawed at her. It was always Shu Keigetsu this, Shu Keigetsu that. No matter how hard Houshun tried to convince Reirin of the Shu Maiden’s inferiority, it never formed a crack in their friendship. If anything, it just gave Reirin chances to throw their bond in her face.

A desire to drag this imperturbable woman down from the heights welled up within Houshun. She longed to see the Maiden pathetically shaken, despairing, and wailing at the top of her lungs.

“A bunch of sheltered Maidens couldn’t possibly imagine the damage a flood actually causes. It’s a lot worse than people’s houses getting filled with water

for a few days. There's landslides. The rivers get contaminated. Fish and livestock get swept away and start to rot, filling the air with their foul stench."

The Ran clan prized knowledge, and Houshun was the daughter of a prostitute. She was far more versed in the ways of the world than the other Maidens, and she took pride in her in-depth understanding of what a flood entailed. For that same reason, she was a good deal more averse to disaster areas and disease than the average person.

"Even after the water recedes, dysentery and eye infections make the rounds. Mold forms in the damp houses, which spreads respiratory diseases to boot. Who knows if we'll make it home safe from our little charity mission? Hee hee, and with how arduous the journey will be, that's assuming we ever make it there in the first place."

The redheaded court lady turned pale, the horrors of a flood-stricken region finally dawning on her. That was the normal reaction. Words and imagination were all it took to push a person to despair.

And yet, the graceful Kou Maiden showed not a hint of distress upon hearing the threat.

"The huge cost of flood control projects means the remote regions always end up on the back burner. The starving populace must be awfully bitter. Do you think they'll be satisfied with a single bowl of congee? Here's hoping the gesture doesn't rub them the wrong way."

If Shu Keigetsu were the one hearing this, she would have gone white as a sheet and crumpled to her knees by now. If only Kou Reirin would do the same, Houshun could take this chance to offer her a helping hand. She could procure an abundance of high-grade medicinal herbs from the wood-blessed eastern territory. Reirin needed only say the word, and Houshun would spare no effort to come to her aid.

"Oh well. When it comes down to it, our only job as Maidens is to dance and smile. We're nothing but powerless decorations. It might do you some good to

get a taste of the harsh reali—”

Just as Houshun was poised to smash Kou Reirin’s vaunted self-esteem and autonomy to bits, the other Maiden shoved something into her mouth.

“Mmgh?!”

“Correct. Starvation breeds resentment and turns people belligerent. With the way you’re acting, I suspect you must be quite hungry yourself.” The aforementioned “something” was one of the chestnut cakes Houshun had brought. “Chew thoroughly. Once you’re done with the pastry skin, do help yourself to the filling as well.”

As she said “filling,” she slipped the reply she had already finished writing into Houshun’s hand. Since Houshun had used that word as code for the initial letter, Reirin followed suit with the response.

Houshun’s first instinct was to refuse to deliver it, but before she could say anything, Reirin turned back to the shelves, grabbed something wrapped in a handkerchief, and thrust it at her. “Here.”

“What is this?”

“My own custom medicinal blend. It has potent antibacterial properties, and it’s quite filling. Take it for your personal use.”

Unwrapping the handkerchief revealed a handful of jet-black pills inside.

When Houshun furrowed her brow in confusion, Reirin gently explained, “You’re afraid to go to the disaster site, are you not?”

The younger girl’s head snapped up. “Excuse me?”

“You tend to get very talkative when you’re distressed. And during the Unso debacle, you shuddered at the thought of impurities and disease. I take it you’re unequipped to handle such matters.”

Houshun was about to argue that she wasn’t “unequipped,” she just didn’t like it. But before the words had time to form sound, her hand tightened around the medicine-filled handkerchief.

It was true. She was afraid of visiting a disaster area without adequate time to prepare. Although she wasn't anywhere near as sickly as Kou Reirin, Houshun was on the feeble side herself. Part of the reason she was all bark and no bite was that she lacked confidence in her physical strength. Members of the Ran clan tended to be petite and slender.

"Remember to disinfect your hands and secure clean water. Take care to get plenty of sleep on the road. Heed those tips and you should be fine. I pray that you will make it through the Congee Conferment Rite safe and sound."

"..."

"I know you must be busy preparing for the rite. I appreciate you taking the time to go behind the secret service's back and pass along our letters."

The way she looked Houshun straight in the eye and smiled was simply sublime. After a long stretch of silence, Houshun tucked the handkerchief away in the breast of her garment. The pills gave off a distinctive grassy scent, but she didn't mind.

"Fine, I'll accept the gift. Be careful, Miss Reirin—of the disaster site *and* the secret service's traps."

Surprised at how invigorated she felt, Houshun stood from her seat. She was already planning to stop by the Palace of the Golden Qilin and say goodbye to the empress before she left. It would be no big deal to discreetly drop off a letter for Shu Keigetsu (in the form of Kou Reirin) on the side.

"Thank you. Please support Lady Keigetsu as best you can."

But as soon as she heard Reirin tack on that request from behind her, her face twisted into a nasty scowl. It was always Shu Keigetsu this, Shu Keigetsu that.

Houshun spun around just before the door and stuck out her tongue, fully aware of how immature she was being. She then turned back around in a sulk, took a deep breath, put on her best "shy girl" face, and left the storehouse for good.

“That girl is such a pain in the neck,” Leelee muttered once the Ran Maiden’s footsteps had receded into the distance, a note of exhaustion in her voice. “She said she came to wish you the best, but all she did was threaten you. What did she even hope to accomplish here?”

“Good question. To pass along a message, a warning, and a motivational speech all in one, I suppose? In her own special way.” Reirin forced a smile, then put a hand to her cheek. “I have no patience for her habit of belittling Lady Keigetsu, but I don’t believe she was wrong about the risks of disaster relief or the impotence of us Maidens.”

“Oh, don’t say that, Lady Reirin!”

“I have a brief stop I’d like to make, Leelee. Let’s pay a visit to the mausoleum on the outskirts of the inner court.”

“You want to go to the mausoleum?” Leelee had been prepared to pull her mistress out of her rare bout of self-deprecation, only to blink at this spontaneous proposal. “And the one on the outskirts? Why?”

“It’s only proper to offer a prayer to the gods and ancestors before heading out on a journey.”

That didn’t fully answer the question, but Reirin broke into a mischievous grin and declined to elaborate. Perplexed, Leelee trailed after her mistress as she left the storehouse behind.

The mausoleum tucked deep within the inner court was dim even in the daytime and pervaded with an eerie atmosphere, and it was little wonder why. The departed souls enshrined here were those that couldn’t be honored out in the open: the children of consorts who were taken before they came into the world, princes who had died of mysterious causes, and princesses who had passed before their time.

It was like the dark side of the inner court crammed into a single building. In

contrast to the resplendent mausoleum in the main palace, this one had the bare minimum of furnishings, and not one person could be found inside. It was nice that they didn't need to worry about anyone eavesdropping, but the creepiness outweighed the advantages. Leelee rubbed her upper arms nervously once she was done lighting a candle.

"I-It's awfully dark in here, and the drafts of wind sound almost like ghostly wails."

"Don't they just? Perfect for drowning out our voices."

"Uh, I don't know if I'd consider that a good thing... Aren't a lot of people who died suspicious deaths enshrined here? I wouldn't be surprised if it's haunted. How can you be so relaxed?" Leelee couldn't help but ask as her mistress cast a blithe glance around the room.

Reirin giggled with pride. "The truth is, this has long been a secret playground for the children of the inner court. Whenever I paid courtesy calls to the empress in my youth, my brothers and I would come here to explore."

"Excuse me?"

The court lady made a dubious face, so Reirin shone the light of her candle on the back of a pillar. "See?"

There, in childish handwriting, was graffiti reading things like "No more lectures!" or "The bureaucrats stink!" Straining one's eyes against the dim light, it became clear that the hollows in the stone floor were filled with colorful pebbles and silly faces had been painted over the wood grain pattern of the pillars. Perhaps the most audacious of all was a poem written on the wooden frame of the altar. The penmanship was far from elegant, and it looked like the writer had done some extra calligraphy practice by repeating the same handful of characters off to the side. They must have been quite fond of this poem, as the same verses were also carved into a nearby pillar, presumably with some kind of blade.

Leelee grimaced. It was total anarchy.

“What am I looking at?”

“The princes and princesses spend their childhood years in the inner court, remember? Whenever those children find themselves bored, they sneak into this mausoleum as a test of courage and find a place to leave their mark.”

Reirin smoothly identified a piece of graffiti as the work of the previous third prince, a pebble as something left by the fifth princess of the generation before him, and a caricature as drawn by the second prince of the generation before her. She could tell because their names were all proudly scribbled next to their doodles, like the signature on a calligraphy painting. No matter the era, the children of the inner court considered their mischief in the sacred mausoleum to be a badge of honor.

“My brothers left a scribble of their own once. ‘History’s strongest brothers were here!’ Alas, Her Majesty made them erase it when she found out. She lectured them that no one outside the imperial line should be targeting a pillar, nor should anyone have the gall to profess themselves the strongest at such a young age.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure writing it on the pillar was the real problem there.”

An outsider to the inner court vandalizing the sacred mausoleum would normally be sufficient grounds for a death sentence. Leelee shuddered to think that the brothers could break the law without batting an eye, and that Kenshuu had picked such a baffling reason to scold them. Perhaps most frightening of all was the fact that underneath her demure appearance, Reirin carried that same Kou blood in her veins.

The Maiden briskly lit a stick of incense, put her hands together before the altar, and said a quick prayer. A bit *too* quick a prayer. She clearly neither sought nor believed in the blessings of the gods or the ancestors.

Can’t say I’m surprised, since Lady Reirin is a realist. Why would someone like her come to a mausoleum in the first place?

As Leelee pondered the mystery, for reasons unknown, Reirin flipped over the

prayer cushion laid out before the altar and ran her fingers over the floorboards underneath. It was an oddly practiced gesture.

“What are you doing?”

“Give me a moment, please. I believe it was right around... Ah, excellent. It’s still here.”

She wedged her fingers into a gap and lifted the floorboards. Hidden beneath the planks was a hole about as wide as a desk, packed with a large collection of folded papers and booklets.

“What are these?”

“Hee hee. Another treasure the young princes left behind.”

Reirin smiled impishly before plucking a single paper from the pile. Holding it up to the candlelight revealed a string of clumsily crafted letters and a grade of “poor” written beside it in red ink.

“I still don’t understand.”

“These are the failed papers and expendable study materials left behind—or hidden, rather—by those who were once taught here in the inner court.”

Leelee’s eyes went round at this unexpected response.

Surmising the reason for her attendant’s surprise, Reirin explained, “Not all those of exalted blood are talented from birth.” Her lips curved into a tender smile as she stroked her fingers across the sheet. “Prince Gyomei is effectively the only prince of his generation, but in previous eras, a good many princes spent their childhoods studying in the inner court and competing with one another. The rivalry between palaces was so intense that those who received poor grades would often hide their papers or pretend to have lost their study materials.”

“So even the upper class has problems like that, huh?”

Leelee gave a helpless shrug, finding this a rather heartwarming story. These members of the royalty lived in another world, and she didn’t even know what

they looked like. Their grandeur had always left the strongest impression on her, but it turned out they were flesh-and-blood people who drew graffiti and hid their mistakes just like anyone else.

Yet what Reirin said next would make her eyes go even wider.

“Indeed. However, there was more to it than simply covering up their failures. I hear that the princesses liked to come here and read the princes’ hidden textbooks. During her time as a Maiden, Her Majesty would often browse the materials herself.”

“What, really?”

“Yes. Princesses and Maidens are not permitted to attend the same classes as the men.”

The girl hailed as the greatest Maiden of her generation smiled and cast her eyes downward. The Kingdom of Ei was a patriarchal society. Women had no right of succession within their families, and it was frowned upon for them to pursue academic studies. All that was desired of them was exactly what Houshun had said: to smile gracefully, sing, and dance. The “culture” demanded of women entailed familiarity with the classics, arts, and proper wifely values, not the practical knowledge to influence politics or the economy.

“‘Women do not have the power to change the major currents.’ Though we are told this all our lives, some have refused to give up, flipping through these books with the hope that every little drop of the river has its purpose.”

Notes had been added in different handwriting, and the pages had been worn by the number of hands that flipped through them. Reirin caressed them all with the utmost affection.

“Look here, Leelee. There’s a detailed topographic map. This is our destination of Tan Pass. Treacherous Tan Peak is here. My, there’s a rather large river running through the area. This is the main stem, and these are its tributaries.”

Upon spotting a bulky topographic atlas, Reirin shook off the melancholy of moments ago, tracing the diagram with sparkling eyes. When Leelee peered over from the side, she found the information recorded there—the population figures of the time, the history of the surrounding countries, the topography of the forests—far too dense to parse, but her mistress pored over the book with keen interest.

“How deep is the river? What types of fish live there? Goodness, it even notes the types of native trees. This ought to teach us a bit about the region we’ll be visiting. This is fantastic. Absolutely wonderful...”

At last Leelee understood. Reirin hadn’t been daunted when Ran Houshun confronted her with the harsh reality. It had instead lit a fire under her, and she had come here to seek out countermeasures.

“When did floods occur in the past? What about the scale? Location? Oh, so that’s how it is... How interesting.”

As she watched Reirin flip through the book’s pages, enthralled, it occurred to Leelee just how much her mistress loved to learn.

“Say, Leelee. There are so many things I would never have learned if not for this opportunity. And soon I’ll have the chance to verify that knowledge in the field. I might be able to do some real good there. Why, I can hardly wait to visit Treacherous Tan Peak!”

Leelee found the sight of her mistress glancing back at her with delight to be dazzling.

Her boundless curiosity might be a result of all the time she spent cooped up in bed.

Reirin’s voracious appetite for knowledge was born from a pining for the outside world. The soup kitchen may have been forced into her schedule out of spite, but she longed for the reminder that even a sickly girl like her could contribute something to the world, so she was giving it her best effort.

Thinking about it that way tugged at Leelee's heartstrings. The thought of heading to a disaster area without proper preparation was terrifying, and the emperor could very well have a trap in store for them. But if nothing else, she wanted to help make this trip a worthwhile experience for her Maiden.

Leelee met Reirin's gaze and gave a firm nod. "You're right. I'm looking forward to it."

"It seems the journey will be a perilous one, but look on the bright side: That could make for a good workout. We might even get to try sliding down a cliff!"

"I-I guess?"

It was questionable if sliding down a cliff was a pleasurable enough experience to count as a bright side.

"Mm, but still..."

When an irrepressible gloom overtook her mistress's expression, Leelee braced herself. Even this immeasurably cheerful girl might have worries of her own.

"My one concern is that this will take me even farther away from Lady Keigetsu."

But lo, the way she finished that thought left Leelee staring at her blankly.

"Sorry, what?"

"Twenty days have passed since we cut off all non-written contact. Our limited exchange of letters has been the highlight of my days, but we can't very well keep that up outside the inner court, can we? And while I am bound for a remote disaster site, Lady Keigetsu will be staying at the encampment with the other Maidens." It seemed Reirin was done studying the map, as she returned the textbook to its place under the floor with a plaintive sigh. "No doubt they will spend the whole night drinking tea and throwing pillows at each other."

"Uh, those four definitely aren't that close. Didn't Lady Houshun just tell us how Lady Seika and Lady Keigetsu are constantly trading insults?"

“Imagine trading insults every day... I’m so jealous. Oh, how I wish I could have been part of it...”

“Hello? Anyone home?”

Reirin buried her face in her hands with a groan, prompting her attendant to squint in disbelief. It was clear that Keigetsu had a fraught relationship with the other three Maidens. Why would anyone envy that?

Lady Reirin has changed a little.

Prior to the switch, Kou Reirin had been a far loftier figure than even the other Maidens. Others might pine for her, but it was impossible to imagine the reverse. No one could have dreamed that she would behave like a disappointed, lonely child stuck in a different group from her friend on a field trip.

“It’s not often that we get to go on a trip. I wanted to stay up all night chatting. I wanted to pick mushrooms and gather firewood together. I wanted to boil rice in a messtin, camp out under the stars, and go fishing in a mountain stream. Do you know how it’s done? You cut a hole in the ice and drop a fishing line into the water below.”

“Why are all your dream activities so athletic?!” As baffled as she was, Leelee felt bad enough for her dejected mistress to add, “There, there. If we finish up the Congee Conferment Rite early, we should have time to stop by the encampment.”

If they rushed to the site in three days and completed the rite in one, they would have the chance to see Keigetsu.

“Yes... You’re quite right. I must approach the task with enthusiasm, both for the sake of my subjects and for the sake of friendship.”

That consolation seemed to have done the trick, as Reirin whipped her head back up. It was adversity that made her shine brightest of all.

“I shall command the secret service’s full attention, deliver my subjects, and

see to it that the swap is reversed.”

After one last murmur of “Let’s do this with a bang,” Reirin dusted off the hem of her robes and rose to her feet in an elegant motion.

Around the same time, in a corner of the main palace far from the inner court, a man languidly entered the odd jobs unit near the outer gate. The odd jobs unit was, as the name suggested, a gathering of the servants who performed miscellaneous chores. They had a wide range of duties, from cleaning the palace to transporting food to managing the lights to producing condiments, so the premises were quite spacious. Unfortunately, the bedrooms afforded to the servants themselves were tiny, and they were forced to sleep huddled together. Despite their frustration with their poor living conditions, they would still collapse into bed each night to refresh their weary bodies.

As such, no one would bother to question the identity of a stranger sneaking in late at night.

The man swaggered down the corridor that led to the sleeping quarters, demonstrating not a hint of caution about who was watching. He eventually stopped before the door at the very end of the hall—or pretended to, at least, before leaping into the air without so much as a running start.

There was a small handle near the rafters. Grabbing hold of that and kicking off the wall allowed him to climb through a cleverly disguised gap in the ceiling and into an attic space.

After sneaking into the loft like he’d done it a hundred times before, the man covered the ceiling back up and lit a candle in another smooth motion. The attic, now bathed in a pale glow, was three times the size of the bedrooms down below and had a high enough ceiling for a grown man to walk through without hitting his head.

The man sauntered across the room and took a seat in a corner. “Now let’s see here...”

In said corner was a vanity so elegant that anyone would believe it belonged to a member of the harem. However, the items set before the mirror couldn't quite be called cosmetics. There were wigs of human hair sorted by color, pastes the color of blood, an abundance of cotton, and even acupuncture needles. The uniforms strewn next to the vanity also covered a wide range, from a eunuch's to a military officer's to a merchant's to a servant's to even a court lady's.

These were a few of the tools of his trade.

"Which face should I wear this time?" the man mumbled, raking a hand through his hair and revealing a glimpse of the fire-breathing lizard tattoo on his temple.

This man was a spy—Akim, the same one who had been disguised as a scribe earlier that morning. After folding his arms and staring at himself in the mirror for some time, Akim made up his mind, leaned over from where he sat, and dragged his robe of choice toward him. Following a quick change of clothes, he reached for the pastes he used to alter his skin tone and the acupuncture needles.

Gazing at his reflection in the mirror, he jabbed the needles into his face and throat without the slightest hesitation. It was easy to change his approximate age and voice with the help of cosmetics and acupuncture. Granted, there was no way to change his underlying bone structure, so as a general rule, he readied a few identities that were easy to play and switched between those roles according to the situation. Despite this, Akim had never once been caught in the act. He had always managed to kill his targets before they figured him out, and he barely ever engaged with anyone else.

After arranging his face into one he had worn quite often over the past few years, he went about preparing for the trip. He shoved the necessary props for his role and a few of his favorite weapons into a burlap sack. Just as he had tossed in one of his darts, he heard a faint *rip*, so he pulled out the offending item with a shrug. It turned out that the blade had shredded its way through a

map of Tan Pass.

Akim gazed impassively upon the paper as it fluttered to the floor. Tan Pass was a problematic region located on the territory borders, surrounded by precipitous mountains and dangerous rapids. Immigrants who had lost their homes flocked there for lack of anywhere else to go. The locale shared more than a few similarities with his own hometown.

Yes, Akim was all too familiar with what these regions were like. He knew the squelch of ill-drained soil underfoot, the gloom of the forests, the bitter cold of the winters, and the devastation the summer floods brought in their wake. He knew how turbulent the rivers that ran through the mountains were and how the lakes looked more like seas. And he knew the ultimate fate of those who were happy to settle down there, dazzled by the abundant nature.

What was it he asked me? "How is life after revenge?"

He crouched down beside the map lying on the floor, propping his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. It had been twenty years now since he had exacted his own revenge with the emperor's support. No, it might have been even longer than that. At some point, he had stopped counting the years since his beloved's death.

Once upon a time, despair had gnawed at him from the inside out, and hatred had put a blade in his hands, driving him to acts of violence that could only be explained as the folly of youth. But that was all a distant memory now.

"A man reckless enough to hold an emperor at knifepoint would not relinquish his thirst for vengeance so easily."

I guess I did do that, huh?

As he recalled what Genyou had said to him that morning, he subconsciously rubbed at the lizard on his temple. He had gained his tattoo as a result of his foolhardy plot to assassinate the emperor. Now that Akim was past the age of forty, his past self—the one whose eyes had blazed with a thirst for revenge, who had rashly infiltrated the imperial residence—seemed so very young and

innocent.

As for Genyou, even back then—from the very first day they met—his eyes had been cold as ice. To the point that not even pressing a blade to his neck could make him flinch.

On that day more than twenty years ago, Genyou had spoken dispassionately to Akim, his would-be assassin. If Akim's memory served, the man had asked him if he thought he could get away with pointing a blade at the emperor. His younger self must have had a comeback for that. He must have snapped out something brash in the heat of the moment.

Can't remember what I said, though.

The countless bodies that had sunk to the bottom of the water, the lurid days spent on a land that reeked of rot—it was those memories that had put him on the path of a spy, but his once vivid hatred had faded over time, and now all that remained was a nagging grain of emotion.

“How does it feel, you asked? It's dull as dirt, my friend.”

Akim stopped squatting and plopped back into his seat. As he leaned back against the chair, he gazed blankly at his reflection in the mirror. Staring back at him was a man who changed faces every half month. Though boredom plagued his features, he didn't have anything else in particular he would rather be doing. He served Genyou to repay his debt and slew whatever political opponents he was ordered to. But every now and then, when he dispatched of someone he had no personal grudge against, he would earnestly wonder, *What am I even doing?* He was far too jaded to feel guilt at this point, but neither did he think his own survival was worth killing others.

Alas, the god of his homeland forbade suicide. To fulfill his solemn vow for life, he had no choice but to tame the beast known as boredom and keep going until his last breath. And of the countless ways one could pass the time, killing self-important nobles made for a better diversion than most.

I envy him in that regard. His revenge is still a work in progress.

Akim's thoughts turned to Genyou, who kept his simmering hatred close to his chest. No doubt the emperor's heart raced with anticipation each time he imagined himself decapitating his nemesis. Each time he devised a new strategy, each time he carried out a rash new plan, each time he unleashed the tempest of resentment swirling inside him, it must have cleared his mind, honed his body, and made him feel alive.

Just as it once had for Akim.

Nah... Maybe not.

As he gazed at the candle flame flickering in a corner of the vanity, Akim amended that thought. Not a moment after a bead of melted wax dripped down the candle, the cold would freeze it in place again. Just as no hatred could simmer indefinitely, neither could a vengeance blaze with passion forever. All that remained in the end would be a cold, congealed grudge and an obsession too deep to bear.

To Akim's eyes, Emperor Genyou had been stuck in the same place for the past twenty years, caught in the throes of a never-ending revenge. The hatred that man held in his heart was like a river frozen in winter. It had been brought to an indefinite standstill, stratified layers of ice blocking the water's flow.

"I hope he can find some peace."

He ought to take his revenge. And then he ought to join Akim in heaving weary sighs over the tedious days that followed. Granted, the whole reason for the current deadlock was that Genyou *couldn't* make any progress over the past twenty years.

It'd be nice if someone else put a crack in the ice.

With that one last thought, Akim abandoned his reverie. Brooding didn't suit him. Miracles like an outside force redirecting the current never happened, so all Akim could do was carry out his duties and bring Genyou's vengeance that much closer to reality.

His current mission was to put pressure on “Shu Keigetsu” and force her to use her magic.

After changing his hairstyle and hiding his tattoo from view, he made a smooth exit from the attic.

Chapter 2:

Keigetsu Gets Put Through Her Paces

IT HAD BEEN two and a half days since the cavalcade departed northwest from the capital. Cloud Ladder Gardens was the name of the encampment built on the outskirts of Tan Pass. The emperor sometimes stayed there during his imperial tours, so it was a much better appointed facility than anticipated. Between the large buildings and their spacious cloisters, the bridges spanning over a handful of artificial ponds, and the exotic rocks dotting the landscape, it could very well be described as a scenic getaway.

After rounding up their ceremonial officers and porters and eventually arriving at the encampment in the evening, the four Maidens—Kin Seika, Gen Kasui, Ran Houshun, and “Kou Reirin”—ordered their court ladies to unpack their belongings before gathering under an open-air pavilion in the center of a pond. A pavilion had no rafters and made for a good vantage point, so as long as no one could be seen in the vicinity, they wouldn’t have to worry about eavesdropping.

Just to be on the safe side, they chased all their ceremonial officers—and even Captain Shin-u of the Eagle Eyes—out of the pavilion to a place where their voices wouldn’t reach. The pretext was that they wanted to practice their requiem without an audience.

To be fair, it wasn’t entirely a pretext. The Maidens really *did* need the practice.

Particularly Shu Keigetsu, currently trapped in the body of Kou Reirin.

“Beneath the sidereal Heavens does that phantasmal garden grow...”

“Could you be any further off pitch?”

“O valorous warriors, we wish thee everlasting repose...”

“Pause. Would you kindly stop your voice from shaking like a fly buzzing about?”

“Oh, shut up! Get off my case!”

After the Kin Maiden—Seika—had closed her eyes to listen and fired off one too many criticisms, Keigetsu lost her temper and slammed her hands on the table. The vibrations sent ripples through cups of tea that reflected the setting sun.

“How about you, Lady Seika? Would you *kindly* stop nagging me like a shrewish mother-in-law?!”

Despite her efforts to sarcastically imitate Seika’s diction, the subject of her impression only sighed with growing scorn. “Ugh, my goodness. Is that your best attempt at imitating me? Only a despicable, delusional mind would believe that copying someone’s surface mannerisms is all it takes to assume their identity. The mere notion of presenting that dreadful singing voice as Lady ‘Kou Reirin’s’ infuriates me.”

Seika clearly couldn’t stomach the fact that her beloved idol’s body was currently inhabited by Keigetsu’s soul. During the Rite of Reverence, she seemed to have eased up on Keigetsu in recognition of the girl’s magical talent. Yet whenever it came time to perform an art, she would go right back to throwing out harsh comments like, “You lack class” or “How uncouth” or “What an eyesore.”

She paid the proper respect to those with deserving talents, but she shunned the ungifted. While some might find Kin Seika’s consistent philosophy to be refreshing, the ones on the receiving end of her criticism and contempt found it insufferable.

“What does it matter? We’ll have reversed the swap by the time the Repose of Souls rolls around.”

“Oh, I simply can’t stand that lackadaisical attitude of yours! Don’t you feel any desire to improve your craft in the moment? Even after you return to your

body, don't you wish to excel as Shu Keigetsu? Those who lack ambition are no better than swine."

"Did you just call me a swine?! How dare you! I'm giving this my best effort! I may not have mastered the melody yet, but at least I memorized all the lyrics!"

"Effort that fails to yield results isn't worth acknowledging," Seika snapped. "And it shouldn't take multiple days to memorize a single song!"

Keigetsu had to stop herself from raising a fist. If only she weren't under surveillance, she would have loved to set this condescending woman's hair on fire and rob it of its precious luster. As the Day of Ultimate Yin drew near, her qi was more liable to spiral out of control, so the flames would be sure to burn extra bright.

Kou Reirin would never berate me like this. She would praise me in proportion to every word of the song I learned and motivate me to keep trying. Lady Seika clearly has no aptitude for nurturing others.

For a moment, Keigetsu considered yelling as much, but on second thought, Seika had no obligation to nurture her. Upon determining that this would do nothing but expose her own dependence on Kou Reirin, she instead tittered a laugh and corrected her posture to something more appropriate for the prince's "butterfly."

"For the record, it's not my fault that the melody never sticks with me. The song itself is the problem. Didn't you know? Songs are a form of incantation. A *proper* melody flows into the ears as naturally as the Great Ancestor's breath and stirs the soul. This requiem's melody is malformed, so it becomes difficult for one as well versed in spells as I am to remember it."

"I beg your pardon?" Seika's almond eyes widened in surprise. This highly rational woman's greatest feature—correction, most *exploitable* feature—was that as long as the logic checked out, she would easily swallow a bald-faced lie. "Is that really true?" she asked, her expression sobering.

"It is," Keigetsu shamelessly asserted. "The way I see it, this requiem's lyrics

and melody are out of harmony. That incongruity makes me resistant to singing it, which is why my voice always comes out in a squeak.”

The actual reason she struggled to remember the melody was that the sheet music was written in pure text format, so it was difficult for her to parse.

Still, it *was* true that something about the song didn’t feel right to her. Kou Reirin was an excellent singer, and she had mentioned in a past lesson that “achieving perfect harmony between the rhythm of the lyrics and the scale of the melody is the mark of a truly wonderful song,” so there was probably an academic reason for it. Granted, given Keigetsu’s lack of musical background, she couldn’t begin to guess about the particulars.

Oh, who cares?! As far as I’m concerned, any song I struggle to memorize is a dud!

After listening to Keigetsu’s confident explanation, Seika appeared to fall deep into thought. “That’s a fair point... It has long been said that truly skilled performances resemble spells in the way they stir the audience’s souls. It’s not far-fetched to think that one acquainted with the Daoist arts would be more sensitive to that aspect...”

As quick as she was on the uptake, she supplemented additional facts and managed to convince herself in the process.

“See? Now you’re getting it. A sorcerer like me couldn’t possibly sing such a faulty song. So—”

“That’s so interesting!” Just as Keigetsu had leaned across the table, intent on winning Seika to her side, Ran Houshun looked up from cutting the tea cakes and interjected with awe. “It’s an old saying that words have a magical power. Imperfect words must make for a malformed spell. That explains why you’re so soft-spoken and uncomfortable with speaking!”

Houshun nodded and clapped her hands together, those eyes so reminiscent of a cute critter’s sparkling with joy. From an outsider’s perspective, she would look like an ingenue fascinated by another Maiden’s knowledge. But now that

Keigetsu had gotten to know her better, she knew that the correct translation was thus: *Wow, how interesting! By that logic, your inability to talk like a proper lady should make you soft-spoken and uncomfortable with speaking. Yet you're always going around shrieking at the top of your lungs? Huh, that's weird!*

As versed as she was in the parlance of the court, Seika picked up on Houshun's true meaning immediately. Her round-eyed surprise gave way to a sharp glare aimed at Keigetsu.

"Aha! You tried to trick me! By your own logic, you wouldn't be able to go around yelling all the time!"

"Ack!"

"How indolent can one person be?! It's unbelievable how fast your mind can work when it comes to crafting excuses!" Seika scoffed, more distrustful of Keigetsu than ever. Not to be given the slip, the fastidious girl then turned her piercing gaze on Houshun beside her. "And as for *you*, Lady Houshun! I've had my suspicions since the time we made the mirror together, but only someone with a hidden agenda would make comments like that with a smile."

"What?! I-I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Lady Seika... I sincerely apologize if I have given you cause for offense!"

Ever the force to be reckoned with, Houshun stayed the course as a cute little critter terrified of the overbearing Kin Maiden. Just because Reirin and Keigetsu had learned her true colors didn't mean she was ready to show her whole hand.

As the smaller Maiden trembled and hid the bottom of her face behind her sleeves, any onlooker would assume that Seika was browbeating Houshun in a classic example of "metal chops wood." Despite her grievances never being that far off the mark, Seika always came off as high-handed, and it occurred to Keigetsu that Houshun might have been to blame for that all along.

"Now, now. The veracity of Lady Keigetsu's other claims aside, she is correct that we needn't stress over the requiem of tribute." Kasui took a break from sipping her tea to cut in with a voice as cool as ice. "The purpose of our

performance is to pacify the wayward souls. So long as we achieve that aim, the quality of the song itself shouldn't matter. Moreover, it's only natural that she would struggle to make progress in a body not her own."

"Well, perhaps..." Seika couldn't put her foot down too hard against the eldest of the Maidens, especially not when her delivery was so matter-of-fact. Reluctant to let the matter drop nevertheless, she added, "But isn't His Highness set to arrive after tomorrow's Congee Conferment Rite? It's possible he might request a welcome banquet, and a song as the entertainment. We aren't ready to—"

"His Highness is aware of the circumstances. His official stance may be that he came to check on his fiancées, but we know that's not the true purpose of his visit. Once the switch is reversed, I suspect he will head straight back to the capital. I certainly can't imagine him requesting a banquet."

Kasui always came off as stoic and impersonal, but it seemed that self-possession of hers had worked in Keigetsu's favor for once. She shot the Gen Maiden a look that said, *Thanks for backing me up.*

Unfortunately, as Houshun passed out plates to the rest of the Maidens, she decided to dredge up more criticism. "The song may not be a concern, but you ought to mind your body language and demeanor. Our escorts and court ladies are always watching us from a distance. I can't help but worry they might discover the truth."

Her face fell, lending her a sheepish air, but Keigetsu's translation went something like: *I'll let you off the hook on the song, but are you sure you have what it takes to imitate Miss Reirin's graceful body language?* The grin in the words was almost palpable.

I can't stand this nasty, two-faced squirrel!

Every time the conversation seemed to reach a consensus, Houshun would swing it back this way and that. At tea parties past, she had tended to ramble on and on without coming to a point, never establishing whose side she was

attempting to take. Keigetsu had always looked down on her as a spineless fence-sitter, but it all made sense to her now. While the Ran Maiden acted the part of an anxious coward, she was actually stoking the conversation—all for the thrill of watching the weak get backed into a corner.

The best way to deal with a relentless schemer was to glare at them head-on. “No need to feign concern,” said Keigetsu, stabbing a toothpick into her flower cake hard enough to split it open. “I’m fairly confident in my impression compared to *hers*.”

Houshun stiffened in apparent surprise. “My, is that so?”

“Of course. First, I straighten my back like this. Then I lower my gaze a touch. It emphasizes the length of my eyelashes.”

Her audience didn’t seem willing to take her word for it, so Keigetsu adopted body language that screamed “Kou Reirin.” After spending a whole month in her body—and aided by her confidence that she understood the girl’s essence better than anyone else—it was a piece of cake.

“I press my fingers together before putting them to my cheek, and I keep my voice soft and soothing. Like this: ‘My, I do so hate to trouble you.’”

Her breathy murmur made the other Maidens’ eyes go wide.

“Wow!”

“Not bad.”

“Quite impressive.”

Pleased with their astonished stares, Keigetsu carried on with her impression. “‘I sincerely apologize for making you all worry.’”

It was like operatic acting, in principle. The trick was to mind the energy center and diaphragm, even when speaking softly.

Kasui nodded, impressed. “Yes, I’d definitely believe this is Lady Reirin.”

As you should. I am “Kou Reirin,” Keigetsu proudly replied in the privacy of her

mind.

Jolt!

All of a sudden, a chill crawled down Keigetsu's spine, and she looked up with a start. It wasn't that she felt a pair of eyes on her. That ineffable wave of discomfort had welled up from somewhere deep inside her.

"What's wrong, Lady Keigetsu?"

"Huh? Um, well..."

By the time Seika questioned her with a dubious expression, the strange chill had subsided.

What was that just now?

Keigetsu claimed it was nothing important, which earned a blatant look of disapproval from Seika.

"Focus on your act, then. I'll concede that your body language and facial expressions are well rehearsed, but you still have your weak points. Your improvisation skills need work." As always, Kin Seika was strict when it came to the arts—and as far as she was concerned, impressions counted as an art form. She raised a fair hand and pointed to a lotus blooming near the water's edge. "Take that lotus, for example. What would Lady Reirin say if she spotted it during a stroll?"

"My, what a lovely blossom! How I would love to pick it and bring it home with me!"

"Don't be daft. One as compassionate as Lady Reirin would never feel the urge to pick a beautiful flower. She would choose to help it bloom."

"Fine, in that case... 'My, what a lovely blossom! How I would love to care for it and harvest plenty of quality lotus roots!'"

"No harvesting!"

Keigetsu thought her answer was pretty realistic, but Seika scrunched her

gorgeous features into a scowl, far too besotted with the prince's butterfly to accept it.

"Do you truly believe Lady Reirin would harvest lotus roots?! My question was a reference to a scripture verse. 'Those who like flowers will pick them, but those who love flowers will water them.' Gracious, you truly possess nothing in the way of intellect!"

"Hmph, get off your high horse. Isn't one's intelligence reflected in what they say, and one's character reflected in what they leave unsaid? I'm working to improve my character."

"Oh, please. I bet Lady Reirin taught you that. Don't look so proud of regurgitating someone else's words." Seika gave an offended snort, then pointed to the twilight sky. "Next. There are the first stars of the evening. What would Lady Reirin say about them?"

"Look! If you connect that white star to the smaller one to its left, it looks like a potato!"

"I highly doubt that!" Seika shrieked, her face flushed with anger, but Keigetsu was sorely tempted to argue that she was correct. Kou Reirin's frail constitution kept her from doing much aside from smiling serenely, but she was usually thinking nonsense underneath that heavenly beauty.

"I'll admit that Lady Reirin surprised me with her fondness for metal casting and her interest in building furnaces. But for an artist as accomplished and versatile as her, that is best described as a wide range of expertise. Beneath her fragile exterior lies a strong backbone, but that's all there is to it. I wouldn't consider her boisterous!"

"You are utterly delusional!"

Though Seika had seen Kou Reirin for the first time that she was during the Rite of Reverence, she had explained it away as the girl "having an assertive side." The Kin Maiden was nothing if not stubborn.

“She might be right...”

“I don’t disagree...”

Houshun and Kasui had conflicted looks on their faces. As they had both gotten a taste of Reirin’s true nature in the past, they had their own opinions on the subject.

“Let’s put that aside.” Realizing that this argument was going nowhere fast, Seika cleared her throat and went back to the original topic. “It’s certainly better than your song, but you still can’t afford to slack off on your impression. See to it that you don’t give yourself away during tomorrow’s Congee Conferment Rite. It’s Lady Reirin’s reputation on the line, not yours.”

“Hmph. If nothing else, I know Kou Reirin better than you do, and I’m confident I could do a better job playing her.” Keigetsu gave a jerk of her chin, fed up with the other Maiden’s condescending attitude.

Seika’s eyebrows shot up. “I beg your pardon?! That’s a bold claim to make with your meager skills!”

The pair carried on with their acrimonious bickering, leaving the flower cakes set out for them untouched.

“It’s gotten quite late. Shall we head back to our rooms, Lady Kasui?” Houshun proposed, perhaps tired of keeping up her scared little girl act.

“Good idea. We have to head out early tomorrow and cook the congee,” Kasui replied, finishing off the rest of her tea before rising from her seat.

Meanwhile, as the gamboge gold Tousetsu stood watch from the bushes a short distance from the pond’s pavilion, she let out a heavy sigh. “Lady Keigetsu is incorrigible. Another argument with Lady Seika? This would never happen if the affable Lady Reirin were here to mediate.”

“I never thought I’d see those four share such an involved conversation.”

“You said it. Things have gotten quite lively indeed.”

Two men shot back responses from beside her. The first was Captain Shin-u of the Eagle Eyes, who was standing watch from the same bushes, his arms folded. The second was Kou Keishou, the second son of the Kou clan, who had plucked a leaf to twirl between his fingers. He had been appointed as an escort for this impromptu disaster relief mission.

“I wonder what they’re so mad about,” Keishou went on. “If Reirin saw this, I know she’d be jealous that she missed out.”

Being averse to commotion herself, Tousetsu furrowed her brow. “Why would she want any part of this? I can practically feel the tension in the air.”

The man cocked his head as if he was genuinely puzzled she needed to ask. “Why wouldn’t she? All the ruckus looks like fun.”

Those with the strongest Kou blood found snide back-and-forths and shouting matches to be nothing but a form of horseplay. And they loved watching people bare all their emotions to throw themselves into those “fun and games.”

“Don’t you agree, Captain?”

“Don’t ask me.”

Keishou had looked to Shin-u for a second opinion, but the taciturn man brushed off the question. That was hardly unusual for him, so Keishou took no offense, simply protesting the snub with a laugh and tossing his leaf aside.

“By comparison, the roundabout conflict between the emperor and the prince is much more unpleasant. We truly owe His Highness for all his contributions.” As he heaved a sigh, a cloud of white mist formed in front of his face. Spring was right around the corner, but the cold was still as bitter as ever near the mountains. “This Repose of Souls was already set to be five times the scale of previous years, and now we have this Congee Conferment Rite sprung on us. Meanwhile, His Highness’s workload keeps getting bigger. Someone seems quite determined to stand in our way.”

Shin-u nodded in agreement. “His Majesty must be concerned that His

Highness will intervene.”

The two men were much more up-to-date on the happenings of the main palace than Tousetsu. As she listened to their observations, her brow creased with worry. “Do you think His Highness will make it here in time?”

“I do,” Shin-u matter-of-factly replied. “He knows what he’s doing. He’ll pretend his hands are tied, all the while making arrangements to head here on the sly.”

“The only real concern is whether he’ll be able to sneak out of the palace without getting caught. Once he’s on the road, the game is ours. His Majesty won’t be able to follow,” Keishou added with a smile, hoping to put her mind at ease. “His Highness ought to have left the capital by now. He’s supposed to pick up Reirin from Treacherous Tan Peak tomorrow evening and arrive at Cloud Ladder Gardens in the middle of the night. It takes three full days to travel from the capital to Treacherous Tan Peak by carriage, but His Highness has his Stalwart Steed. Just you watch—the switch will be reversed without a hitch, and we’ll all make it home in time for the Repose of Souls.”

The Stalwart Steed was a reward from one of the crown prince’s past expeditions, a swift steed said to descend cliffs with ease and gallop a thousand li in a single day.

Tousetsu relaxed upon hearing that. “He’s bringing the Stalwart Steed? I was concerned about the dangers of the trip from Treacherous Tan Peak, so that is a relief to hear. Perhaps visiting this disaster area was for the best after all. It allowed us to escape the watchful eye of the emperor.”

“Agreed,” Keishou lazily replied.

Beside him, Shin-u gazed up at the sky. Something white had flashed in the corner of his vision. Even as twilight fell, his azure eyes could pick out distant airborne objects.

“I see a dove.”

Keishou stopped blowing on his hands and snapped to attention. “Uh-oh. Could that be one of my brother’s birds?”

In preparation for the worst-case scenario, Keikou had stationed his protégés at various points along the road to the capital so they could send regular updates via dove. Seeing one in flight was a bad sign. Despite Keishou’s flippant tone, his eyes narrowed with caution.

“No,” replied Tousetsu when she looked up a moment later. “That doesn’t appear to be one of Master Keikou’s personal doves.”

“Really? How can you tell?”

“The face and wings are different. If I had to guess, he feared the secret service might catch on if he sent out too many messenger doves, so he added a few decoys into the mix. Once the spies have relaxed their guards, I wouldn’t be surprised if he used a raven or eagle instead.”

Apparently, the court lady had seen right through Keikou’s plan. Shin-u just shot her a brief glance and said nothing, while Keishou stroked his chin in thought.

“You know something, Tousetsu?”

“What?”

“You might actually be really compatible with my brother.”

The moment she heard that, the glacial court lady whirled on him with a completely straight face. “Don’t even joke about it.”

“Yikes! Am I detecting some bloodlust?”

Keishou barely stopped himself from bursting out laughing. For all that she seemed calm and composed, Tousetsu could be quite fierce.

As he went back to breathing on his cold hands, he offered his sister’s favored court lady a warning. “A word of advice, then. Never say something like that in front of my brother. It’ll make him crazy about you.”

Tousetsu stared at the sky in silence for a few long moments. Eventually, she let slip a white puff of breath as an ominous smile came to her face. “If a dove does fly our way, let’s strangle it and make ourselves a stew.”

“Try not to kill our precious messengers, please,” Keishou quipped. Then, upon noticing that Shin-u had gone quiet, he cocked his head in question. “Something wrong, Captain?”

“No,” Shin-u mumbled, dropping his blue-eyed gaze. “I was only thinking that for someone so straightforward, Lord Keikou has a knack for stratagems.”

It seemed he had some mixed feelings about Keikou’s surprising perspicacity.

“Hm? I suppose. For all his antics, he *is* the heir to the Kou clan,” said Keishou, unsure how to interpret Shin-u’s response. Then he shot another wistful glance at the sky. “Let’s hope no doves find their way to us.”

Tousetsu nodded. “Indeed.”

They made that wish for the sake of the poor messenger bird—and for the sake of Keigetsu and her lively chitchat with the other Maidens.

As the trio watched the pavilion from a distance, they prayed that everything would resolve without incident. Alas, the following day, a wild dove would come bearing an urgent message.

Chapter 3: Reirin Flings a Spoon

“THERE IS Treacherous Tan Peak’s evacuation center.”

The Shu Maiden’s nighttime departure from the imperial capital had been followed by a full three days of travel. Over the course of those three days, she progressed down an increasingly precipitous mountain path, switched from carriage to palanquin, and alighted from that palanquin to walk on foot. Her entourage breathed a sigh of relief when the settlement finally came into view in the dim light of dawn.

“Yes! We finally made it!”

“My feet are killing me. I’m ready to collapse.”

The majority of those exclamations came from the blazing scarlet and cinnabar rust Shu court ladies. As wellborn ladies, they had never before been forced to walk such a long distance. Most of the women either hunched over their walking sticks or crumpled to the ground and massaged their calves.

Even Leelee—who had ridden with the Maiden in her carriage and palanquin—and the men serving as escorts or palanquin-bearers were visibly exhausted from this forced march. Only one member of the procession was the picture of good cheer as she stretched.

“What an invigorating journey that was! It was nice to see all the signs of the coming spring. It’s hard to get a proper sense of the seasons in the capital.”

It was the Shu Maiden, the most exalted woman of the bunch—or rather, Kou Reirin wearing her skin.

“What signs? All the rivers and lakes were frozen over.”

“Silly Leelee. Didn’t you notice how thin the ice has gotten? What’s more, our close calls with the snakes and bears coming out of hibernation gave me a real

taste of spring's impending arrival!"

"That shouldn't give you a taste of spring! It should give you a taste of fear!" Leelee snapped from beside her mistress.

Between cowering in fear of snakes as they trekked through the woods and being kept awake at night by the howls of wild animals in the mountains, there hadn't been a moment of peace on the trip. And yet, captivated by these experiences she never could have had in her former sickly vessel, Reirin had remained in good spirits throughout.

"Ha ha ha, too true! When I tried to go ice fishing earlier, the ice was so thin that I almost plunged into the water! Now that was a taste of fear!" an overzealous voice rang out from the side. "Well, not that I'd mind going for a midwinter swim. Argh, but I was so excited to catch some pond smelt! Maybe next time!"

The man with the boisterous laugh was Kou Keikou, who had been appointed "Shu Keigetsu's" ceremonial officer on short notice. Declining to use his status as her personal escort to take the carriage, he had made the entire three-day trek across the mountain path on horseback and on foot, yet he showed not the slightest hint of fatigue. His stamina was a wonder to behold.

Sapped of the will to be the voice of reason, Leelee just nodded vaguely and said, "Uh-huh..."

She had to wonder what made the Kou siblings so passionate about fishing for pond smelt. Along the road, they had been magnetically drawn to every single river they encountered. The ones covered in a layer of ice seemed to be of particular interest.

Due to factors like the depth of the river or the speed of the current, the thickness of the ice varied wildly, with some spots as solid as a floor and others in immediate danger of melting. One wrong step would see them drowning in a winter river, yet the siblings had gone so far as to hold team meetings, excitedly planting their feet on the ice and shouting, "This is a good place to stand!" or "I

believe we could break the ice here!”

Water was the archnemesis of those affiliated with fire. Even a marginal Shu like Leelee had a vague aversion to rivers. Watching the pair’s attempts to bring the waters to heel—the principle of “earth obstructs water” at work, perhaps—made her feel something between disgruntlement and admiration.

“I’m glad to see you both in such good spirits. Considering the attendants you’re stuck with, I was afraid you might be feeling a little ill at ease, Lady Rei... er, *milady*.”

Looking somewhat weary, Leelee threw a glance over her shoulder. Behind them, the court ladies were still slumped on the ground, grumbling and complaining.

Only ten Shu court ladies had accompanied them on this last-minute trip. Due to the number of retainers who had quit after the Noble Consort’s exile, this had been the absolute most they could round up.

Unfortunately, because Keigetsu had previously spent a year bullying the majority of Vermillion Stallion court ladies, they all detested their Maiden. The court ladies present were the ones with the mettle to withstand the abuse and stay in their posts—or to put it another way, the stubborn ones—so they didn’t bother hiding their animosity toward their mistress.

Keigetsu herself must have realized that she couldn’t afford to lose any more court ladies. In a complete reversal from her previous high-handed attitude, by the time of the autumn trip to Unso, she had stopped reprimanding her staff over some minor slacking. As a consequence, the women had begun pushing their luck, cutting corners and foisting all their difficult work onto Leelee. To make matters worse, now even the highest-ranking blazing scarlets were taking advantage of “Shu Keigetsu’s” self-imposed house arrest to unabashedly neglect their duties.

And the problems persisted. The women had spent the whole journey gossiping within earshot about how they ought to be offered a ride in the

carriage, or how Shu Keigetsu was a slave-driver, or how a Maiden like her could never contribute anything of value to a sympathy call. Each time Leelee observed their little clique, she grimaced with shame. Irritation may well have been the biggest source of the exhaustion she was feeling.

“Lady Keigetsu once doused me with water in the middle of winter and forced me to stand out in the gardens, so I do get where they’re coming from... Still, it’s just not right for court ladies to act so disrespectful to their Maiden. I’m really sorry about all this.”

“Oh dear. You needn’t apologize, Leelee,” Reirin said mildly, hoping to smooth things over.

She had heard stories of how hard Keigetsu was on her staff. The court ladies were only human, so it was understandable that they couldn’t treat it as water under the bridge. All the same, Keigetsu had owned up to her mistakes and was slowly but surely working to change herself, and Reirin wished that more people would notice those efforts. She longed to see her friend more widely loved.

That said, it wouldn’t be right for me to use my position as “Shu Keigetsu” to meddle. Barring truly drastic circumstances, I must leave it to the involved parties to mend their relationships. It’s better that I sit back and observe.

As she reflected on their previous trip and the Rite of Reverence, Reirin furtively nodded to herself. Despite appearances, Keigetsu was a strongly independent woman who preferred to settle her own affairs. She would definitely get upset if Reirin went over her head to reprimand her court ladies. As much as Reirin wanted to track down everyone who insulted or shot dirty looks at her best friend and bring them to a private room for a nice, long chat, she had to show restraint.

Whenever I push myself too hard for Lady Keigetsu’s sake, it always seems to make her angry with me. I must learn from my mistakes. This situation calls for self-control. Be good, Reirin!

It wasn't always apparent, but Reirin was constantly practicing moderation in an effort to please her very first friend.

For the time being, I shall commit to memory the faces and distinguishing features of the court ladies who insulted Lady Keigetsu. I can find out their backgrounds and least favorite foods later.

That is, until she eyed the court ladies and came to that conclusion, which threw all her attempts at moderation out the window.

Just then, there came a rush of footsteps from the settlement.

"Hey... Is that the Shu Maiden mentioned in the proclamation?"

"It's gotta be. She's even got servants with her. They really brought us congee!"

"Someone call for Doctor Tou! Tell him the Congee Conferment Rite is about to start!"

A glance in that direction showed a group of men opening the door and tottering outside. Their clothes were drenched in mud, their hair and beards were scruffy, and their bodies were emaciated. It was safe to assume that these were the locals—the ones hit by floods each year and forced to weather the accompanying epidemics.

Despite the early hour, the men's shouts summoned a steady stream of residents from the huts that dotted the area. There were elderly with a bend in their backs. Men coughing listlessly, perhaps suffering from some sort of lung trouble. Women cradling infants with arms like twigs. Unsurprisingly for a border region, some of the children had distinctly foreign features. Likely due to malnutrition, the people's complexions were ashen, their teeth were chipped, and a handful were wearing eyepatches or bandages.

It's exactly as the book described. From nomads who lost ethnic feuds to immigrants looking for a place to settle down, many come here hoping to start a new life in Ei... But each time a flood hits, both the Gen and Kin leadership

refrain from getting involved.

As she looked out over the crowd, whose features were a touch more chiseled than pure Ei natives, Reirin recalled the contents of the book she had read in the mausoleum. It was generally believed that the larger the domain, the better, and that the clans were constantly locked in competition for land, but that wasn't quite accurate. What the feudal lords wanted was land that could make for a good transportation hub. Or if not that, then terrain that was rich in resources, easy to cultivate, and home to valuable residents.

Neither the Gens nor the Kins desired land that was out of the way, sparsely populated, and barren, whose inhabitants possessed no industrial prowess of note, and that was in constant need of aid due to frequent floods. After all, once annexed, they would have to keep an eye out for border disputes and send the region the bare minimum of support.

I've heard that both the Gens and Kins refuse even the simple task of reporting natural disasters to the emperor, so the news takes quite a long time to reach the capital. I'd imagine that puts the locals on edge.

The result was that this region had come under the direct control of the imperial capital, belonging to no one of the five clans. Unfortunately, the capital only sent the military to conduct inspections once every few years. This soup kitchen was the long-overdue culmination of years and years of petitions.

What we are serving to these people is more than a mere bowl of congee. It is the grace of the gods given form, a reminder that the Heavens have not forsaken Treacherous Tan Peak. We must ensure that everyone receives their rightful share.

Motivated by her responsibility as someone born into privilege and that sense of purpose innate to a Kou, Reirin stood straight at attention. But then...

"M-milady! My deepest apologies!"

A demonstrably flustered man came running from one of the luggage wagons parked in front of a cluster of huts, went straight to his knees, and lowered his

head in a deep bow. He was one of the porters in charge of transporting the supplies in advance of the sympathy call. If his neat topknot and forehead protector were any indication, he held a decently high rank.

“We followed our orders and transported the rice in advance, but...I’m afraid only half of the cargo made it here, seasonings and cauldrons included.”

A stir swept through the crowd at this shocking piece of news.

“Huh?”

“What’d he just say?”

Though taken by surprise herself, Reirin bid the man to lift his head. A hint of panic in his tender, droopy eyes, he went on to explain, “The path leading to Treacherous Tan Peak is so steep and narrow that we were forced to split our haul in two. Our group made it here with our cargo intact, but the one behind us lost their footing on the mountain path and dropped their cargo down a cliff.”

“Oh no! Were they all unharmed?” Reirin automatically asked.

The man’s eyes widened a fraction in surprise, and then he prostrated himself, more humbled than ever. “Y-yes, milady. Your concern is appreciated. They stopped their descent by grabbing hold of the branches and rocks jutting from the cliffside. Alas, all the wagons and cargo were lost.”

Upon closer inspection, behind the man with the forehead protector, there was a group of men near the huts kowtowing and trembling so violently that it was clear from a distance. Those must have been the ones who lost the luggage.

“I see... Well, I’m glad everyone is all right, if nothing else,” Reirin murmured.

Behind her, the court ladies began to raise their voices.

“That’s terrible! Whatever will become of the Congee Conferment Rite?”

“There won’t be enough to go around with only half the supplies!”

It appeared they were more concerned with the success of the Congee Conferment Rite than the well-being of the porters.

“What a disaster! And before we’ve even begun to make the congee?! This doesn’t bode well.”

“Quite an inauspicious start. Well, what more could we expect from a sewer rat?”

Or maybe not. If anything, they seemed to be using “Shu Keigetsu’s” failure to blow off steam. Their voices held a note of ridicule more than pure distress.

“What should we do, milady? Shall we send a search party to the bottom of the cliff to retrieve the supplies?” Leelee nervously ventured, the hysteria starting to get to her.

After giving that proposal some thought, Reirin shook her head. “No. We’re already running this Congee Conferment Rite on a tight schedule. We cannot spare the personnel for a search if we hope to finish in time. We must press on with half the supplies and get straight to cooking.”

She could feel in her bones that something was afoot. “Shu Keigetsu” had been tasked with caring for a remote area all on her own. The journey had been a perilous one. And the cargo hadn’t arrived. To lose her composure would be playing right into the enemy’s hands.

I might be under surveillance as we speak.

Emperor Genyou apparently suspected “Shu Keigetsu” of dabbling in the Daoist arts. Since he hadn’t jumped straight to torture, it was probably his policy to act only once he had definitive proof, but that left the question of what he was willing to do to *get* that evidence.

He likely intends to put me in a predicament and force me to use magic.

On reflection, Keigetsu’s magic tended to run out of control whenever her emotions got out of hand. As her powers were a product of her soul, the emotions likewise born of that soul could probably impact her spells. It

followed, then, that the enemy would put pressure on “Shu Keigetsu” and try to induce a spike in her qi.

Since Reirin was unfamiliar with the Daoist arts, she had no reason to fear her qi spiraling out of control. Her best move was to use those opportunities to emphasize that she was both the real Shu Keigetsu *and* incapable of using magic.

“I was the one to suggest that we split into two groups. I have every intention of bearing the responsibility.” The poor porter was grinding his forehead into the dirt, pale as a ghost.

“You needn’t grovel so,” said Reirin, encouraging him to lift his head. “What is your name?”

“It’s Anki,” the man with the forehead protector replied in a trembling voice. “No surname. I am a mere manservant.”

The court ladies took to lambasting Anki, perhaps hoping to stress their own blamelessness in the matter.

“How are you planning to fix this?!”

“Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if these starving people start a riot!”

The locals, who had been listening in on this conversation, took turns yelling over this upsetting turn of events.

“Hey, hold on! Does that mean you won’t have enough congee for all of us?!”

“The hell?! What was even the point of this rite, then?!”

The men’s faces flushed with anger, while the women behind them began to cry. Long since resigned to their circumstances, the children born and raised on the land simply hung their heads, their faces screaming, *I told you so*.

“Hush, everyone. What is all the fuss about?”

Just then, a man emerged from one of the hovels toward the back and walked out in front of the crowd. He looked to be around fifty or so, a middle-aged man

with a tranquil air. Though clad in the same shabby rags as his neighbors, he had a strong build, and despite the beard obscuring much of his face, there was a gleam of intelligence in his grayish eyes.

At his mild interjection, the locals whipped around one after another.

“Doctor Tou!”

“You won’t believe this! We finally get a Congee Conferment Rite, and half of the rice never made it!”

“Oh dear...” The man called Tou frowned upon hearing the situation. A moment later, however, he gave a light shake of his head and attempted to talk the crowd down. “That is a shame. Nevertheless, it’s not our place to complain about the charity we receive. We should be grateful that His Majesty generously granted us congee at all, even if it is half of what we hoped.”

“But it’s not fair, Doctor Tou! The other afflicted regions get enough congee to go around!”

“He’s right! Why do we always get the short end of the stick?!”

Tou held up a hand to silence the enraged crowd, then bowed his head. “First off, I thank you for making the long trip to be here, Lady Shu Keigetsu. My name is Tou Juntoku. I’m a community counselor of sorts.”

Given that he had a surname, he had to come from a decently well-off family. Tou went on to briefly explain that he used to work as a town doctor in the western territory. Amid his aimless travels in search of medicinal herbs, he had happened upon this community and decided to settle down for a time.

“‘For a time’? You’re welcome to stay here permanently!”

“More than welcome! But I guess we can’t complain. You *have* saved our hides with the supplies you bring back from your wanderings.”

“You better not disappear into the night again, you hear? We miss you when you’re gone.”

The locals seemed deeply attached to Tou. He had probably delivered them

from a post-disaster epidemic making the rounds a while back.

In sharp contrast, those same men shot a bitter glare Reirin's way.

"Doesn't seem like the capital-dwellers have any interest in aiding their subjects. Well, what do they care? We're just a ragtag bunch of disaster victims and immigrants."

"Exactly! What's so charitable about running a one-day meal service as a formality? And now they don't even have the damn congee!"

"Calm down. You insult His Majesty," Tou protested, hoping to pacify the locals, but they wouldn't hear it. Anger and discontent rippled through their ranks in the blink of an eye, and soon the air was so thick with tension that one might well reach out and touch it.

"This is a complete mess."

"Better cover your ears, ladies. I bet *someone* is about to start screaming. 'Oh, it's not fair! It's not my fault!'"

The hardest part to stomach was that the court ladies in the background were cracking wise about this development, not panicking alongside their mistress.

Leelee's temper flared as she was caught between the two groups, but she clenched both hands to her chest, apprehension winning out. *Seriously, though, what do we do?*

The rancid atmosphere prickled against her skin. The men's hostility was bad enough on its own, but watching the children sag with disappointment behind them made Leelee's heart ache.

"Whatever shall I do?" Reirin said from beside her, looking unlike her usual self with the way she was drooping. Leelee's despair only grew.

If even the imperturbable Kou Reirin was at her wits' end, the situation was truly dire.

"I never imagined the chance would present itself..."

Just as Leelee stepped closer to comfort her mistress, the girl murmured something strange. A funny sound escaped Leelee's lips. "Hrm?"

What did she just say?

"Oh, no, it's not what you're thinking! I am most certainly not pleased with this development. I would never behave so frivolously around my disadvantaged subjects! I am not the slightest bit thrilled at all! I promise!"

After snapping to attention and firing off that string of desperate excuses, Reirin cleared her throat. Then, apparently intent on playing "Shu Keigetsu," she tossed her hair over her shoulder. "You people are way off the mark! It's not my fault half of the cargo didn't get here!"

The men bristled at the trademark haughtiness of her tone. "Hah! Planning to foist the blame onto your retainers?!"

But her next words took the wind out of everyone's sails.

"It's not their fault either!"

"Say what?"

"And just to be clear, it's obviously not because you're immigrants or disaster victims! If it's anyone's fault, it's the fault of the steep mountain path—which makes it the Heavens' fault! But we can't hold the Heavens accountable. What a hassle!" Reirin said, looking not the least bit hassled. Then a wicked grin lifted the corners of her lips. It was curious how the facial expressions were the one part of the act that seemed to come naturally to her. "There's only one thing to do in a situation like this. Any guesses?"

"Huh?"

Put on the spot, the men traded glances.

"I-I dunno, what?"

"Press on with only half the rice, I figure."

"Come back another day?"

Swept up in the moment, the locals broke into timorous whispers.

The grin on “Shu Keigetsu’s” face widened. “My sources tell me that the water quality around here isn’t so bad,” she triumphantly declared, then looked over her shoulder with an air of dignity. “Bro—er, Lord Keikou!”

“Way ahead of you. I know where to find branches that ought to be perfect for the job.”

It was at this point that her escort walked over to a nearby thicket and began searching for branches. When he found one that was sufficiently long and pliable, he snapped it in two with a single flick of his hand and returned with a broad smile.

“This type of tree should serve our purposes well. There’s a bunch in the area. For the line, unraveling a robe will give us more than enough to work with. That just leaves the bait and hook.”

“We brought prawns to season the congee. Let’s break them into smaller pieces and use those,” the Maiden replied with confidence. “And I packed plenty of needles for sewing and acupuncture, so you needn’t worry about the hooks.”

No one present, Leelee included, had any idea what they were talking about.

“Uh, wha...?”

“What are you planning to do?” Tou asked on behalf of all the locals, a dubious look on his face.

“Shu Keigetsu” sniffed and gave a snobby jerk of her chin. “You *still* haven’t figured it out?” Then, with one of the most nefariously haughty smiles the world had ever seen, she went on, “If they have no rice, let them eat fish! Since we only have half the rice to cook, we only need half the hands to make the congee. Everyone else is coming to the river for some ice fishing!”

She... The corner of Leelee’s mouth twitched. *She’s freaking unbreakable!*

As she watched her mistress—and her brother—turn an unforeseen

predicament into a chance to sneak in some pond smelt fishing, Leelee was once again reminded of how formidable the Kou blood could be.

“Did she say ‘fishing’?”

Only moments ago, the children had averted their eyes and given up all hope, but now they were exchanging looks of confusion instead.

“Whew! What a haul!”

A basket filled to the brim with small fish snug in her arms, Reirin walked along the path with a spring in her step, leaving the children to lead the way.

Approximately two hours had passed since her arrival at Treacherous Tan Peak. She was on her way back after taking the men of the group to enjoy some fishing in the river. At this point, they had caught more than enough to last them the day, so Reirin and the kids had turned back to the settlement to start cooking, while Keikou and the men stayed behind to keep at it.

“Wow! I never knew we could catch this much fish in the winter!”

“Once we’ve dropped these off, I’m gonna head back to the river and keep fishing with the grown-ups!”

“No fair! I wanna go too!”

The children were likewise in a good mood. They refused to part with the fishing poles crafted for their own personal use. Branches had been substituted for the poles, the unraveled silk threads of a robe for the fishing lines, and the needles Reirin carried for medicinal purposes for the hooks. A bit makeshift, but the upside was that they could prepare a lot of them on the fly.

Look how happy they are! It was worth snapping my ornamental hairpin into pieces to use as lures.

Pond smelt were attracted to shiny objects, so Reirin had broken up her golden hairpin and affixed a piece to everyone’s hooks. That was one of the reasons for their generous haul. After serving their purpose as lures, the

fragments could also be exchanged for money, though only a paltry sum.

“Thank you so much, milady! Now that we have these fishing poles, we’ll never go hungry again!”

Of the three children in Reirin’s group, the two boys were beaming at her.

“Dhal,” muttered the sole girl walking alongside them, a stark contrast to their excitement.

Reirin had never heard the word before, but judging by the girl’s frosty expression and the flustered looks her companions shot her, it probably didn’t mean anything good.

Due to Treacherous Tan Peak’s large immigrant population, it wasn’t rare to hear people speak non-Ei languages. The language the children broke into now and then was supposedly the same one spoken by the nomads scattered around the Tan Region.



“Leanne! Don’t say stuff like that around the Maiden. It’s rude.”

“Would you rather I said it in a language she understands?”

The grumbling girl had the foreign-sounding name of Leanne and features more sharply defined than a pure Ei native. She looked to be about thirteen, and her sharp eyebrows and obsidian eyes gave her an air of intelligence.

“There’s no point teaching ourselves to fish. Another flood is coming this summer. When the river overflows, all the fish will get swept away.”

“Well, yeah, maybe... But I’ll take it over a single bowl of congee, at least,” one of the boys mumbled in protest.

“Exactly. And we should count ourselves lucky that she even came in the first place,” said the other.

It sounded like they were trying to convince themselves, and it pained Reirin to hear it. They clearly didn’t believe that a one-day Congee Conferment Rite or fishing trip would do anything to improve their lives.

Aiding them in the truest sense will require addressing the heart of the issue.

As Reirin turned the problem over in her mind, the settlement peered into view past the thicket. A shout of “Screw you!” rang out from the serving station, at which the Maiden looked up with a start.

A glance in that direction revealed a large crowd gathered around the rightmost pot in the row of five cauldrons. Reirin had asked Tou—the community organizer—and the dependable Leelee to supervise, but it appeared they had run into an issue.

After running over in a hurry and parting the crowd of rubbernecking locals, she found the one at the center of the commotion to be Leelee. She was standing in front of the cauldron, grabbing another one of the blazing scarlets by the collar.

The woman in her grip was smiling back at her with distaste and scorn, her thin eyebrows arched into a glare. If Reirin’s memory served, her name was

Kasei, and she came from a relatively upper-class background. Her entourage of colleagues was protesting, “Let Lady Kasei go, you little rat!”

“Shove it! You’re all a godsdamned disgrace to court ladies everywhere! Why the hell would you empty a spittoon into the congee?! Are you proud of yourselves for ruining these poor people’s food?!”

“Ruined? Whatever are you implying? Congee without toppings is ever so plain. I simply chipped in to provide some flavor for these unfortunate souls.”

“How can you even say that with a straight face?!”

From the sound of it, Kasei and her lackeys had mixed the food scraps and trash accumulated over the trip into one of the cauldrons. Having caught on to their mischief, Leelee was red-faced with rage and making no effort to watch her language.

“There was crap and animal fat in there! We already had so little congee to go around, and now you’ve made one of the five pots completely inedible!”

“My, but you have a vulgar mouth on you! Who would want congee served by such an incompetent Maiden and crass court lady? Why, it’s for the people’s own sake that we don’t let them partake!”

“I sure hope you’re prepared to shoulder the blame for this!”

“Don’t be silly! That will fall on our dear mistress. Any mishap during a ceremony is the fault of the Maiden.” Leelee yanked Kasei closer, but Kasei only shook her off with a giggle. “Four of the cauldrons are still perfectly usable, are they not? Knowing *her*, she’ll press onward without complaint for fear of a scandal.”

Upon hearing that last comment, Reirin pieced together what had happened. Kasei had a grudge against Keigetsu, and she was attempting to settle the score by making a blunder of the rite. To escape punishment, she would take advantage of Keigetsu’s habit of hiding her failures.

“Why, you little—oh, milady!” Just as Leelee seemed ready to deck the other

woman, she spotted Reirin in the crowd and spun around with a start. “We have a problem! These blazing scarlets emptied a spittoon into one of the cauldrons! It’s my fault for focusing too much on the other pots. Please forgive —”

“Shu Kasei.” Reirin cut Leelee short and turned to the unrepentant court lady. “May I ask what ‘I’ have done to warrant such resentment?”

“Goodness, Lady Keigetsu! Are you certain you want to have this discussion in front of such a large crowd? I assumed you’d rather hide how you once hurled an inkstone at me because an instructor praised my poetry! Or how, as punishment for acquiring a brand-new rouge for myself and not my mistress, you made me kneel in the winter gardens until my cheeks grew chapped!”

Kasei must have been injured when Keigetsu chucked that inkstone. She lifted her bangs and showed off a small scar near her temple.

“Even Her Majesty plans to wash her hands of you in the near future! Try to hide it all you like, but word spreads fast among the court ladies. Before you’re relieved of your position, milady, I would like to see you make amends for this scar!”

The belligerent sparkle in her eyes proved that she was assured of her victory.

There’s a rumor circulating only among the court ladies, hm?

Reirin calmly observed Kasei’s triumphant look. However indolent the Shu court ladies were, as far as she knew, none of them went so far as to proactively harass Keigetsu. And for good reason—now that Kenshuu was the girl’s acting guardian, bullying Keigetsu could be perceived as picking a fight with the empress.

But now that gossip has incited them to act. Little do they realize that Aunt Kenshuu hasn’t washed her hands of Lady Keigetsu at all.

As a fellow member of the Kou clan, Reirin had a good idea of what her aunt was up to. Not to mention, given the entire family’s high regard for Keigetsu, it

was absurd to suggest that Kenshoo would ever forsake her.

Someone must have started a false rumor among the court ladies.

There was someone pulling the strings in the shadows. Once Reirin had the situation under control, she would need to find out who put that idea in Kasei's head.

"Leelee. Forgive me for assuming, but 'I' already apologized, did I not?"

Picking up on her meaning, the court lady beside her nodded in response. "Yes. Just once, not long after you grew close to Lady Reirin."

That meant that Kasei's allegations were true, but Keigetsu had also owned up to her mistakes and apologized.

Though hesitant to come out and say it, Leelee added in a whisper, "It was wrong of Lady Keigetsu to resort to violence, but as best I can tell, Lady Kasei left the scar on purpose. She hopes to unite the court ladies by stirring up animosity against our Maiden."

For all the lingering bad blood Leelee had with Keigetsu, she still found Kasei's methods hard to swallow.

Kasei carried on with her taunts, her lips curving into a grin. "Well, Lady Keigetsu? Going to punish me again? Be my guest. Of course, if you do, I will be sure to inform the capital of your little mishap during the Congee Conferment Rite!"

She was clearly confident that she would get off scot-free, and it incensed Leelee to hear it. It was fair to resent Keigetsu for her past actions. Still, not only had the Maiden deigned to apologize to mere court ladies, but she had also genuinely reflected on her actions and was making an effort to change.

Either way, don't drag innocent citizens into your grudge, asshole!

Having eked out a living in a seedy part of the city and gone without food more than a few times, Leelee found Kasei's actions unconscionable.

I can't wait to watch Lady Reirin lay into this uppity jerk!

Knowing how much Reirin adored Keigetsu and loved her subjects, she would be sure to deal Kasei a grueling punishment.

What's it gonna be? Drowning her in water? Or boiling oil? Ooh, I bet Lady Reirin wouldn't hesitate to feed her some of the ruined congee!

No doubt she would carry out judgment as swiftly as she exterminated the aphids that ravaged her garden.

"It is not my place to punish you for harboring a grudge, Shu Kasei. Until the Congee Conferment Rite is over, I ask that you stand next to that cauldron and do nothing."

Imagine Leelee's surprise when *that* was the Maiden's response. She gawked at her mistress. "Milady! Are you sure you only want her to stand there?!"

"Yes."

Leelee checked to be sure she'd heard right, but Reirin's answer didn't change. Kasei and her handful of accomplices traded deflated looks, then eventually broke into sneers. Although they did stand next to the cauldron as instructed, they struck up a lively conversation on the side. It came off less like a punishment and more like they had been granted an excuse to slack off on work.

You're kidding! Are we really going to let them walk all over us?!

As Leelee trailed behind her mistress, who had already moved on to one of the other pots, she clenched her fists, conflicted. It was true that the Shu Keigetsu everyone knew would freeze up in a situation like this, settle for shooting the bully a dirty look, and ultimately let the matter drop. Then, once she was back in her room, she would throw a tantrum and maybe plot to get revenge later.

This is the right way to do things if she wants to play "Lady Keigetsu." And I get that she doesn't feel like it's her place to punish someone else's court ladies. Still, knowing Lady Reirin, I was sure she would get back at them somehow.

It belatedly dawned on Leelee that *this* was what it meant for Reirin to show restraint and keep Keigetsu's magic from coming to light—to play at being someone she wasn't. For all the times Leelee had stressed over her mistress's terrible acting, the sight of Reirin repressing herself to put on a more convincing performance brought something bitter welling up in her throat.

"It would appear the other four pots were indeed unaffected. Thank you, Leelee. The congee should be ready shortly, so get ready to serve it, please."

As Reirin went around dispassionately checking on each pot and tasting the congee with a wooden spoon, Leelee glumly replied, "Yes, ma'am..."

"Check it out, boys! Looks like this is where the cookout is!"

The guttural voice prompted the entire crowd to whip around. What they found was a thug pushing his way through the rows of locals orderly gathered around the cauldrons.

No, not one. More men trailed behind the ostensible boss. In the blink of an eye, there was a band of ten men standing there. Their hair hung loose, they clad themselves in animal pelts, and every single one of them was armed. Judging by their appearance, they had to be brigands—men who haunted the mountains and robbed people for a living.

"We were just walking through the mountains, minding our own business, when we smelled some mighty tasty congee!"

"Rude of you guys not to extend us an invite!"

As the locals erupted into screams, the men cast leering glances around.

Their previous predicament couldn't hold a candle to this new one. Leelee broke into a cold sweat. *What the hell?! It's one thing after another!*

All of the strapping men, Keikou included, were currently out fishing. Most of those who remained were women, invalids, and the elderly. There were a handful of men among their ranks, such as their designated supervisor—Tou—or Anki and the other porters, but it was hard to imagine them fighting off an

organized group of ten brigands.

One of the women's legs buckled under her as she was shoved aside. "Eek... S-someone hel—"

The boss took this in with a shrug. "Aww, no need to be scared. We ain't got eyes for your sick and elderly. Might as well screw a pile of chicken bones instead. We're here for those filthy rich, curvy ladies from the capital." Then he jerked a thumb at one of the cauldrons. "And your food. We're starving over here! Think we'll help ourselves to all the congee you've got."

"You can't!" Leelee shouted upon hearing their plans to ruin the rite.

"Hunh?!" One of the bandits turned his head and growled out a threat. "You think you're in any position to tell us no?!"

"W-wait! Our money and valuables are one thing, but you don't have to take these people's congee!"

"Cease this, Leelee." Just when the redhead had mustered up all her courage to protest, a voice cut in from the side to talk her down. "We should do as these men say."

After saying this, Reirin bowed to the leader of the bandits. Heedless of Leelee's shock, she even demurely guided him over to the pots.

"I only ask that you do not lay a hand on the locals."

"Heh heh! Depends on how good a job you girls do of satisfying us. Let's start with the congee."

Reirin brought the guffawing men to the rightmost cauldron. It was the same one Kasei and her lackeys were standing next to.

None of the court ladies had predicted this development. The women shrank back from the brigands lumbering toward them. "Um, Lady Keigetsu, we—"

"Stay where you are." Reirin's only response was to call them coolly to a halt. "Didn't I say to stand next to that cauldron and do nothing until the Congee Conferment Rite is over?"

“B-but—”

“Very well. If you have repented of your deeds, I shall permit you to kneel instead.”

As soon as the Maiden made that concession, the court ladies dropped straight to their knees, deliriously muttering apologies. This allowed them to curl in on themselves and hide their faces from the brigands.

Leelee swallowed hard as she watched this play out. *What is Lady Reirin planning? I highly doubt she would force the court ladies to entertain these brigands as payback.*

Perhaps her idea was to strike back at the brigands by feeding them the garbage-filled congee. But if the men flew into a rage over how disgusting it was, there would be no hope of beating back their group of ten. Reirin was a fairly skilled fighter, but the only weapon she had on hand was a wooden spoon.

As for our men...

Leelee glanced back at Tou and the porters, but due to their lack of combat training, the most they could manage was adopting a defensive stance. The same went for the rest of the sick and elderly men present.

What do we do?! Her heart was in her throat for sheer terror.

The children’s faces were likewise frozen in fear. They backed away from the pots, holding up their bowls and spoons like shields.

“Sorry this ended up our own private feast. Once we’re done eating, we promise to give you girls plenty of love.”

The men flocked around the one idle pot, grinning.

“Allow me to serve you.”

Standing at the front of the pack, Reirin raised her wooden spoon—and then, for some reason, took a great leap backward.

“Huh?”

Clang!

Heedless of the men’s blank stares, Reirin chucked something at the pot. That powerful, long-range projectile was none other than her solid wooden spoon.

Pop!

There came a foreboding sound as the cauldron vibrated, and the very next moment, its contents gushed forth like a geyser.

“Eeeeeek!”

The court ladies shrieked, but they were fortunate enough to be crouched down and hanging their heads. It was the brigands standing nearby who took the brunt of the damage. After all, that geyser of congee had soared to the height of a grown adult.

Unable to withstand the viscous globs of heat pelting their faces, the men fell writhing to the ground.

“Hot, hot, hot, hot! Wh-why, you little...!”

Reirin took advantage of that opening to throw a dagger and cut the rope from which the cauldron hung. The pot lurched sideways, raining boiling hot congee on the men.

“Aghhhhh!”

“Now’s our chance, my dear porters!” Reirin cried as she rushed out in front of the brigands.

Her first move was to deliver a powerful kick to the boss while he was squirming from the congee assault. That was one down. She then crouched to grab a burning log of firewood, which she swung at another opponent’s stomach. Two down. The way she slipped between the men and skillfully wielded her weapon made it look more like a dance than a fight.

Between their burns from the congee and the fact that their leader had been

the first to fall, the gang of brigands was in disarray. It was evident that Reirin could make short work of them in their weakened state.

“Everyone, follow our Maiden’s lead!”

“Yes, sir!”

Better still, the porters snapped to their senses and jumped into the fray one after another. In the blink of an eye, all ten brigands were restrained with rope.

When the boss briefly regained consciousness, he thrashed and tried to undo his rope bindings. “What the hell?! Hey! This isn’t what—”

“Silence, scoundrel!”

Fortunately, Anki knocked him out as soon as he saw that, so the arrest ended without incident. With the boss down for good this time, silence fell over the row of cauldrons, a stark contrast to the violent scuffle that had just unfolded.

“Wha...?”

This series of events had Kasei and her followers flat on their backsides, too scared to speak. Not only was this the first time these well-to-do ladies had ever laid eyes on brigands, but it was also the first time they had ever been caught up in a brawl.

“Wh-what monsters those men were!” Kasei gasped out, still planted on her buttocks.

A shadow fell over her face. She looked up to find the freckled Shu Maiden standing over her.

“Are you quite all right? Oh, good, none of the congee landed on you. What a stroke of luck.” Despite her reputation for shrieking at the drop of a hat, the girl calmly put a hand to her cheek and went on, “You ought to be thanking those brigands. If not for them, *you* might have been the ones to bathe in that scalding congee.”

“Huh?”

“The slightest of vibrations can cause congee to boil over if it is not stirred regularly. That goes doubly if foreign matter is introduced. With fat added into the mix, I imagine it must have been piping hot.”

“What?!”

As Kasei’s group finally pieced together the *real* reason their Maiden had ordered them to stand next to the cauldron and “do nothing,” the color drained from their faces. She knew that a pot left unattended was liable to explode. And in light of that knowledge, she had ordered them to stand there.

“But because the brigands showed up and you ladies kneeled in repentance, you didn’t have to take that congee to the face. Look what good a little self-reflection can do.”

If they hadn’t dropped to their knees, *they* would have been the ones to suffer agonizing burns.

Suddenly far more terrified of their mistress than of those brigands, the ladies scrambled to cling to her skirt. “L-Lady Keigetsu! My deepest apologies! Please forgive us! On reflection, the inkstone you threw and my banishment to the gardens both fall under the umbrella of discipline! I-I beg that you overlook this transgression!”

“Whatever are you talking about?” The girl only tilted her head to one side, her smile as serene as ever. “Don’t you remember what I said? It is not my place to punish you for harboring a grudge.”

“P-pardon?” Unsure how to interpret that statement, Kasei’s voice hitched.

A faint smile rising to the freckled Maiden’s face, she kneeled beside the court lady. “‘I’ am indeed at fault for taking my tantrums too far. I cannot chastise you for holding a grudge over that. However...”

Those fair fingers tucked the court lady’s disheveled hair behind her ear. Although it was a tender gesture, Kasei trembled like someone standing before a wrathful deity.

“You had to answer for the sin of forsaking your duties and spoiling our subjects’ precious rations. The explosion would not have happened had you not neglected the pot and mixed in contaminants. Your punishment was of your own making.”

Well, technically, Lady Reirin delivered the final blow with her spoon! Leelee thought, but it definitely wasn’t the time or place to say as much.

Her mistress’s rage was a bit terrifying to witness—given the Maiden’s love of farming, it turned out wasting food was one of her taboos—but stronger than that fear was the urge to whoop for joy. Nobody had come even close to walking all over Kou Reirin. She wasn’t the sort to stand by and let someone insult her best friend, nor would she let them get away with hurting her subjects.

“Should you change your ways, you can be rewarded instead of punished.” When Kasei stared up at her, pale-faced and hopelessly intimidated, Reirin reached out to gently brush her cheek. “You must dedicate enough of yourself to your duties to make up for neglecting them. You must cherish the people of our kingdom deeply enough to make up for hurting them. Only then will you be repaid with blessings instead of misfortunes. Is that something you can do?”

“Ye—”

“Will you swear to me that you can do it?”

There was no way Kasei could respond to that sweet whisper with anything but an affirmative reply and a nod. Utterly overwhelmed by her mistress’s menacing aura, she bowed her head as if stupefied—or bewitched, perhaps.

“I swear it!”

“Hee hee. I’m glad to hear it.” With a flash of an innocent smile, the Maiden rose to her feet. “In that case, can I put you in charge of dishing out the remaining four pots? We need one person to manage the lines, one to take a head count, and one to collect the used dishes. Have the ladies team up with the men and stand two at a cauldron to serve the food. The pot of inedible

congee is *mysteriously* empty, so someone should clean it out and fill it with oil. We can fry these fish.”

Kasei’s eyes darted to and fro at this series of rapid-fire orders. “Erm...”

“I trust you can handle this?”

“Y-yes, ma’am! Right away!”

The very next moment, Kasei sprang to her feet and, in a complete departure from her previous contrarian attitude, dashed off like a fire had been lit under her. Upon seeing this, her entourage of court ladies followed suit.

Excellent. Let’s keep this up, thought Reirin. As she watched a semblance of order return to the scene, she rolled up her sleeves and muttered, “Let’s do this with a bang!”

The plan was for Gyomei to swing by that evening. If she didn’t take his horse to meet the other Maidens at Cloud Ladder Gardens, reverse the switch immediately, and leave for the capital by tomorrow, she wouldn’t make it back in time for the Repose of Souls. Although the end of the soup kitchen was in sight, there was still much she wanted to do to help Treacherous Tan Peak in the truest sense.

As Reirin was tying up her sleeves with a cord, Tou came running over in a fluster. He seemed quite harried, given the clumsy way he stumbled over the spoon on the ground and bumped into the table where the bowls had been set out face down.

Once he was face-to-face with Reirin, he lowered his head in a deep bow. “Milady! Thank you so much for your help! After you left me in charge of supervising, I’m utterly ashamed of how useless I turned out to be.”

Evidently, he had come to apologize for failing to salvage the situation.

“Don’t be. No one could have prevented the bandit attack.”

Reirin’s calm response belied what she was really thinking. Sure, a single town doctor couldn’t have hoped to stop the brigands’ violence...but he *should* have

been able to stop the tittering court ladies from emptying their food scraps into the cauldron.

Could his goal be to ruin the Congee Conferment Rite and put pressure on “Shu Keigetsu”?

Drawing his own conclusions about her discreetly probing gaze, Tou clutched his right leg with a sheepish look. “I must also apologize for failing to keep the court ladies in line. Due to an old wound, my leg cramps up if I spend too long in the cold.”

To back up his claim, he rolled up the hem of his outfit. There was indeed a scar that ran from his ankle to his knee. With an injury that big, it was a miracle he could walk at all. Reirin was initially shocked, then ashamed for ignorantly pointing fingers.

“Goodness! I should apologize for being so oblivious to your circumstances! I wouldn’t have asked you to supervise had I known.”

Tou waved off her earnest apology, discomfited. “I introduced myself as the community counselor, so it’s only natural that you would turn to me. It’s certainly no fault of yours.”

“The congee’s ready, Doctor Tou! Better hurry up and get in line, or you’ll miss your chance to eat!” came Leanne’s voice from behind them. Her words oozing with spite, she tacked on, “Especially since our rations were cut in half.”

After watching the girl turn on her heel, Tou prostrated himself before the Maiden. “I beg your pardon, milady! She has no right to speak to you that way after you taught her how to fish.”

“It’s quite all right. She’s not wrong that we’re missing half the rice. I bid you rise.”

At Reirin’s prompting, Tou apprehensively lifted his head, then shot a wistful glance toward Leanne’s back. “These children have lived through far too many floods, and they are left to fend for themselves every single time. They have

nowhere else to go, and there's nothing they can do to effect change. Behaving cynically and keeping their expectations low is their only way to keep from getting hurt. Children like her are a common sight around disaster zones." His assessment was as levelheaded as could be expected from a doctor.

"Keeping their expectations low,' hm?" Reirin murmured in echo.

If you switched out the repeated floods for illness, Reirin could understand where Leanne was coming from. This land would never change. Her health would never improve. After getting a taste of that helplessness one too many times, Leanne had given up hope, while Reirin had given up despair. That was the only way they could make it through each day.

"Still, sometimes miracles do happen."

As a brilliant comet flashed across Reirin's mind, her hands clenched into fists.

Tou appeared to have missed that. "Say that again?" he asked, craning forward to better catch the words.

Reirin brushed it under the rug with a smile. "It's nothing important. I was merely impressed by your knowledge of disaster zones."

"Ha ha, well, I've wandered through various disadvantaged communities as part of my training as a doctor. Granted, I was so taken by the locals here that I ended up settling down. I'm practically the village leader at this point."

"That's a very touching story."

As she nodded along, various thoughts raced through Reirin's mind. She had yet to ask anyone permission for what she was about to bring up. Even so, she was confident she could make her case for it later.

I must live up to my name as a Maiden...and as the best friend of a miracle worker like Lady Keigetsu.

That call to duty drove Reirin to go on, "I've actually grown quite fond of these people myself. Would it be all right if I came back tomorrow to deliver the relief supplies that didn't make it here today? Just so you're aware, I may have

to bring another Maiden along.”

Technically, she wouldn’t be bringing another Maiden along. A different Maiden would be showing up altogether.

If it wasn’t obvious already, as soon as the switch was reversed, Reirin planned to come back and devote one more day to relief efforts as the Kou Maiden. It meant she wouldn’t make it back in time for the Repose of Souls, but as long as the issue of the body swap was resolved, she didn’t particularly care if Kou Reirin’s reputation took a hit.

“Truly?!” Tou met this with wide-eyed surprise. After a short pause, he broke into a grin that radiated uncontrollable delight. “What a gracious offer! Manners dictate that I should decline, but that’s too good a deal to refuse. You’re welcome back anytime.”

Tou’s smile was a friendly one, and there was something familiar in his gentle, grayish eyes that made him feel like a relative. It was enough to make Reirin wonder if she recognized his face from somewhere.

Reirin was about to thank him for the warm welcome, but she clamped her mouth shut when Tou added, “Oh, and I’d appreciate it if you brought your brother along with you.”

My brother?

Her immediate assumption was that he meant Keikou, but Kou Keikou and “Shu Keigetsu” were supposed to be complete strangers.

“My brother? Who are you referring to?” Reirin asked carefully.

“Hm?” Tou blinked, then awkwardly replied, “Was I mistaken? You will have to excuse me. You and your escort seemed close as siblings, so I jumped to conclusions.”

“That’s—”

Was it an innocent misunderstanding, or was that an attempt to trip her up? Before Reirin had a chance to investigate his true intentions, a man’s deep voice

called out from behind her.

“Lady ‘Shu Keigetsu’!” Speak of the devil and he shall appear. It was Kou Keikou, finally back from the fishing spot. He was accompanied by a group of men rejoicing over their big haul, but the strained look on his face alone stood out. “Come this way.”

Reirin’s first assumption was that her brother was upset over her brawl with the brigands, but he spared the captive men only a glance before averting his gaze, so that didn’t seem to be the case.

Once he had led Reirin somewhere far from the crowd, Keikou lowered his voice and said, “We have a big problem. A dove just arrived from a protégé of mine who stayed behind in the capital. Apparently, His Majesty snuck out of the imperial palace and headed northwest. He did an excellent job covering his tracks, but there’s evidence that his carriage already departed the capital two days ago.”

“Oh no!” This unforeseen turn of events drew a gasp from Reirin. “Are you certain? His Majesty truly abandoned all his work ahead of the big event and left?”

“Yeah. And based on the direction he’s headed, it’s definitely related to the two of you.”

“Do you think he’s coming to Treacherous Tan Peak to personally put pressure on ‘Shu Keigetsu’?”

Perhaps he planned to confirm firsthand whether the Shu Maiden was a practitioner of the Daoist arts, no longer satisfied to leave matters up to his secret service. Or perhaps he thought that an unpopulated backwater would be the perfect place to disguise an assassination as an accidental death. Both might very well be true.

Reirin brought a hand to her mouth as she considered the possibilities, but Keikou followed up with an even more shocking piece of news. “No. Based on the trail left by the dove following after him, His Majesty isn’t headed for

Treacherous Tan Peak. He's going to Cloud Ladder Gardens."

Her heart gave a sickening *thud*. So the emperor wasn't coming for her, "Shu Keigetsu"? He was going to see the "Kou Reirin" at the encampment? The real Keigetsu?

Does he already have his suspicions about the switch?!

That was the only possible explanation. There was no other reason for him to disregard "Shu Keigetsu," who was already rumored to be a practitioner, in favor of pinning down "Kou Reirin." And if Genyou had left the capital by carriage two days ago, he would be arriving at Cloud Ladder Gardens later that evening.

Her Majesty can't protect us outside the confines of the inner court. Lady Keigetsu has Brother Junior and the captain with her, but neither of them has the authority to defy an order to interrogate her. The only one who can hope to stop His Majesty is His Highness. We need him to arrive without a moment to spare.

Keigetsu was in danger. Assailed by an intense wave of panic, Reirin could think of nothing but running to her dear friend's rescue.

"I'll tell His Highness to hurry to Treacherous Tan Peak," said Keikou. "As soon as he picks you up, you can start heading her way."

"No." Reirin wasted no time rejecting her brother's proposal. "He might not make it in time if he stops here first. Have your dove tell His Highness to forget about me and head straight to Cloud Ladder Gardens."

"Fine by me, but what's *your* plan, then? By carriage or palanquin, it's an entire day's trip from here to Cloud Ladder Gardens. Will you make it in time to reverse the switch?"

"It's slower to take the path meant for vehicles. If I go alone and begin descending the cliff now, I should make it to the encampment by nightfall."

Reirin explained this as if it were no big deal, but even Keikou was dumbstruck

by this suggestion. “Whoa, hold it! That’s the kind of plan *I’d* come up with. Don’t make me be the voice of reason here.”

Reading between the lines, that meant the idea wasn’t completely off the table for him. Still, ever the sister fanatic, the eldest Kou scratched anxiously at the back of his neck.

“It should be fine as long as I go with you, but...we’re two of the highest-ranked people here. After that run-in with the brigands, it wouldn’t look good for us to up and leave. And ‘Shu Keigetsu’ is the one whose reputation will suffer for it.”

“I realize that. Hence why I’m suggesting that you stay here and I descend the mountain alone.”

“What’s the point, though? At best, that only lets His Highness reach Cloud Ladder Gardens a few hours sooner. It makes more sense to wait for him here and leave Treacherous Tan Peak on horseback.”

“Those few hours could make or break us.”

“You’re just a Maiden, Reirin. Even if you rush to the scene, you don’t have the authority to stop His Ma—”

“I don’t care!” Reirin shouted over him, then was shocked by her own behavior. Was it a consequence of being trapped in the body of an impatient girl like Keigetsu? Words were rushing out of her mouth faster than she could think.

As she slowly regained her composure, she went on, “It’s true that I may not have the power to change the big picture.”

Women were powerless. The Maidens were decorations. The reality had been made crystal clear to her time and time again, and she had long since come to accept it. Yet in that one moment, her instincts were screaming at her to fight back.

“It is not in the Kou blood to sit back and watch while a loved one is in

danger,” she concluded with a note of finality.

Keikou looked to be giving that some thought. Sensing that her brother was close to conceding the argument, Reirin made one last push to reassure him. “I promise I will be fine. I remember the way here, and I’m confident in my sense of direction. I learned the art of self-defense from the best. In a healthy body like this, running down a cliff for a few hours is nothing I can’t handle.”

“What are you going to do about the Congee Conferment Rite?”

“I plan to come back tomorrow. And now that I’ve asserted control over the court ladies, I doubt they will have any trouble finishing up here. Tell them I fainted from exhaustion and secluded myself in the palanquin. Put Leelee in charge of standing watch. We’ll make it look like I head out later in the evening after a long nap, when in reality, I will leave for Cloud Ladder Gardens immediately.”

Reirin swiftly hatched plans for every eventuality. It was highly likely that there was a spy hiding somewhere nearby. If so, it would look suspicious if she made a big fuss about running to “Kou Reirin’s” side. She had every intention of making a discreet exit.

“Oh, right! I have a big favor to ask of you. When you instruct His Highness to head to the encampment first, tell him it’s because the Congee Conferment Rite ran late and I won’t make it to our rendezvous. Don’t mention the rest of this.”

“But, Reirin...”

“I don’t wish to make Lady Keigetsu feel guilty when she’s already at her wits’ end.”

What mattered most right now was that Gyomei, the only person capable of keeping the emperor in check, made it to Cloud Ladder Gardens as soon as possible—and that no further stress was put on Keigetsu.

Hang in there, Lady Keigetsu. I promise to come running to your rescue at once!

Her thoughts with her friend and a strong determination in her heart, Reirin successfully managed to persuade her brother.

Chapter 4:

Keigetsu Stands Her Ground

“U_{GH}, I’M EXHAUSTED.”

The chamber assigned to the Kou Maiden was tucked away in a corner of Cloud Ladder Gardens. Not a second after the celestial beauty known as Kou Reirin—or the one inhabiting her body, Keigetsu—made it back to her sunset view room, she collapsed onto the bed.

First thing in the morning, she had set out for the nearby disaster site known as Central Tan, where she had distributed congee all the way into the evening. Seeing as the benevolent “Kou Reirin’s” reputation was at stake, she had kept a ladylike smile on her face the whole time, and she had acknowledged each and every one of the locals who came to her weeping with gratitude. But the fact was, it was cold, she was hungry, and there hadn’t been one positive part of the experience.

Speaking as a former poor country girl herself, Keigetsu found the entire concept ridiculous. Handing out a single bowl of congee with all this pomp and circumstance and calling it “charity” was just the capital patting itself on the back. There was no reason for the Maidens to personally hand out the food. In her opinion, they should have spent the budget for their transportation and lodgings on extra rice instead.

“I’m all out of fake smiles and polite conversation. Oh, what I wouldn’t give to remove all my makeup and sleep until tomorrow afternoon...”

As Keigetsu buried her face in her pillow, Tousetsu removed her ornamental hairpin with a gentle touch. “I’m afraid you still have plans to gather in the banquet hall for dinner. After that, His Highness and Lady Reirin will come meet you late in the night, you will undo the switch, and you will all leave for the imperial capital tomorrow.” With a frown, she asserted, “This is no time to be

lazing about. You must make yourself presentable at once.”

“Leave me alone. I’m tired from standing next to the cauldron all day.”

“Fair enough. I never imagined a Maiden would spend so long standing among the common folk.”

What, is she calling me indecorous now? Keigetsu wondered, her face twisting into a scowl.

But before the Maiden could punch her pillow in frustration, the head court lady went on, “I could tell it left a deep impression on the people. It made them feel closer to you.”

That oh-so-casual compliment prompted Keigetsu to look up with a start. And then she shoved her face right back into the pillow. This hypercritical court lady almost never had a kind word to say about her. On those rare instances she *did* hand out a compliment, she never couched it in flattery, and it always came without warning, so Keigetsu never knew how to react.

“Kindly stop rubbing your face against that pillow. It’s smudging your rouge.”

“Shut up.”

Keigetsu didn’t want anyone to see the dopey smile on her face. Though all her rouge ought to have been wiped onto the pillow by now, her cheeks were still bright red. Upon noticing as much, Tousetsu responded with nothing but a slight raise of an eyebrow. Resigning herself to the hassle of the laundry she would have to do, she dropped the subject and set out sheet music and cosmetics on the table.

“Come, it’s time to get ready, milady. You can’t very well greet His Highness with a face like that.”

Keigetsu dismissed Tousetsu’s nagging with a snort. “As long as my pretty little head is sitting attached to my shoulders, His Highness won’t care what my makeup looks like.”

All of a sudden, the door burst open, and a slender young man stormed into

the room.

“We have a problem!”

Looking the part of a military officer with his trusty sword hanging from his hip, this man was the second son of the Kou clan, Kou Keishou. It was rare for him to barge into a room without first asking permission. Keigetsu sprang out of bed. She wasn’t about to let this catty man see her with all her makeup smudged.

“Wh-what do you—”

“His Majesty the Emperor will be arriving here shortly.”

Just as Keigetsu scrambled for a mirror to hide her face, Keishou’s announcement made her freeze. On a closer look, he was gripping a small slip of paper in one hand.

“Excuse me?”

“It sounds like he wore a disguise and traveled in secret. He claimed to be holed up inside the Hall of Violet Rain, going so far as to prepare a body double, so it took the protégés a while to catch on.”

“That’s impossible. The Repose of Souls is only four days away! Why would His Majesty ditch the preparations for such an important ceremony to visit a backwater like this?!”

“Well, I suppose he *is* known for making the rounds to remote war zones and disaster areas...” Keishou’s response sounded skeptical. Abandoning a major ceremony to visit a disaster zone couldn’t be explained by a habit of “making the rounds.” It was clear that this was part of the emperor’s investigation into Daoist magic.

“And he’s headed here? Not to Treacherous Tan Peak?”

“Yes. ‘Shu Keigetsu’ doesn’t appear to be his main suspect. He’s more interested in the other Maidens—or specifically ‘Kou Reirin,’ if I had to guess. He might already have his suspicions about the body swap.”

“Are you serious?!” Keigetsu’s breath hitched. “Then maybe I should pretend to be sick in bed...”

“Not a good idea. What if he asks to offer well-wishes and traps you in a one-on-one conversation? It’s safer for you to stay with the other Maidens. I imagine His Majesty will be joining you for tonight’s dinner, but it would look worse if you didn’t show up.”

Keigetsu’s first instinct was to find an escape route, but Keishou rejected her plan without missing a beat. To be fair, he had a point. She didn’t even want to imagine confronting the emperor all on her own.

“I-I’ll go, then,” she practically gasped out with a nod.

“Don’t worry.” Keishou put a hand on her shoulder, doing his best to reassure her. “If His Majesty hasn’t resorted to torturing the Maidens under suspicion, it means he has a reason to approach this carefully. If we can clear you of suspicion, he won’t have grounds to lay a hand on you. We have the captain of the Eagle Eyes on our side, and His Highness should be here soon.” He peered into her eyes, his gaze as earnest as it had ever been. “Do not use your magic under any circumstances, and do your utmost to play the part of ‘Kou Reirin.’ I promise to get you through this safe and sound.”

For a last-minute arrangement, the banquet in the grand hall of Cloud Ladder Gardens was a lavish affair. A table and chair had been set out for the emperor in front of the altar, and the seat of honor was adorned in purple fabric and five-colored threads. To allow him a better view of the room, the Maidens’ tables had been placed along the wall, facing each other in pairs.

In the right-hand seat closest to the emperor was Gen Kasui, eldest of the Maidens and a fellow Gen descendant. Across from her and to the emperor’s left was the second oldest, Kin Seika. The younger “Kou Reirin” and Ran Houshun were each placed close to the door, and “Shu Keigetsu” was omitted from the seating arrangements in light of her absence.

Although their positions were decided according to seniority, the layout also reflected the Maidens' desire to keep Keigetsu as far from the emperor as possible. Standing closest to the exit, Keigetsu positioned herself so she was mostly hidden behind Seika, who occupied the adjacent table.

"At ease, ladies."

Emperor Genyou had just finished offering incense at the altar. As soon as he took his seat, the Maidens slowly lowered the hands they had folded near their foreheads.

"You have my permission to take your seats and speak freely. I realize I'm intruding on your dinner, but I hope you will all relax and enjoy your meal. Congratulations on finishing the Congee Conferment Rite. I brought some alcohol to celebrate, so help yourselves to a drink and warm up."

Genyou's offer was a generous one, but no one was interested in blithely savoring the booze under the circumstances. Although the girls reached for their steaming hot rice wine and soup, they were stiff as boards as they attempted to discern the true purpose of his visit. On reflection, they could count on one hand the number of times they had conversed with the emperor without a set of bamboo blinds in the way. To sit around the dinner table together and be granted permission to speak freely was nothing short of a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Sensing the tension in the air, the Maidens looked at one another and engaged in a silent debate over who should be the first to speak.

"If I may be so bold," Kasui began at length, assuming responsibility as the eldest of the group and a relative of the emperor's, "I would be curious to know what brings Your Majesty here. I must confess, we are all dreading a reprimand for an oversight in the Congee Conferment Rite."

Though careful to keep her language appropriately humble, Kasui came right out and inquired about his intentions. The rest of the girls breathed a sigh of relief.

The emperor picked up his cup with a soft chuckle. “An oversight? Far from it. I appreciate the lengths you have gone to for our people. As this will mark the first Day of Ultimate Yin in twenty-five years, I merely hoped that my presence might serve to dispel the buildup of yin.”

So he claimed, but if that were truly the case, he wouldn't have kept his visit to Cloud Ladder Gardens a surprise. Official imperial visits were supposed to be widely publicized.

Picking up on the Maidens' skepticism, he tipped his drink back and went on, “But your concerns are not entirely unfounded. I do wish to keep a close eye on you Maidens. Don't go around repeating this, but it has long been tradition for the Maidens to step up their sabotage as soon as they leave the inner court on travel.”

The girls' faces went taut as he casually touched upon the dark side of the inner court. According to Genyou, Maidens past would devise all manner of ugly plots to drag each other's names through the mud. Some might hire thugs to disrupt the meal service, while others might damage their own cargo and level false allegations against another clan.

“If nothing else, that was certainly still the case during the current consorts' generation. It did appear that Kou Reirin's good example had brought order to your ranks, but...I hear that your recent interactions in the Maiden Court have been a good deal more contentious. Care to explain what has you all so heated?”

It seemed word had gotten back to the emperor that the new owner of “Kou Reirin's” body had been getting into frequent arguments with the other Maidens. As Keigetsu maintained her silence, she broke into a cold sweat.

Did someone overhear our conversations?! No...that can't be. We were always careful to stay out of anyone's earshot. And someone losing their temper a little more often isn't enough to prove a body swap.

Still, she should have been more cognizant of the fact that someone might be

observing her facial expressions and body language. Even if eavesdropping wasn't a concern, she shouldn't have jabbed a finger at Seika, nor should she have given Houshun the stink eye. In light of the positive relationships "Kou Reirin" had managed to build with everyone around her, it would obviously look suspicious if she suddenly started picking fights with the other Maidens.

"I-If you would allow me to speak, my ignorance can sometimes give Miss Reirin cause for concern, and she takes it upon herself to provide me guidance. She truly is the big sister I always wanted..." Houshun threw Keigetsu a lifeline from the opposite seat, affecting a flustered air. Her approach was to stress that their friendship was still going strong. "And for her part, she often mentions that she thinks of me as a real younger sister."

When Houshun tilted her head to one side, seeking agreement, Keigetsu almost broke out into goosebumps.

I'd rather die than have a two-faced little sister like this!

It was quite a shameless claim to make when she knew full well that Kou Reirin hated her guts.

And I must say, this little squirrel has got some real nerve to keep up her act around His Majesty.

Keigetsu was almost impressed. If nothing else, it was true that the girl's unapologetic attitude made the performance look more natural.

Fighting to keep the wobble out of her voice, she flashed Houshun a faint smile. "Oh, very much so."

The real Kou Reirin had the soul of a boar. Her response probably would have been to empty her hot rice wine into Houshun's face, but Shu Keigetsu would never make such a poor move. Unlike others she could name, she had a little something called common sense.

"You're very dear to me, Lady Houshun."

Houshun's face lit up, and she "bashfully" pushed her luck even further.

“Goodness! If you feel that strongly, would you mind if I took you up on your previous invitation to spend the night at the Palace of the Golden Qilin?”

Kou Reirin would never invite this girl for a sleepover. If Houshun ever did show up at the Kou Palace with an overnight bag, Reirin would probably smile, shut the door faster than the speed of light, and fasten the lock.

“Feel free,” replied Keigetsu with a smile, making excuses to her friend in the privacy of her mind.

Forgive me, Kou Reirin! I had no other choice!

Classic Ran Houshun. She would pretend to rescue someone from their predicament, only to mercilessly pile on her own demands.

“If I may, I have an answer for you as well, Your Majesty,” Seika chimed in, sounding as composed as ever. Elegantly setting her wine cup aside, she explained herself without batting an eye. “It is through constant competition that the skylarks perfect their song. Although we may be fledgling Maidens, we constantly seek to better ourselves through a clash of opinions. We do not consider those fraught arguments but a form of healthy rivalry.”

As pretentious as she sounded, she was using all that talk of self-improvement to help cover their tracks.

“Exactly right,” Keigetsu agreed without a moment’s hesitation.

“Oho. And what exactly is causing such an extreme difference of opinion?”

“Well...”

When Keigetsu faltered, Kasui was the next to offer her a hand. “Our song. Lady Seika places the most value on the melody, while Lady Reirin believes the lyrics are more important. They often debate which we should spend more time on during our practice for the requiem of tribute.”

It was the perfect excuse in light of the upcoming Repose of Souls. Keigetsu almost had to stop herself from applauding. At the same time, she felt a wave of relief.

I lucked out.

Keishou was exactly right. It was a good thing she hadn't gone into this alone. Much to her surprise, the other Maidens were doing everything in their power to help her. She hadn't been left to fight a one-woman battle.

When she glanced up and spotted Keishou standing near the wall among the other military officers, he casually made eye contact. With a newfound courage, Keigetsu took a tiny sip of her wine. Only now could she finally discern its taste.

Alas, Genyou chose that moment to drop a bombshell. "Speaking of the requiem of tribute, I hear you have been putting quite a bit of effort into your practice. I'd be interested to hear it. We can consider it our entertainment for the evening."

He wanted them to sing here and now.

"And since this is a rare opportunity, why don't you each sing for me separately?"

Worse, he was asking them to do it one at a time, not as a chorus.

We can't! He'll find out that "Kou Reirin's" singing is terrible!

The muscles of Keigetsu's face went taut. It seemed Genyou did indeed have his doubts about whether the "Kou Reirin" sitting before him was the real deal.

Kou Reirin is Her Majesty's niece, so she's had chances to visit the inner court and show off her song and dance since she was little. His Majesty must know what she's capable of. Which means...

If she couldn't put on a performance on par with the real Reirin, it would prove that they had swapped bodies.

"We, um—"

"No need to be shy. Why don't you start us off, Kou Reirin? Knowing how skilled a singer you are, I'm confident your requiem will be lovely enough to heal these devastated lands." Genyou ramped up the pressure, a faint smile on his face.

Kasui pitched forward, struggling to sit back and watch this. “As the yin has yet to reach its peak, I’m afraid this is not the appropriate timing for the requiem of tribute. If it is entertainment you seek, I would be honored to perform a dance—”

“I asked Kou Reirin,” Genyou coolly rebuffed her. “Come, Kou Reirin. Sing for us. I am confident the yin needn’t reach its peak for you to perform a most magnificent requiem. I request that the court ladies and military officers step outside to observe whether the Maiden’s song brings about a miracle.”

Her lifelines of Tousetsu and Keishou taken from her, Keigetsu gasped. She couldn’t think of any brilliant pretexts to refuse the emperor’s order. But if she went ahead and sang, it would become immediately apparent that she wasn’t actually Kou Reirin, and there was a good chance Genyou planned to torture her after that. Keigetsu wasn’t the least bit confident she would be able to keep the secret if things came to that.

What...do I do?

The other clans’ court ladies and military officers filed out of the hall one after another. Tousetsu and Keishou lingered behind, fully prepared to talk back to Genyou and swallow a charge of treason, but that proved unnecessary.

“What’s wrong, Lady ‘Reirin’?” Before they could speak, Seika stood from the neighboring seat. “We Maidens are also eager to hear your most exquisite song... Oh dear, but look how pale you are!”

After peering thoughtfully into Keigetsu’s face, she blinked like she had only just noticed the other girl’s pallor. Then, with the tender sort of smile reserved for her idol, she pushed a cup into Keigetsu’s hands.

“Is the cold getting to you? Then you ought to partake of His Majesty’s generosity and warm yourself up. Once you’re feeling better, won’t you please honor us with your voice?” There came a soft *glug* as Seika tilted a long-necked decanter. Once the cup was full, she placed her own fingers over top of it and urged, “Come, have a sip.”

Keigetsu was unsure how to react to Seika's steady, almond-eyed stare. In light of their relationship to this point, and in light of the Kin Maiden's personality, there was a chance that she was plying Keigetsu with booze and pushing her to perform knowing full well she would fail. But maybe...

Is this an attempt to redirect the conversation?

When Seika shot her another prompting look, Keigetsu steeled her resolve and surrendered herself to the flow.

"I shall," she murmured before downing the cup in a single gulp.

And that was when it hit her.

"Urk!"

A burning sensation ran down Keigetsu's throat, and she began to cough and hack.

"Ghk... *Koff!* Urgh..."

When she attempted to gasp for air, she choked on her own saliva, sending her into another fit of pain.

While Keigetsu was doubled over and wheezing so hard it was difficult to breathe, Seika cried, "Oh no! My deepest apologies! I mistook the chili vinegar for alcohol!"

True to its name, chili vinegar was a condiment made from marinating hot chili peppers in vinegar. It was quite delicious when drizzled sparingly over a stir-fry, but gulping down such a large volume was tantamount to drinking poison. Between its strong acidity and the fiery kick of the chili peppers, Keigetsu felt like her throat was on fire.

"*Koff, koff!* Hrk... Urghhh..." Keigetsu was in too much agony to speak, more and more phlegm rising from her throat.

"Oh, what have I done?! I'm so sorry, Lady 'Reirin'!" Seika patted Keigetsu on the back, her face pale with horror, before turning around and prostrating herself before the emperor. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, I'm afraid Lady

‘Reirin’ is no longer in any condition to sing for us. If you would allow me to bear the responsibility, I shall sing the whole night long in her stead.”

It seemed her plan was to prevent Keigetsu from singing at all.

I’m glad she got me out of it, but was it really necessary to blow out my voice?! In a frail body like this, that easily could have killed me!

Seika had even gone so far as to cover the cup with her fingers to mask the smell of the vinegar.

And hey, hold on! Isn’t chili vinegar made of the same ingredients used in pesticide?! She knew this because Kou Reirin made a habit of using it herself.

“No need.” Fortunately, that stunt seemed to have killed Genyou’s interest. He shook his head with his usual chilly demeanor. “A requiem sung as a punishment couldn’t possibly provide solace to this land. Kou Reirin and Kin Seika may forgo the performance on account of the former’s sore throat. The remaining two Maidens can sing together.”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty!”

Singled out without warning, Houshun and Kasui scurried out in front of the emperor and sang their solemn requiem. Keigetsu was relieved to see that she had dodged the performance. She still felt that Seika’s methods had been a tad excessive, but she was grateful for the Maiden’s quick thinking. Of course, she was equally indebted to Houshun and Kasui for bearing the collateral damage.

“That was brilliant.”

Despite having personally requested the performance, Genyou offered nothing but some generic flattery before dismissing the Maidens with a perfunctory wave of his hand. It was clearly not what he had been hoping for.

Now that the entertainment for the evening is over, let’s hope this banquet wraps up soon.

So Keigetsu prayed between coughing fits, but those hopes would soon be dashed.

As Genyou gazed at the moon through the window, he murmured, “That may be it for tonight’s entertainment, but the moon has only just risen. Let’s indulge in a bit of conversation, shall we?” He slowly shifted his gaze back to the girls and cast Keigetsu a wistful glance. “I would be interested to hear stories of your childhoods.”

Although his thin lips formed their typical faint smile, his eyes had gone cold as ice.

“How long do you plan to hang around, Lord Keishou?”

“Please, Captain. Surely you don’t expect me to follow my orders and stand watch outside under the circumstances.”

Keishou, who had been politely ejected from the room alongside the other clans’ military officers and court ladies, hovered outside the door to try to discern what was going on inside.

“Our most pressing threat is in this room, not anywhere outdoors,” he continued. “I never imagined His Majesty would launch such a transparent attack.”

In contrast to the composure he had shown Keigetsu, he was now raking a hand through his hair in frustration, looking the perfect picture of a worrywart brother. And for good reason—the lives of both his precious sister and her best friend were riding on the conversation unfolding behind that door.

“What is His Majesty’s goal here?” Keishou scrunched his shapely features into a frown, struggling to pin down the emperor’s true motives.

At first, he had assumed that Genyou wanted to suppress Daoist magic for the same reason as his father: It was a discipline tantamount to treason. Yet the more one investigated Genyou, the less fixated on control he appeared. Looking back on his reign, his policies tended to be conciliatory. He had added races once oppressed as slaves to the census, permitted immigrants to build pagan

religious structures, and even granted autonomy to remote regions seeking independence.

Besides, if he truly did detest the Daoist arts as a traitorous ideology, nothing was stopping him from openly executing all practitioners. Instead, he let them go unchecked and hunted a select few behind closed doors. To complicate matters further, rather than jumping straight to torture, he exercised the caution of someone working to figure something out.

“I get the sense that His Majesty is taking care to confirm something. And by that, I don’t mean whether one of the Maidens is dabbling in a dangerous discipline like magic... It’s more like he’s trying to ascertain if a body swap took place.”

“How could he have picked up on the switch?” Shin-u asked calmly. “And why would he need to make sure of it?”

“That’s the part I don’t know!” Keishou snapped impatiently, then pressed his ear back to the door. “Either way, we need to make sure he doesn’t find out her true identity... Oh, sounds like the song finished without issue. We really owe Lady Seika one.”

It was then that Tousetsu came back holding a jug, her forehead beaded with sweat. “I brought some water. I shall enter the room under the pretext of bringing my mistress a drink.” After she was likewise removed from the room, Keishou had ordered her to work on an excuse to get back inside.

“Much appreciated, Tousetsu. Lucky for us, Lady Seika’s quick thinking just blew out ‘Reirin’s’ throat. Use that to your advantage to remove her from His Majesty’s presence.”

“Yes, sir. We must get her out of there before she grows agitated enough to let a spell slip.” There was a hint of panic on Tousetsu’s famously aloof features.

All of Keigetsu’s allies were well aware that her magic tended to run out of control when she was under pressure.

“There are a good deal of candles in that room. We must ensure that she does not exert control over any of those fires...and that she does not unwittingly spark a phenomenon,” Tousetsu muttered as she gazed out at the torches in the garden.

Keishou blinked. “Wait, that gives me an idea!” Then he whirled to face Shin-u. “I have a request for you, Captain.”

“A what?”

“You heard me.” Keishou gathered up all the candles he could find in the corridor. After foisting five in total onto Shin-u, he declared, “I have a contingency plan I want to try. And it hinges on your persuasion skills, Captain.”

When the emperor mentioned childhood stories, it took all Keigetsu’s willpower not to scream at the top of her lungs.

How am I supposed to manage that?!

Genyou and Kou Reirin shared a relationship of uncle-in-law and niece. Being the empress’s darling, the Kou Maiden had paid frequent visits to the inner court ever since she was a little girl. Naturally, that had also granted her plenty of opportunities to interact with the emperor. If Keigetsu were asked about any of those encounters, she would have no idea how to respond.

That wasn’t the worst of it. On further reflection, she had no idea how Kou Reirin behaved around her family, period, nor what kind of upbringing she’d had back in her own domain.

There’s a limit to how far an excuse of “I forgot” can get me.

Gritting her teeth, Keigetsu continued to cough and cough. Hopefully losing her voice could at least buy her some time.

“Are you all right, ‘Miss Reirin’?” asked Houshun.

“You seem to be in quite a bit of pain. Perhaps it would be best to step outside and return to your room for a spell,” suggested Kasui, hoping to use the

coughing fit as an excuse to get Keigetsu out of there.

Alas, Genyou used that as a starting point for the conversation. “You always have been rather frail. However, you once told me, ‘I find it a relief when the symptoms are something I can observe.’ It was such a mature outlook that I remember it to this day.”

The reminiscing had already begun.

Is this a test on whether Kou Reirin actually said that?

As she gasped for air between coughs, Keigetsu racked her brains for all they were worth. It certainly sounded like something her friend would have said as a child. Still, it was hard to imagine her flaunting her personal beliefs before the emperor.

“My, did I act like such a precocious child in Your Majesty’s presence? The thought shames me... *Koff!*”

She got the ball rolling with a noncommittal answer that she could easily take back later. Unfortunately, she could only dodge his questions so many times before it stopped working.

“Permission to enter, please.”

Just then, the door opened and a dignified voice rang out, prompting Keigetsu to look up with a start. The ones to enter were Tousetsu, holding a jug of water, and Shin-u, carrying five candles.

“I, the gamboge gold Tousetsu, extend my greetings to Your Imperial Majesty. Respectfully, I have come to pour my indisposed mistress a drink of water.”

“I, Captain Shin-u of the Eagle Eyes, extend my greetings to Your Imperial Majesty. More yin amasses with the setting of the sun. I brought more candles to increase the light in this room.”

The pair bowed before going about their business. Shin-u passed off one of the candles to Tousetsu, then distributed the rest to the emperor and the three other Maidens.

Meanwhile, Tousetsu briskly approached Keigetsu with the candle and water jug. After pouring her mistress a drink and observing that this did nothing to help her cough, she prostrated herself before the emperor. “With all due respect, subjecting Your Majesty to this incessant, grating cough risks exposing you to diseased qi. May my mistress be excused?” She was likewise angling to extract Keigetsu from the situation.

Despite Keigetsu’s show of hacking and wheezing for emphasis, Genyou replied, “That will be unnecessary. If something so trivial could be classified as a source of diseased qi, I would hardly be paying a visit to a disaster region. There’s no reason to confine her to her room. I imagine staying here to engage in conversation will do more to take her mind off the pain.”

He had no intention of letting her leave. Keigetsu’s panic mounted. Even under the best of circumstances, she tended to grow flustered in the presence of Genyou and his strong water qi.

What am I supposed to do?!

As a wave of unrest rippled through her heart, she felt the qi in her body swell and threaten to overflow. Here she had been taking great care not to let any spells slip, but Shin-u’s candle delivery had strengthened the fire qi in the room and made it that much more difficult.

I can’t lose my composure... I can’t use any magic.

Her hands balling into fists, Keigetsu was on the verge of tears. It was so unfair. Her looks were subpar, her singing and dancing were terrible, and she had never received a decent education. Magic was her only skill. Just her luck that the one talent she had been granted in abundance was the one scorned by society and treated as a crime.

She had to hold it in. She couldn’t let him find out the truth. If the emperor witnessed anything, she would be killed.

“Use your magic,” she heard Tousetsu say in a calm whisper. The woman ought to have been panicking after her evacuation attempt was thwarted, so

this took Keigetsu by surprise. “As soon as I give you the signal, connect your flame spell to Lord Keishou,” the court lady went on in a hushed voice as she rubbed her Maiden’s back.

A flame call? To Lord Keishou?

After denying herself the use of magic for so long, Keigetsu didn’t know how to react to a sudden order to cast a spell. A flame call was much smaller in scale than a body swap, sure, but it was still bound to cause all the fires in the room to flare. Even if Tousetsu hid the candle projecting Keishou’s image behind her back, it would still look suspicious if all the flames in the room trembled simultaneously.

“I can’t!” Keigetsu whispered back. “His Majesty will notice!”

“The captain will provide a distraction,” Tousetsu responded with finality, though she still kept the volume of her voice down. This made Keigetsu more confused than ever.

The captain will? What kind of distraction?

Before she could ask any more questions, the events were set into motion. Once Shin-u was done handing out the candles, he kneeled before the emperor and started in on a report.

“If you will allow me to speak, Your Majesty, when the Maidens sang their requiem earlier, I sensed a fresh clarity in the night air. I believe it is owed to the Maidens’ earnest wishes for peace among our kingdom, as well as the guiding light of your virtue. As presumptuous as it may be to say it, we military officers found ourselves freshly in awe of your benevolence.”

He placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. Between his enigmatic azure eyes and well-defined profile, he looked less a military officer and more a knight from a distant northern kingdom.

“On behalf of the officers who cannot be here, I shall present the flash of my sword as a token of our loyalty.”

Without a moment's hesitation, he drew his blade.

"Eek!"

Even if the man in question was of imperial blood, a mere military officer drawing his sword in the emperor's presence was an act tantamount to treason. Unaccustomed to seeing blades in action, the Maidens—particularly Seika and Houshun—were daunted by this alarming spectacle.

"What are you doing?!"

"Have you gone mad?!"

"Detain him at once!"

The attendants surrounding the emperor immediately pointed their swords at Shin-u, and military officers alerted to an emergency flooded the room from the door that led outside.

Stomp, stomp, stomp!

When the stampede of men brought a rush of sound and wind, Tousetsu shot Keigetsu a sharp glance.

"Do it now."

With a start, Keigetsu focused her thoughts on the candle in front of her.

Lord Keishou!

All the flames in the room flickered, but fortunately, it looked like it was caused by the breeze the men had kicked up upon storming the room.

Keigetsu sensed that she had formed a connection. Yet the other side of the flame was dead silent.

What is he planning?

She stared dubiously into the fire, only to blink when a piece of paper appeared within its red contours.

Don't worry.

Words were written on the page. The handwriting was so aggravatingly neat that it could have come straight out of a textbook.

I can hear His Majesty's questions as he asks them. Say whatever I write here and you'll be fine.

More words were fluidly and swiftly added to the page.

Keigetsu finally caught on. This was the perfect way to communicate without fear of anyone else overhearing.

I'm a famously possessive expert on my sister. You can count on me.

At the end of the sentence, he had scribbled an extra little caricature for fun.

You have both Reirin and muscles on your side.

What does that even mean?

Apparently, that caricature of someone flexing a bicep was meant to be his sister. Or else it represented the concept of muscles. There was something almost amusing about the gap between his skillful handwriting and his completely unrealistic art.

Like sister, like brother.

A strangled sigh escaped her lips as the tension bled out of her shoulders. She blamed the tears forming in her eyes on exasperation.

I ought to poke fun at his terrible art after this is over.

Her whole body relaxed, the stiffness replaced with a surge of power welling up from her core. Yes, after this was over. She wasn't about to let things end here. She was going to make it through this predicament.

"That was a risky move, Shin-u. Do you have something you would like to say to me, my son?"

Over by the seat of honor, the guards still had Shin-u held at swordpoint. His father gazed coldly upon him from his throne, which was returned with an equally chilly look.

“Not at all, Your Majesty. I merely kneeled and drew my sword in what I considered an unequivocal display of allegiance. I never dreamed your guards would be so intimidated,” Shin-u shamelessly replied, slipping his sword back into its sheath.

The guards buzzed. “Say that again?! The son of a slave has no right to speak that way!”

“That’s enough. Lower your weapons. I am positive he has no designs on the throne.” The emperor himself was the one to call them off. His defense of his son could be read as either magnanimous or insulting. “Try to refrain from such misleading actions in the future. I appreciate the report. Do continue to keep an eye on things outside.”



“Yes, my lord.”

With his work as the decoy done, Shin-u bowed and quietly exited the room. As the expressionless captain took his leave, the Maidens bowed their heads to avoid his gaze, and Keigetsu thanked him in the privacy of her mind.

Once his bastard son was out of sight, Genyou turned back to the Maidens. “Now then. It’s not every day I get to share an intimate conversation with my future daughters. Let’s make the most of this opportunity.”

“That is quite an honor,” said Keigetsu, at last holding her head high with confidence.

In the corner of her vision, hidden behind Tousetsu’s back, a warm flame flickered and danced.

“Do you remember my favorite place within the imperial palace? If I recall, I did bring you there once.”

“*Koff, koff!* Excuse me. Of course, I’d never forget it. It’s the top of the hill behind the Palace of the Golden Qilin—Sunlit Bliss Hill. You invited me to watch the sunrise together.”

“Did I now? The Kou Palace is located to the west of the court, so I can’t imagine it’s the best place to watch the sunrise.”

“*Koff.* Not so. Our palace may be the last to see the sunrise, but you enjoyed watching its glow envelop the inner court building by building.”

The conversation was moving along surprisingly smoothly with the help of the flame call. As soon as Genyou dove into a new story, Keishou would start writing in anticipation of the question to come. Keigetsu would pretend to cough, turn her face aside to glance at the candle, and then respond to the emperor’s question with the answer she’d glimpsed.

Empress Kenshuu, Reirin’s blood relative, was always present for her interactions with Genyou. And whenever Reirin came to visit her aunt, the

overprotective Kou brothers were never far from their sickly sister's side. In other words, Keishou had listened in on all of Genyou and Reirin's conversations. For the first time, Keigetsu was glad that Reirin was so sickly—and that Keishou was so possessive as to never forget something after hearing it once.

"You were always such a kind girl. I recall you once cried at the sight of a lotus withering by the pond."

False. She rejoiced that it had bloomed.

"Oh, and you were quite the voracious eater. You used to eat fried snacks with relish."

False. She longed to, but the oil would give her a stomachache.

"Hm, this is embarrassing. My memory must be failing me with age. Perhaps I could use a decoction that sharpens the mind. You have a knack for preparing medicine, correct?"

True. But she would never show it off in a public setting. Too modest.

Genyou's questions were clever, but Keishou's answers were even more tactful and accurate. After scrambling to read the successive strings of words, Keigetsu would either hesitantly respond in the negative or dodge Genyou's attempts at a follow-up with an embarrassed frown.

"Such a modest Maiden you are. You're truly the pride of our kingdom."

Genyou seemed to realize that reminiscing about her childhood wasn't having the effect he had hoped. While framing it as a continuation of the trip down memory lane, he next inquired about her education.

"Oh, speaking of which...what was the topic we discussed during your oral examination prior to becoming a Maiden?"

The oral examination?!

Keigetsu reflexively stiffened. The oral examination prior to entering the court involved questions about, say, ways to help the poor or the definition of a

woman's chastity. The girls were expected to back up their opinions with citations from the scriptures.

Unlike the civil service examination the bureaucrats had to take, this assessment covered only the classics, the arts, and ethics—which were all the things Keigetsu was terrible at. Ultimately, she had squeaked out childish opinions informed entirely by her own personal feelings, never once alluding to the scriptures. She could still remember the disapproving looks on her examiners' faces.

Thanks to casual contributions her guardian, Shu Gabi, had provided from behind her, she had managed to earn the “evaluation”—which was really one step away from an insult—that her opinions gave off “the candor of the common folk.” The very thought of having to reenact that here and now left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“I believe it was whether the blind still have value.” Genyou stared at Keigetsu, his expression revealing none of his intentions. “What was your answer, again?”

“Come, answer the question, Shu Keigetsu.”

Sweat beaded on Keigetsu's forehead. She felt as though she had been transported back to the test site, almost two years ago. She saw the strangers acting as her examiners. The cold looks in the eyes of the court ladies sizing her up. Her head hurt from the opulent, heavy hairpin included in her new capital-style hairdo. Her sash was tied so tightly that it was hard to breathe. On the other side of the bamboo blinds, the emperor and empress, the most exalted figures in the kingdom, were observing her conversation.

She had to sit up straight. No, it was more important to answer the questions fast. Her thoughts were all over the place.

I need to refer to the scriptures...and sound cultured.

A voice inside her screamed that it was impossible—both back when she had taken the entrance exam and now in the present moment. She didn't have the

kind of knowledge that could impress someone from the capital. She didn't know anything about the scriptures. What was the use in trying to cram all this information when she was already so far behind? Such were the oft-repeated cries of her heart.

She said that they certainly do. Refer to *Chronicles of the Ascetic*. Chapter 25, "Tale of a Stormy Night."

Across the flame, Keishou already had an answer ready to go. Unfortunately, while he must have assumed that any Maiden would know which chapter he was referring to, Keigetsu couldn't remember what the story was about at all.

No, Keigetsu... Don't get emotional. You can figure it out if you just calm down.

She had read *Chronicles of the Ascetic* before. She had asked Kou Reirin to teach her about it. Yet she couldn't recall anything about it. Kou Reirin once told her that anxiety was her worst enemy, and she was exactly right. Keigetsu had put in the work, but debilitating panic and fear prevented her from showing results when it counted.

It's time to show off what I know. I have to recite everything I've learned exactly as it's written in the texts...

Keigetsu routinely found herself overwhelmed when presented with academics. There was so much she had to remember. There was too much she was lacking.

I have to answer him! Fast!

No doubt Keishou was losing patience with her on the other side of the flame. On the verge of tears, Keigetsu stole another glance at the candle.

It's okay.

Her lips almost trembled when she saw the new line on the page.

You can do this.

"You can do this, Lady Keigetsu."

That gorgeous, bell-like tinkle of a voice played back in her ears.

“It is said that one’s intelligence is reflected in what they say, and one’s character is reflected in what they leave unsaid,” Reirin always told Keigetsu when she panicked at the piles of textbooks before her. *“In other words, you needn’t scramble to learn things for the sake of flaunting that knowledge. People value quiet empathy over eloquence. You are more in tune with others’ feelings than anyone I know, which means you also have the greatest aptitude to improve your character.”*

It was incredible. She was about the only person who could frame Keigetsu’s excess of uncontrollable emotion as a strong point. Keigetsu couldn’t turn herself into an intellectual overnight. What she *could* do was leverage her emotional nature and account for the other person’s feelings in her response. Kin Seika had laughed off the idea of her as a character-oriented Maiden, but it was thanks to Reirin’s encouragement that Keigetsu had managed to tackle her studies head-on.

“What’s wrong, milady?” Tousetsu ventured nervously, rubbing her Maiden’s back. She was concerned about Keigetsu’s long silence. “Hurry up and answer His Majesty.”

“...I said that they do, naturally.”

As if to brush off her anxious court lady, Keigetsu sat straight at attention. *I’ve got this.*

Just moments ago, it was like her mind had been trapped in a fog, but she suddenly felt all the information she needed falling right into her grasp.

Chronicles of the Ascetic Chapter 25, “Tale of a Stormy Night.” Shou. An old servant is blinded by disease.

“Take chapter twenty-five of *Chronicles of the Ascetic*, for example. In the ancient kingdom of Shou, there was once an old servant who lost his eyesight to disease.”

Inferring that Keigetsu was unfamiliar with the texts, Keishou supplemented a more detailed synopsis. Assured that she was on the right track, she began to speak more emphatically.

“With the servant no longer fit for duty, his former master deemed him useless and cast him out onto the street. Instead, the master of the neighboring estate took the old man in and cared for him, believing he had already rendered a lifetime’s worth of service. One stormy night, the master got lost on his way home from work, his vision impaired by the winds and rain. The blind servant, accustomed to being without sight, was able to lead him back safely.”

The result was that the neighboring master made it home alive, while the original master tried to rush home during the storm and tumbled down a cliff.

Keigetsu had a hunch about how Reirin would relate that anecdote to her own life. She added, “I may be a sickly girl, but there are ways I can leverage that to benefit others. I await the day when I can prove my true worth.”

Genyou fell silent for several long moments.

“That’s right,” he eventually said, setting his cup back down on the table with a nod. “It always soothes my heart to hear your compassionate wisdom.”

She was right. A wave of relief washed over Keigetsu.

“Speaking of soothing, there is a small mausoleum on the grounds of the inner court. I recall you often snuck around there in your younger years. Have you seen the scribbles left behind by the former princes and princesses?”

True. Reirin often went exploring with us as a child.

“Yes. I used to love exploring with my older brothers.”

Genyou tossed out another question, but Keigetsu no longer faltered. She knew she was going to be fine. Beside her, Tousetsu observed this with obvious relief.

“I believe your brothers proudly called attention to who had the best calligraphy and the most skilled drawings.”

The third-eldest prince of the previous generation had the best calligraphy. The most refined painting was the work of the second-eldest prince three generations back.

Keigetsu followed Keishou's instructions and managed a smooth reply. "*Koff*. They did, yes. If I recall, they found the calligraphy of the previous third prince outstanding for an act of vandalism, and they praised the artwork of the second prince from three generations ago as exquisite."

When she gave her answer, she had to stop her face from twitching. As if trespassing on the mausoleum weren't bad enough on its own, the Kou siblings had the gall to rate the graffiti there. *Talk about fearless*.

"Oh, right. They also mentioned that one of the poems stood out as atrocious. Whose was that, again?"

The previous first prince. His handwriting was misshapen and his choice of vocabulary was odd, Keishou quickly supplemented.

Keigetsu herself recalled the poem engraved on a prominent part of the mausoleum. *I've seen it for myself. It was even signed with a name. The previous first prince was, er...a Kou descendant, if I recall?*

She was far from an expert on the imperial family tree, but she was pretty sure that the previous Kou consort had been the Pure Consort, and her son had been the first prince. Although he wasn't the empress's child, he was still the first male child of his generation and the apple of his father's eye, so it wasn't long before he was named the crown prince. However, around the same time the youngest prince—Genyou, the son of Empress Gen—rose to prominence, the first prince was disinherited.

Seeing as he was disinherited, there must have been an issue with his conduct or credentials. It makes sense that he would have bad handwriting.

This was definitely the correct answer.

"Oh, it was probably—"

Just as she was poised to confidently declare that it was the previous first prince, Keigetsu shut her mouth.

Incredulous, Keishou scrawled a fresh new sentence across the flame.

What's wrong?

"..."

It was the previous first prince, Gomei. He was the son of Pure Consort Kou and later disinherited.

Even after Keishou provided more details, Keigetsu chose to remain silent.

I know the right answer. Nothing is preventing me from answering his question. But...

"One's intelligence is reflected in what they say, and one's character is reflected in what they leave unsaid."

Kou Reirin would never belittle someone behind their back, not even her own relative.

"Well, who could say?"

In the end, Keigetsu leisurely brought her hand to her cheek and tilted her head to one side. Her friend would frequently press a hand to her face, as if to catch any stray emotion threatening to escape. She would cover up her sadness, her rage, and all her other disgraceful emotions with the most gorgeous smile.

"My apologies. I seem to have forgotten."

Not even the emperor's presence could stop her from boldly feigning innocence.

After a long pause, a smile rose to Genyou's face. "I would imagine so. That's the Maiden I've come to know."

This time, Keigetsu truly felt a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. The pride she had felt when she correctly cited the scriptures earlier was nothing

compared to what she was feeling now.

“Oh, she’s good,” Keishou dazedly murmured on the other side of the flame. Black ink dripped from the brush he gripped in one hand.

Under the circumstances, he never would have dreamed that Shu Keigetsu would reject his assistance and claim to have forgotten the answer. But she had made the right call. The more he thought about it, the more Keishou agreed that his sister would never mock another person’s handwriting. What’s more, going with the flow of the conversation would have amounted to Kou Reirin spreading her own brothers’ gossip.

It occurred to Keishou that his preoccupation with surviving the emperor’s interrogation and rescuing Keigetsu had made him overly fixated on answering every question.

Whew, how embarrassing for me.

He hung his head and covered his face with his free hand. So much for “rescuing” her. If anything, he was the one who’d needed bailing out.

After mussing the bun atop his head, he looked up again. “Her” reflection in the red flame flickering above the candle looked positively dignified.

A completely different woman was wearing his sister’s face. She was quick to lose her composure and always ready to run, halfway to tears, only to stand her ground with a tenacity that exceeded his every imagination. For each new side of her he discovered, it became harder and harder to tear his gaze from her.

Keishou stared into the candle for some time, a hand clamped over his mouth. But the moment he saw Genyou stand from his seat within the fire, alarm coursed through his veins.

I can’t figure her out.

Genyou narrowed his eyes as he watched the Maiden unhurriedly bring a

hand to her cheek. He was struggling to determine whether this girl was actually Kou Reirin.

I know someone used flame magic during the Rite of Reverence. Shu Keigetsu is the most likely to be a sorcerer, given that her father was an aspiring cultivator. However, she never once used magic during her trip to the outer city, while a phenomenon was witnessed near “Kou Reirin.” The most likely explanation is that the two of them swapped bodies.

There existed magic to swap souls between bodies, and sorcerers seeking to escape the public eye would sometimes steal the forms of others. Genyou was well aware of these facts due to past experiences—and he despised the notion with every fiber of his being. If someone was indeed practicing such ghoulish magic in his presence, he would kill the sorcerer without fail.

Alas, that would have to wait until he had proof of the switch. As far as Genyou was concerned, a body-swapping spell was something to be approached with the utmost caution.

She seemed quite restless at the start.

The Kou Reirin that Genyou knew was as calm and composed as anyone of Kou blood. She was only fragile and delicate as far as outward appearances went. On the inside, she was steadfast as could be. She tended to draw a firm line between herself and others, perhaps as a result of how closely she lived in the company of death. Never before had she gotten into frequent arguments with those around her or scowled and yelled, as mentioned in the most recent reports from his secret service, so that alone was cause to question whether she was still the same person inside.

It was also strange that the other Maidens kept casting her looks of concern. Kou Reirin would often elicit longing stares from those around her, but no one would ever condescend to her. And even though she *had* burned her throat with chili vinegar, it was unusual for her to make no effort to hide her coughs. Still, Genyou had rarely concerned himself with the inner court, so it was

potentially explainable as her relaxing in the company of her friends.

What's more, she had an accurate memory of her childhood, and her staunch refusal to engage in gossip was very characteristic of the usual "Kou Reirin."

This is getting to be a nuisance.

There were ample grounds to trust her—and just as many reasons to doubt her. For lack of a deciding factor, Genyou was gradually tempted with more disturbing thoughts. The Gen bloodline was fundamentally coldhearted and associated with warfare. It wasn't in his intrinsic nature to consider the suspect's well-being at every turn.

Attempting to determine her identity via conversation had been too roundabout a method. He could resolve the matter instantly by tearing off one or two of her fingernails.

I'm running out of time. This was not the time to adopt methods that don't suit me.

Genyou set his liquor cup down and rose from his seat. If the woman sitting before him was Shu Keigetsu, she would cry mercy at even the mildest torture. If she truly was Kou Reirin, she would be sure to bite down all her screams.

No matter, he thought. At least their watchdog of an empress, that constant reminder of a certain someone, wasn't present at the scene.

"Um, Your Majesty?"

As the Maiden glanced over at him in surprise, he took a step toward her.

Slam!

The door swung open, and someone entered the room.

"I extend my greetings to Your Imperial Majesty," came a clear, booming voice at the same time.

When he saw who had strode across the room and elegantly kneeled before him, even Genyou couldn't stop a look of surprise from crossing his face.

“I came as fast as I could when I heard the news. If the most exalted man on the continent has graced this remote region, it wouldn’t do for his son to stay out of harm’s way in the capital.”

The man was slightly out of breath, perhaps a result of spurring his horse onward all day and night. A single strand of his perfectly arranged sidelocks had fallen out of place, and his virile features were slicked with sweat.

The very next moment, however, he looked up with dignity and flashed a flawless smile. “I shall personally entertain you for the remainder of the evening. As I imagine the Congee Conferment Rite has taken a lot out of my fiancées, would you permit them to rest for a time?”

I won’t let you lay a hand on my Maidens.

After overcoming his tremendous workload and the numerous obstacles in his path, Prince Gyomei had arrived to take control.

“Ouch!” Reirin yelped when her leg caught on a protruding branch.

She stopped for a moment and gave herself a quick once-over. To prevent her coat from getting dirty, she had taken it off and wrapped it up in cloth. She’d also rolled up the hem of her skirt, exposing both of her bare legs. Stray branches had left a countless number of scratches on her shins, and her hiked-up hem was muddied and fraying. Still, the damage wasn’t so bad that she wouldn’t be able to hide it under the coat later.

With how hard I’ve had to rush, I’m fortunate that this is the worst of it.

Reirin had been so focused on making a straight shot to Cloud Ladder Gardens that she had taken uncharted paths and even slipped down a small cliff along the way. Thanks to those shortcuts, she had almost reached the foot of the mountain before sunset.

From there, she had progressed down the mountain trail in silence, and it had taken her until the sky was completely blanketed in darkness to officially escape

the mountain known as Treacherous Tan Peak. The path was still thick with underbrush, but she only had a little more distance to cover before she made it to an open area. Once she came out onto the country road and ran for another two hours, she would be greeted with the gate to Cloud Ladder Gardens.

I should stop for a short break...

When Reirin noticed how hard her knees were trembling, she briefly thought to sit down on a nearby tree stump. Her calves were burning and swollen, and she was completely out of breath. For the past several hours, she had been running down a mountain with the speed of a military courier. Even a body as tough as Keigetsu's would need some rest after that.

No, I mustn't! What if that delay proves fatal?!

Quickly thinking better of the idea, she wiped the sweat that had trickled all the way down to her jaw. She had opted to head down the mountain alone for fear of the difference a few hours could make. The thought of what a "short" break might mean for Keigetsu made it impossible to sit still.

Reirin straightened out her disheveled hair and put on the coat she had been clutching to her chest. Now that she had made it this close to the encampment, she stood a chance of running into someone.

I have to hurry!

Based on the position of the silvery moon overhead, it was around the second hour of the dog. Back at Cloud Ladder Gardens, they were sure to be holding a banquet with the emperor as the guest of honor—or perhaps it was already over by now. Hopefully Gyoumei had made it in time.

Reirin ran for another two hours, racked with worry the whole way. It was during the second hour of the boar, late in the night, that she finally passed through the gate to Cloud Ladder Gardens.

"It's 'Shu Keigetsu,'" she announced, smoothing out her robes and expression. "Please allow me through."

“What?! Lady Shu Keigetsu?! What are you doing here?!”

“As soon as I was informed of His Majesty’s visit, I cut the Congee Conferment Rite short and came as fast as I could.”

After ending her conversation with the baffled gatekeeper with a single sentence, Reirin forced her way onto the grounds and gave the area a sweeping glance. A carriage flying the imperial family’s flag was parked near the entrance, and skilled guards lined the cloisters. It was clear that the emperor had already arrived.

At the very least, there was no sign of a brutal execution being carried out in the courtyard or cloisters. Nor was anyone ringing the gongs that announced when someone had passed.

As Reirin dashed down the cloister toward the courtyard, she was relieved to spot the prince’s Stalwart Steed tied to the stable. It seemed Gyomei had made it safely.

“...aren’t you?”

“Please, Lady...”

As soon as she turned her gaze outside, she picked up on cheerful voices coming from the pavilion in the center of the pond. When she squinted into the light of the torches adorning the space, she saw the four other Maidens sitting there. Wrapped up in fur to stave off the cold, the girls appeared to be admiring the nighttime scenery.

Lady Keigetsu!

The moment she spotted “Kou Reirin”—that is, Keigetsu—sitting on a stone chair and wrapped in the thickest overcoat of the group, Reirin nearly let slip a cry of relief. As the two of them had cut off all contact since returning from the outer city, this was her first time seeing her friend in almost a month. Although it was her own face she was looking at, something about the sight felt deeply nostalgic.

Keigetsu was sipping from a teacup she held in both hands. She looked up at Seika with a pout, only to turn around and glare at Houshun, sigh at Kasui, and slump back against her seat in exhaustion. She still flitted through expressions at the drop of a hat, and she was *alive*.

The joy of their long-awaited reunion and the comfort of seeing her friend safe and sound almost brought tears welling up in Reirin's eyes. *Thank goodness!*

No doubt Keigetsu had skillfully thrown the emperor off her trail. Reirin's legs nearly gave out from under her, but she scrambled to brace her knees, then tidied herself up one last time for good measure. The Maidens' pavilion was almost certainly under surveillance. It would look suspicious if "Shu Keigetsu" burst onto the scene, and she didn't want to give Keigetsu cause for concern by looking like something the cat dragged in.

Similar to how she always suppressed her symptoms with sheer willpower, Reirin put a lid on her exhaustion and pain, held her head high, and crossed the bridge that led to the pavilion.

"My, what do we have here? The four of you in one place?" she called out, prompting Keigetsu to turn around.

What a relief it was to see her alive and well. Still, Reirin couldn't imagine what a harrowing experience she must have been through. Keigetsu had her bumbling and skittish tendencies. There was every chance that she had wallowed in isolation, unable to come out and rely on the other Maidens for help, or that the emperor's sudden assault had plunged her into despair. If only Reirin had been there, she could have provided a little more support.

As the Kou Maiden walked over, feeling frustrated with her own impotence, Keigetsu went wide-eyed and shot up from her seat. "Oh, Lady 'Shu Keigetsu'!"

Based on the way Keigetsu started stalking across the bridge, Reirin braced herself to be berated by way of greeting. *Why didn't you come sooner?!* she would probably say. *It's all your fault that I had such an awful time of it!*

“Why did you bother coming back here?”

Huh?

Seeing as Reirin had been expecting a tearful outburst, she froze when Keigetsu’s reaction was to lower her voice and shoot her an unimpressed look.

“Erm, well...”

“His Majesty got suspicious about the swap and interrogated me to no end, but Prince Gyomei intervened and drove him back. He’s holding the emperor’s attention as we speak. Everything is going smoothly, so you shouldn’t be talking to me.”

Reirin did her best to digest the deluge of information delivered in hushed tones. In short, Keigetsu had made it through her predicament, so there was no point in Reirin showing up now. If anything, talking to each other like this risked inviting renewed suspicion.

“I can manage just fine without you.”

Now that Gyomei had arrived on the scene, Reirin’s help was no longer necessary.

“Oh...”

Reirin felt something sear the depths of her heart, but she didn’t know what name to put to the emotion. She had a feeling it was akin to shame. In an effort to disguise whatever it was welling up inside her, she tucked her hair behind her ear.

She knew she ought to be glad for her friend, but for some reason, it felt like she had been cast aside. No, it was arrogant of her to even think that. It was her own fault for spinning her wheels and getting it into her head that she had to act.

“I’m glad to hear it. My apologies. It seems I wasn’t able to help when it mattered most.”

Her hair was matted with sweat. Suddenly ashamed of how her legs had been

soaked in mud and sliced by branches, she casually adjusted her coat to better hide the hem of her skirt. She made a concentrated effort to steady her ragged breathing. Not only had she not been there when it mattered, but she had even damaged her beloved friend's body.

"It's fine. This was no big deal." Keigetsu shrugged. Then, upon noticing how understated Reirin's reaction was, she furrowed her brow into a dubious frown. "It sounds like holding a Congee Conferment Rite on Treacherous Tan Peak was a struggle even for you. In a sense, it's fortunate that you were running late, since it let His Highness get here earlier than planned. All's well that ends well, I suppose."

Keigetsu had no idea how hard Reirin had worked to ensure that Gyoumei made it in time. Nor did Reirin have any intention of telling her. How could she? It would be like begging for gratitude.

"True. It's a good thing that His Highness made it in time."

"The other Maidens, the captain, Tousetsu, and Lord Keishou all helped me out. It turns out I can work pretty well with others when I try."

With a triumphant giggle, Keigetsu cast a glance behind her. The bright flames of the torches illuminating the pavilion cast their glow on her cheeks. Reirin found it a dazzling sight.

"I suppose so. That's nice."

"Is that all you have to say?" That underwhelming response made Keigetsu's lips twist into a pout. "While you were taking your sweet time with the Congee Conferment Rite, I was fighting pretty hard over here. You could be a little—" Before she could finish that complaint, she bit back the words on the tip of her tongue. "Forget it," she snorted instead. "Either way, we can't reverse the switch tonight. It's obviously not going to happen while His Majesty is here. We can revise our strategy once we've made it back to the capital, so we should stay out of contact to avoid suspicion. Also..."

At the very end, it looked like she was about to say something else, but she

ultimately clamped her mouth shut.

“That’s all. I’ll head back now,” she finished, then turned back to the pavilion where the Maidens had assembled.

Seika craned forward as soon as she noticed Reirin there. “Lady ‘Keigetsu’! I didn’t realize you were back! Why don’t you join us for some—”

“Oh dear, we mustn’t trouble her. She seems rather exhausted,” Keigetsu cut in, putting on her best “Reirin” act. “After a bit more chatting, we should all return to our rooms as well. It’s beginning to get quite cold.”

She probably wanted to impress upon whoever was watching from afar that “Kou Reirin” and “Shu Keigetsu” were always split up. As usual, Keigetsu was full of good ideas.

Oh?

Reirin tilted her head to one side, mystified. She ought to have been proud to see how dependable her best friend had become, but for some reason, all she felt was a dull ache in her heart.

How curious.

Her body’s reactions were off. She had spent so long hoping for Keigetsu to gain acceptance and love from the people around her. Every time she watched Tousetsu or Leelee praise her friend, she felt a joy akin to bathing in a warm spring breeze. So where was this pain in her chest coming from?

It must be a side effect of running down that mountain.

Just as Reirin clutched her hands to her chest, Keigetsu cast her a quick glance from the pavilion. Startled, Reirin hurriedly forced a smile and waved a hand. Before the other girl had time to respond, she bowed and turned on her heel.

As she traced her steps down the pitch-black cloister, she was thankful that there were plenty of torches burning in Keigetsu’s pavilion. It was usually hard to make out dark areas from well-lit ones. There was no danger of her noticing Reirin’s mud-soaked hem or horribly unconvincing smile.

“Ugh. Just look at how perfect her posture is.” Back in the pavilion, Keigetsu watched Reirin turn back down the cloister with a back straight as a rod. “She’s perfectly composed no matter the situation. How is she supposed to convince anyone she’s ‘Shu Keigetsu’ like that?”

She had to stop herself from clicking her tongue. After hearing that the Congee Conferment Rite had run late, Keigetsu had worried that there must have been some big commotion. She certainly hadn’t expected Reirin to waltz in with perfect poise.

How silly of her to assume that Reirin would at least speed up her carriage ride upon hearing news of her dilemma. The Kou Maiden had never looked anything less than elegant, smoothing out her hair and perfectly arranging the hem of her garment. She hadn’t rushed across the cloister or bridge, and she wasn’t even out of breath.

Was she not worried about me at all? Even the other Maidens showed a little concern.

As she settled back down in her stone chair, Keigetsu shook the thought from her head. It would be strange if the emperor’s sudden arrival made “Shu Keigetsu” worry for “Kou Reirin,” so that was the right way to behave in front of other people. Perhaps the girl had finally decided to buckle down and fix her weak acting.

But I also worked hard to overcome my weak points, you know. Keigetsu picked up her teacup to hide the pout threatening to twist her lips.

In truth, she had wanted Reirin to praise her more. She always relied on Kou Reirin to get her out of her predicaments, but just this once, she had made it through on her own power. She had hoped the girl in question would be the one happiest to see that.

What a letdown. I was sure she would marvel at me and go, “Wow, how incredible!”

Keigetsu was lying earlier. She didn't think the emperor's surprise attack was "no big deal" at all. The whole encounter had been terrifying, she had come close to crying, and her heart had called out Kou Reirin's name too many times to count. It was only by desperately clinging to her absent friend's words of encouragement that she had managed to break through the situation. The sole reason she had blustered about "managing fine on her own" was because she wanted to show Reirin that she could be independent.

She's always going on about self-sufficiency and backbone. Isn't an independent woman supposed to be her ideal?

She could stand on her own without depending on Kou Reirin. She could manage the bare minimum of socializing. Given how Reirin always delighted over Keigetsu's accomplishments as if they were her own, Keigetsu had been sure she would be ecstatic to witness these signs of growth.

Didn't I show you that I can get along with the other Maidens?

Kou Reirin would often urge Keigetsu to interact more with the other Maidens or lament how she wanted more people to learn of her friend's charms. With how quick the other Maidens were to start playing mind games, Keigetsu had no real desire to deepen her bonds with them at this point, but she was doing her best to improve her social skills due to Reirin's encouragement.

I even stopped myself from begging for more praise.

A few months ago, if Keigetsu didn't get the compliments she wanted to hear, she would throw a tantrum and start hurling teacups. She had since reevaluated that behavior as immature, so she'd forced herself not to say anything.

I can't believe this.

The steam wafting from Keigetsu's tea moistened her lips.

Seika took that moment to address her from the opposite seat. "What did Lady Reirin say? Was she all right? For Heaven's sake, I can't believe you chased her off after she came all the way to the pavilion!"

Houshun and Kasui chimed in after her.

“I agree! I wanted to ask her how things went at Treacherous Tan Peak.”

“And I would have liked to share what happened here tonight.”

Keigetsu was in a bad enough mood already. She dismissed the deluge of criticism with a snort. “What else was I supposed to do? It would look suspicious if we were together.”

“You have some nerve to say that,” Seika shot back without missing a beat. “Haven’t you been waiting out in the cold hoping to get a glimpse of Lady Reirin? You even dragged the rest of us into it.”

It was true. The plan had been for Kou Reirin to arrive at Cloud Ladder Gardens that night. The only reason Keigetsu was sitting under the pavilion was to ensure that she made it with her own two eyes. She had to tell her worrywart friend she was all right, or else that boar might go on yet another rampage.

Granted, that had turned out to be a needless worry.

“Now that we’ve all seen Miss Reirin, shall we retire for the night? It’s gotten quite late.”

“Yes, let’s. The original plan was to leave for the imperial capital tomorrow, but now that His Majesty is here, we might be asked to lend a hand with the inspection tours. We ought to rest.”

Deciding this was the right time to wrap things up, Houshun and Kasui started preparing to take their leave.

As Keigetsu observed the girls who had kept her company without a single complaint, she soberly interjected, “Thank you for helping me earlier.”

It was usually only a handful of times a year that she bothered to say thanks, but if Kou Reirin were in her shoes, she would be sure to express gratitude over the most trivial of things.

See? Can’t you see how hard I’m trying? Keigetsu once again thought in a sulk.

It was particularly humiliating to humble herself before that nasty Kin Seika, but she owed her for getting her out of singing.

“Frankly, I felt like you went a little too far, but...you really saved me.”

When Keigetsu mumbled out her thanks, Kin Seika grew flustered, her eyes growing wide. Then she turned her head aside to cover up her reaction. “No need to thank me. I simply didn’t want to endure your dreadful song.” Flicking her eyes down at the other girl, she added, “Though I suppose I can give you credit for remembering *Chronicles of the Ascetic*.”

Seika’s arrogant attempt at praise only made Keigetsu’s brow crease into a frown.

“This doesn’t feel right...”

“Come again?”

“I don’t enjoy watching you squirm and struggle to hand me a compliment.”

“I beg your pardon?!”

A blue vein popped out on Seika’s forehead. Apparently, that comment had offended her, but Keigetsu had only spoken the truth.

It was strange. She had spent so long wishing for others to fawn over her. Perhaps this didn’t quite count as *fawning*, no, but she was still receiving a certain measure of appreciation. Yet she didn’t feel the slightest bit of excitement.

I can’t believe this.

Keigetsu reiterated her previous thought for good measure before slamming her emptied teacup on the table.

Reirin collapsed face-first, and the bed caught her in its soft embrace. She had found her way to “Shu Keigetsu’s” assigned room within Cloud Ladder Gardens. As she had left Leelee back at Treacherous Tan Peak—by this point, the court

lady and her colleagues were probably making their way down the mountain with an empty palanquin—there was no one else around.

Without a single candle lit, the room was dark. Moonlight filtered in through a window left open for ventilation. Reirin rolled onto her back and stared vacantly at the pale light casting its glow on the wall. The moment she stopped moving, she was reminded of how much her legs hurt. Reirin took to massaging her calves, which had gone numb with exhaustion.

This was her friend's body. No amount of care could be too much. Plus, due to her promise to Tou, she would have to head back to Treacherous Tan Peak tomorrow. It would serve her well to focus on recovering her strength.

Perhaps I should have stayed at Treacherous Tan Peak.

All they'd needed to evade the emperor's assault was the crown prince's intervention. Keikou was right; there had been no point in Reirin running to the scene. After how hard she and Keigetsu had worked to minimize their contact and keep the spell under wraps, why had she even bothered coming back?

I was just so worried about Lady Keigetsu.

Although she whispered that excuse in her mind, a more rational part of herself immediately scolded her for thinking it. That was still no good reason to act on her emotions. The whole reason they were in their current mess was because she had forced Keigetsu to use her magic, convinced it was for her friend's own good, and put her in danger as a result. Why hadn't she learned her lesson?

The most important thing for Reirin to do right now was to keep her friend's magic from coming to light. And that meant keeping as much distance from Keigetsu as possible.

Lady Keigetsu doesn't need me around. She can work with everyone else just fine.

As she recalled the sight of Keigetsu under that pavilion bathed in warm light,

blending effortlessly into the group, Reirin rolled onto her side again.

“She’s become so dependable,” she said out loud, desperate to make her thoughts fall into line with her words.

This was what Reirin had wanted all along. She had longed to see her friend get closer to the people around her. Keigetsu was an incredibly endearing girl. Sometimes she could give the wrong impression, but Reirin had always known that once Keigetsu opened the door of her heart a fraction, a great number of people would realize her appeal and set out to bond with her. And that hunch had proven correct. As soon as the girl was in a tight spot, her fellow Maidens and a number of others had all reached out to her.

It’s no surprise! Lady Keigetsu has a certain kind of charm. It makes people want to lend her a hand.

Clenching her scratched-up palms into fists, Reirin nodded in agreement with her own point. Her friend had never received the love and appreciation she deserved due to the unfortunate circumstances of her environment. If people were starting to rethink their treatment of her, there could be no greater cause for celebration.

Once a single crack formed in the outer shell, the seed would burst open. The dormant bud would unfurl its leaves and bloom into the flower of sociability. Reirin just so happened to be the first friend Keigetsu had ever made, but over time, she would become expendable. That was all a part of growing up, and growth was a positive change.

Beautiful flowers weren’t meant to be plucked and kept close at hand. A true friend would wish to see that blossom grow strong in the lush wilds. As sickly as she was, she was bound to die and leave Keigetsu behind sooner or later. All the more reason not to tie her down.

But still...

She recalled the sight of Keigetsu turning on her heel toward the pavilion. That circle of people exchanging laughter. That lively scene. In truth, as she

watched Keigetsu turn to leave, Reirin had been tempted to tug on her sleeve. *Wait*, she had wanted to say. *Please don't—*

“Stop that!”

When Reirin noticed herself reliving the moment and reaching out a hand, she snapped upright in bed, then slapped both cheeks in a fluid motion. What had come over her?

Stop that, Reirin! You ought to be thrilled that your friend is finding happiness and learning to stand on her own! You mustn't ever wish to keep her from leaving the nest!

Her heart pounded in her chest. Just now, she had vaguely—no, *strongly*—wished that Keigetsu would rely on her a little more. Even if it meant forgetting all about the other Maidens.

Why, I can hardly believe I had such a nasty streak in me.

It was almost unthinkable that a member of the Kou clan had tried to deny someone their independence and growth. For a while, Reirin muttered “I can't believe it” over and over, both hands clasped to her chest.

Upon noticing how hot her cheeks felt, she scrambled to find a cool cloth for her face. She shouldn't have hit herself with quite that much force while in Keigetsu's body. Reirin was really disappointing herself on all fronts today. In the past, she had been a bit more cognizant of her limitations.

“In any case, the very last thing I should be doing is dragging Lady Keigetsu down,” she told herself as she clutched her smarting cheeks from over the cloth.

The entire reason that the emperor had his eye on Keigetsu was that Reirin had forced her to use a large-scale spell at the Rite of Reverence. She had caused her friend more than enough trouble already, so it wouldn't do to stand in the way of her happiness any longer. It was unethical to even consider it. Her role was to take responsibility and make sure Keigetsu's magic stayed a secret.

I must keep my distance from Lady Keigetsu. I must perfect my act. And no matter what, I must refrain from doing or saying anything that might look suspicious.

Reirin repeated the same advice over and over, etching the words into her soul.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

“Are you there, ‘Shu Keigetsu’?” came a resonant voice.

Is that His Highness?

Surprised, Reirin opened the door to find Prince Gyoumei standing in the entrance with the moonlight to his back.

“Your Highness! What’s the matter? Why are you wandering around this late at night without an escort?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

Despite her fluster, Reirin attempted to let the prince inside, but he stopped her with a sigh. He preferred not to set foot in a Maiden’s room so late at night. It was a sensible move. She didn’t have a single attendant present, after all.

“Keishou ran up to me in a fluster and reported that ‘Shu Keigetsu’ arrived at Cloud Ladder Gardens all by herself. I came to check that all was well.”

The crown prince was under constant surveillance. Gyoumei wasn’t even going to attempt to keep this visit a secret, so he treated Reirin as “Shu Keigetsu” in case anyone decided to listen in.

“Was there trouble at Treacherous Tan Peak?”

Oh... He’s worried because he couldn’t pick me up on the Stalwart Steed.

Reirin quickly inferred the intent behind his question. It must have made her worrywart cousin anxious to head to Cloud Ladder Gardens without stopping for her first. Plus, she had used the excuse of the rite running late to get him to go on without her. He was obviously concerned that she had been caught up in

some kind of trouble at that perilous disaster site.

Even Keishou, the one who had brought him the report, must have been distressed that he couldn't go check on his sister himself. (After all, it would look strange for a Kou military officer to visit the Shu Maiden in the middle of the night.) Gyoumei had likely come bearing her brother's share of the concern as well.

"I heard you came through the gate unaccompanied. Why didn't you return in a palanquin? You had better not tell me that you came down that mountain all alone."

"Erm..."

If the average highborn lady couldn't be picked up by horse, she would travel in a palanquin or carriage instead. But in that case, it wouldn't make sense for her porters and drivers not to have shown up along with her.

"I was so impatient that I got off the palanquin part of the way through the journey. I was determined to make it to Cloud Ladder Gardens in time to receive His Majesty. Granted, I ended up too late regardless."

Reirin made her best effort to smile instead of sweat. The men of the Kou clan were known to be overprotective. The eldest, Keikou, had a habit of going, "Give it your best shot! That's the spirit!" and letting his sickly sister run free. But the middle child, Keishou, and her cousin, Gyoumei, were always a step or two away from locking her up whenever she pushed herself too hard.

"I did a bit of walking on my own. Only a bit, though. The palanquin should be arriving shortly after me."

She wasn't lying. As a matter of fact, she *had* ridden in the palanquin during her departure trip. And several hours later, her palanquin would arrive at Cloud Ladder Gardens with only Leelee riding inside. "Several hours" could count as "shortly" if one were feeling generous.

"Oho?" Gyoumei looked like he wanted to say something when Reirin casually

adjusted her hem to hide her swollen leg, but he changed his question for fear of eavesdropping. “Then what about the Congee Conferment Rite? You didn’t run into any issues, I hope?”

He must have been concerned that the emperor had tried putting pressure on her.

“Well...”

Reirin had to stop and think for a moment. It was a good idea to report that there had been interference, but she didn’t want to give Gyoumei or Keishou needless anxiety. She preferred that they spend that concern on Keigetsu rather than herself. The last thing she wanted was for them to increase the security around Treacherous Tan Peak and leave Keigetsu vulnerable as a result. Besides, while a lot may have happened, from losing the food to the court ladies’ rebellion to the arrival of the brigands, none of it had resulted in any tangible harm.

“All things considered, there were no real issues.”

“Hold it. Don’t give me that bare-bones summary.” Reirin had averted her gaze and attempted to fudge the issue, but her perceptive cousin frowned, demanded answers, and forced her to meet his eyes. “Explain what happened.”

“The porters lost a wagon on the rough roads and misplaced a portion of the food. However, we were quickly able to supplement our supply through other means. One of my court ladies had an attitude problem, but she repented after I gave her a stern warning. There were also a handful of naughty bullies who attempted to disrupt the line, but I worked together with the porters to bring them under control.”

She endeavored to make it sound like nothing of note had transpired. Half of the supply counted as “a portion,” all she had done to punish Kasei was make her stand in front of a pot, and the brigands could definitely be categorized as “naughty bullies.” It was fine. She hadn’t told any lies.

“I am humbled to have your concern, but forget about me. How fare the

other Maidens? I feel terrible that I wasn't present to help field His Majesty's unexpected visit." She asked as much out of genuine concern as she did for the convenient change of topic.

Inferring that she meant Keigetsu specifically, Gyoumei relaxed his masculine features into a gentle smile. "They're doing fine." There was more to his words than their surface meaning. "His Majesty was satisfied with the girls' hospitality. In particular, he was pleased to see that 'Kou Reirin' is still the *same* intelligent and modest Maiden he remembered."

That meant that Keigetsu had successfully acted the part of "Kou Reirin"—and that she hadn't given away the switch.

"Now that His Majesty is assured of the Maidens' capabilities, he has turned his attention toward other matters."

For the time being, Genyou had set aside his suspicions about "Kou Reirin" body swapping or practicing Daoist magic. It sounded like something else had caught his interest.

"What other matters?"

"Verbal alms. His Majesty plans to stay at the encampment through tomorrow. He says he is going to gather the blind, crippled, and gravely ill from the nearby disaster areas and offer them a few words in person. He also wishes to personally perform the funeral rites for those who have died of starvation. Apparently, that was the reason for his unannounced visit."

"He came to give verbal alms?"

Of all the emperors in history, Genyou was famous for paying by far the most official visits to disaster areas and war zones. To personally grace those of low birth—not to mention the disabled or diseased—and offer them encouragement was an act of unprecedented charity for a supreme monarch. Word had it that the recipients of these verbal alms always wept for joy.

It could have served him well to advertise that benevolence, yet Genyou

always showed up to these places with no warning. And he declined to even make a record of his visits, as if he wanted to hide his good deeds.

“His Majesty goes to such great lengths for his people,” Reirin commented, choosing her words carefully.

Sometimes he was the apathetic ruler who showed little interest in politics. Other times, he was the vindictive emperor who launched a relentless investigation into the use of Daoist magic. And then there was the benevolent monarch who loved his subjects. Genyou’s behavior was all over the place, which made it difficult to pin down his true motives.

“However, if we extend the length of our stay, we won’t make it back to the imperial capital in time for the Repose of Souls.”

“Correct. His Majesty said that you Maidens needn’t participate in the ceremony at the capital. He would prefer you stay here until the Day of Ultimate Yin and perform the requiem of tribute on this land. He claimed it would be much more beneficial to sing where the yin is densest.”

With how much effort the girls had put into making it back for the Repose of Souls, it was a bit of an anticlimax for the man in charge to excuse them from the event. Then again, if Genyou was wary enough to follow them all the way to the encampment, it would prove difficult to undo the switch under the cover of the ceremony. There was no longer any reason for them to hurry home.

“But I trust that His Majesty will still be returning home in time for the event?”

Gyoumei heaved a beleaguered sigh. “He can still make it if he leaves the day after tomorrow, so I assume that’s his plan, but...it’s difficult to say. During our earlier conversation, he sounded quite passionate about the verbal alms. He said he wishes to talk with as many of his subjects as possible.”

If Emperor Genyou was to remain in the region, the crown prince couldn’t very well head home without him. That meant there was a chance that the emperor, crown prince, and Maidens would all be absent for the Repose of

Souls, a national event. It would be unprecedented.

“What could His Majesty be thinking?”

“The imperial capital must be in a state of panic. Still, His Majesty’s will is the will of the nation itself.” Gyoumei gave a weary nod, then went on, “One last thing. His Majesty wants the Maidens to round up the recipients of his verbal arms from each of the respective disaster sites. He wants to treat the ill here at Cloud Ladder Gardens, and he wants to bury the corpses of the starvation victims. Also, so as not to alarm the people, he asks that you refrain from alluding to him and instead treat it as the charity of the five clans.”

“He wants us to round up ill patients and corpses without mentioning his name?”

Reirin’s brow furrowed a fraction. Genyou was known to prefer keeping a low profile. It was possible to take the request at face value and assume that he wanted to let the five clans have the credit. Still, it sounded almost like he was trying to use the Maidens as a cover for some kind of plot. Was she overthinking it?

“Yes. As such, you Maidens are to revisit your assigned locations tomorrow. The captain of the Eagle Eyes, ceremonial officer Keishou, and I have our concerns regarding ‘Kou Reirin’s’ poor health, so we plan to accompany her to her disaster site.”

Reirin picked up on the implications in Gyoumei’s smooth explanation. It was hard to tell what the emperor was thinking, but the Maidens’ return to the disaster sites provided the perfect excuse to get them away from Genyou, so they would comply with his request. Since Keigetsu was the emperor’s target, they would solidify her defenses with allies: Gyoumei, Keishou, and Shin-u.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea.” Reirin nodded enthusiastically. “I’m also quite concerned for Lady ‘Kou Reirin’s’ well-being. I beg that you do all in your power to keep her safe.”

“‘Shu Keigetsu.’ I’m afraid this means you will be returning to the most

perilous locale with only Keikou for a bodyguard. Forgive me.”

“You have absolutely no reason to apologize,” Reirin replied with a bow.

Her number one concern was Keigetsu’s safety, so as long as people were looking out for her friend, she didn’t mind in the least if no personnel could be spared for her. Besides, she had already been planning to revisit Treacherous Tan Peak at the earliest opportunity.

“As a matter of fact, I was feeling quite chagrined that I failed to distribute a portion of the food today. Receiving permission to return there is a stroke of good fortune, as far as I’m concerned.”

“I brought some rice of my own to reward our subjects’ struggles. Take as much as you need to cover your losses.” Gyoumei easily offered exactly what she needed. “I believe it will stave off the locals’ hunger for longer if you present it in the form of rice rather than congee.”

“I thank you for your incredible generosity.” Reirin meant that from the bottom of her heart.

This would add further momentum to her relief efforts. Now that she was no longer constrained by the need to return home in time for the Repose of Souls, she could give this project her full attention.

“Actually, with all due respect, I was concerned that a single day’s worth of congee may not suffice to provide these people true relief. I have been privately pondering a way to better address the root of their plight.”

“Oh?”

The prince’s interest seemed piqued, so Reirin divulged the plan she had come up with that afternoon.

“I see. That’s an intriguing idea. We should give it a try. However—”

Just as Gyoumei craned forward, he abruptly stopped and glanced back down the cloister. His ears had picked up on clear notes of music.

“Is that...a flute?”

The melody almost seemed to melt away into the surrounding air, as sad and surreptitious as a woman's weeping. But it was that softness of sound that commanded the listener's attention.

After straining her ears alongside Gyoumei for a few moments, Reirin traded looks with him before stepping out of her room. Lured down the cloister by the plaintive melody, the pair slowly but surely approached the source of the music.

"Who could it be?"

Whoever it was, they were quite skilled. Such distinguished sound could only be the work of a professional, but no musical troupe had been summoned to the encampment. Although the Maidens were well versed in instruments themselves, they were all supposed to be asleep at this hour. Besides, the girls specialized in stringed instruments like the erhu and qin; it was hard to imagine any of them being this proficient with the flute. A handful of eccentric military officers dabbled in music, Reirin's brother Keishou among them, but few could manage such a brilliant performance.

Incidentally, though Gyoumei was walking alongside Reirin anyway, there was a second reason to exclude him from the list. As skilled as he was in both the literary and military arts, he had no talent for music whatsoever. He would never even play the qin where anyone could hear it.

Zhi, jue, zhi, jue, gong, yu...

As Reirin had been familiar with music from an early age, her ears automatically picked out the notes. Translated from Ei's music scale, they were roughly equivalent to sol, mi, sol, mi, do, and la. The melody was like a gentle cycle of ripples and tidal waves, and it seeped into the depths of the heart like water.

I've heard this song somewhere before.

Reirin put a hand to her cheek, sensing a vague memory threatening to surface. Perhaps owed to the blood of her artistically talented mother, she

could recall a song with perfect accuracy after hearing it only once, and she was certain she had never heard anyone perform this one before. Yet curiously enough, the moment the melody flooded her ears, she was struck with the sense that she knew this song.

But where have I heard it?

The song was absolutely beautiful. It had such a familiar ring to it that it was tempting to start humming along. If it had lyrics, even the youngest of children would be able to memorize it with ease.

Following the sound eventually led the pair out of the cloister and to a pond bathed in moonlight. Near the shore opposite the pavilion where Keigetsu and the other Maidens had been, there was a man-made hill modeled after a mountain. There, among the majestic branches of the pines and the arrangements of exotic rocks, stood a lone figure.

“Oh!”

Upon identifying the man playing his flute beneath the waxing gibbous moon, both Reirin and Gyoumei gasped. It was Emperor Genyou.

That's right. His Majesty loves music.

An appreciator of refinement and grace, Genyou was said to prefer the songs and dances of banquets to military exercises and to own a larger collection of musical instruments than swords. Still, this was Reirin's first time ever seeing him perform a song himself. Judging by Gyoumei's wide-eyed look of astonishment, the same went for him.



The pair exchanged glances before muffling their footsteps and heading back down the cloister. Gyoumei shot Reirin a look that urged her to return to her assigned room, but she stopped and cast one last glance at the hill on her way back. Genyou stood there in silence. As he blew on his flute, he looked as poised as ever, his face betraying not a hint of emotion. Even so, the sound of his song eloquently attested to a hidden sorrow.

Gyoumei frowned. "What could His Majesty be thinking?" Even the man's own son was struggling to pin down the emperor's true motives.

"I believe I've heard this song somewhere before."

"You have?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid I can't remember where... What about you, Your Highness?"

"This is my first time hearing it. I'm fairly sure, at least."

Gyoumei's response was uncharacteristically noncommittal and lacking in confidence. Reirin was similarly frustrated with how vague her own memories were. She definitely knew the melody from somewhere, but somehow she couldn't recall ever hearing it.

Perhaps I only read the sheet music? But where? If I can just recall the purpose of the song, I'm sure I could figure out the rest from there.

Judging by its somber tone, the song was probably either one performed at farewell parties or a piece composed to beguile a hermit's tedium. Reirin walked down the cloister in silence, racking her brains for an answer, but just as she arrived outside her room, a bell rang and called her to a halt.

"Oh..."

It was the second hour of the rat. Midnight.

"The date has changed," Gyoumei muttered offhandedly.

It was then that something occurred to Reirin: If noon, the time when the sun

shone highest in the sky, was the pinnacle of yang, then now was the exact opposite, the pinnacle of yin. To perform a song on a land rich in yin at the time of yin was a way to pacify and console the souls of the dead. Which could mean only one thing.

“That song His Majesty is playing must be a requiem.”

Gyoumei snapped to attention, taken by surprise, then nodded. “Perhaps so.”

But if so, then who was it for? His subjects? Would that mean he was a benevolent monarch who sincerely desired peace among his people?

Struggling to put her finger on both the song’s identity and Genyou’s true nature, Reirin creased her brow.

Chapter 5:

Reirin Creates an Explosion

“**T**_{HANK YOU} so much, milady!”

“I hardly deserve thanks. It pains me to present you with uncooked rice instead of proper congee.”

“Oh, no, this is preferable! We have the option to preserve it this way!”

The Shu Maiden—currently inhabited by Reirin—offered a tender smile as she handed a sack of rice to the last local in line. It was the evening of the day after the Congee Conferment Rite, and she was back at Treacherous Tan Peak. Reirin had borrowed the rice Gyoumei brought and, true to her word, compensated for the half of the supplies that were lost.

The Shu court ladies were predictably exhausted after making the trip up and down a steep mountain two days in a row, but they were also beaming with pride. The porters who had finally seen their job through looked equally relieved.

“This is great, milady! We finally managed to hand out all the rice.”

“Indeed, Leelee. Now it truly feels like we have completed the Congee Conferment Rite.”

In contrast to the others, Reirin appeared perfectly calm, as though she had done nothing but fulfill a basic obligation.

Her demure response earned an exaggerated look of round-eyed wonder from Kasei, the blazing scarlet court lady standing nearby. “My! Even if you *did* promise to deliver the missing half of the rice, not many Maidens would make good on their word the very next day. No doubt the common folk are in admiration of your timely response!”

The “discipline” of the previous day may have proved a little *too* effective.

Reirin met Kasei's earnest attempts to sing her praises with a strained smile.

Despite Reirin's attempts to get the full story later on, she had failed to identify the culprit who started the rumor that the empress was on the verge of disowning Keigetsu. Kasei claimed to have heard it from her roommate, that roommate claimed to have heard it from another court lady, and that court lady claimed to have heard it from Kasei.

It had always been easy for stories to take on a life of their own around the inner court. One need only take someone good at steering a conversation (like Houshun, for example), dress her up as a court lady, and throw her into a gossip session, and any lie could end up spread around as the truth. The malicious actor could have posed as a court lady, or they could have disguised themselves as a eunuch or menial worker. It was impossible to pinpoint where it all started.

Reirin dodged Kasei's blatant flattery with a slight smile, replying, "I am glad I was able to take swift action, but it's all thanks to His Highness that I was able to prepare the rice so soon. I have done nothing deserving of such praise."

She then stole a glance in the direction of Cloud Ladder Gardens, her thoughts turning to what the others were up to.

Around now, His Majesty should be giving the verbal alms back at the encampment. Lady Keigetsu should be headed to the neighboring disaster site of Central Tan alongside His Highness's team. I pray they all stay safe.

Earlier that morning, Keigetsu's team, bound for Central Tan, and Reirin, bound for Treacherous Tan Peak, had ridden their carriage and palanquin alongside each other up to the gate of Cloud Ladder Gardens. As the girls had been keeping their distance for the past month, that was their first time traveling side by side in quite a long time.

In truth, I wished to get a glimpse of her face and say hello.

Have a safe trip, Reirin had longed to say. Did you sleep well last night? Please do take care.

She missed her expressive friend so much. A simple greeting was all it would take to make the girl light up, then turn her face aside with a snort.

In the end, Reirin had refrained from calling out to her. The secret service could have eyes on them at any given moment, and there was no telling what might spark suspicion about the swap. Besides, Keigetsu was already annoyed at her for “bothering” to come back the night before.

I must not do anything suspicious. I must keep Lady Keigetsu’s magic from coming to light. Staying away is the surest way to protect her, she had told herself as she sat in her palanquin and watched Keigetsu’s team go, her head lowered into a deep bow.

Back in the present, Reirin noticed she had hunched in on herself and scrambled to get her chin up. *Oh, enough! I have no time to waste wallowing in the past! Show some backbone, Reirin! It’s all about backbone!*

She had returned to Treacherous Tan Peak to provide her services, so she had to be sure to put her all into it. After giving her cheeks a firm slap, she sensed a pair of eyes on her and turned around. There, she found the little girl from the settlement, called Leanne, staring at her with a conflicted expression. The girl was clutching the bag of rice she had just received and looking for a chance to approach.

The moment her eyes met with Reirin’s, she looked off to the side. But when the boys around her urged her to go say thanks, she reluctantly stepped forward.

“What’s wrong, Leanne?” asked Reirin.

“Uh, well...” the girl mumbled, forcing the words out. “I’m surprised you actually came two days in a row.”

As Leanne’s face twisted into a grimace, the boys chimed in to tease her from the sidelines.

“Ever since Doctor Tou told us you were coming back yesterday, she’s been

pestering him about it nonstop! She kept asking, ‘Are you sure? Are you really sure?’”

“See? We *told* you the Maiden’s not like those other nobles who just pretend to listen to our complaints!”

From the sound of it, she’d had her doubts that Reirin would make good on her promise to supplement the missing half of the rice.

“You can’t blame me for worrying! The only thing most nobles know how to do is spout a bunch of empty words.”

Leanne had at last grown miffed enough to come out and say something downright irreverent. The boys panicked and told her to watch it, but Reirin found the attitude charming. It was healthy for people to openly express their complaints. As the friend of a girl who existed in a default state of dissatisfaction, it almost made Reirin happy to hear Leanne’s spirited remarks.

“Besides, this may make up for the loss of the rice, but we’re still going to get hit with a flood later.” Leanne dropped her gaze, and Reirin gave a start.

“Nothing is ever going to change. The Heavens will never save us. All we get is a single bowl of congee, and after that, we have to fend for ourselves.”

The Heavens would never bestow a miracle. People only had themselves to rely on. Curiously enough, Leanne’s insistences bore a striking similarity to the thoughts Reirin had bottled deep inside her since she was a little girl.

Never expecting help from others could be considered a form of self-sufficiency. But lately, Reirin had come to see things differently. An attitude like that was only one step removed from rejection and resignation. She had simply grown too tired to hope for miracles and believe that someone would come to her rescue.

“I understand how you feel, Leanne. Holding out hope requires even more courage than accepting reality for what it is. It means opening yourself up to having your expectations betrayed.” Reirin crouched down in front of Leanne. She then took the girl’s emaciated hands in hers and flashed her an impish

smile. “Say, would you care to make a bet with me?”

“A what?”

“You heard me.” Reirin met the girl’s dubious look with a smile. “It’s only natural that a smart girl like you would grow pessimistic in the face of hardship. But should I succeed at performing a small miracle, I want you to stop insisting that nothing will ever change.”

“A small miracle? Like what?”

“I have devised a plan to aid those of Treacherous Tan Peak. If I had my way, I would execute it within the day, but it will require a bit of coordination. However, I am determined to return here at least one more time.”

The form of “aid” Reirin was looking into would preferably involve getting permission from various parties. Gyomei had already given it his stamp of approval as “intriguing,” but acting prematurely risked causing trouble for him.

Leanne’s eyes went wide, while the boys leaned in with excitement.

“What? You’re coming back again?!”

“Are you going to bring us more rice?!”

“When are you coming? Tomorrow?!”

“That has yet to be determined,” was all Reirin said with a smile.

The kids flocked around Reirin, their interest further piqued, when someone else spoke up from behind. “My, I see the children have grown quite attached. I’d say that speaks volumes to your virtue, milady.”

A glance in the direction of the voice revealed the smiling community counselor—Tou.

“I apologize for interrupting your conversation. The residents were insistent on expressing their thanks.” Behind him, a group of locals chanced nervous glances in the Maiden’s direction. The majority were bowing their heads in typical Ei fashion, but Tou spoke on behalf of the ones who had heavy accents

or could only speak a foreign language. “We are all extremely grateful. A lesser Maiden might have pressed on without bothering to reimburse the misplaced rice. Instead, you taught us to fish, supplied us the missing half of the rice the very next day, and even offered treatment back at the encampment for those interested. Why, we only benefited from the mishap in the long run.”

The surrounding locals nodded along vigorously. Having eaten their fill of fish and congee, there was more color in their faces and more pep in their steps. The gravely ill and wounded residents of Treacherous Tan Peak had also been given the option to travel with Reirin’s entourage and get treated back at the encampment. Someone was willing to offer them a helping hand—and this realization made the people glow from the inside out.

As Tou swept his gaze over the satisfied crowd of locals, his eyes came to a stop on Leanne. “That reminds me, Leanne. Did you give the Maiden her thank-you gift?”

“Not yet, no...”

“The Maiden kept her promise and came back. It’s time to show your appreciation.”

At Tou’s nagging, Leanne begrudgingly fished around in the breast of her garment. Eventually, she held out a certain item atop her spindly hand. It was a long, thin braid woven from several different colors of thread.

“Oh? What is this?”

“A braided bracelet to wear for good luck. I had to throw it together in a hurry, since I didn’t think you were really going to come.”

“Goodness! Did you make this yourself, Leanne?”

“Only because Doctor Tou dumped the materials on me and demanded I do it.”

In an effort to distract from Leanne’s surly attitude, Tou graciously added, “It’s a traditional craft common to this mountain range. A good deal of the

locals excel at handicrafts like these. You tie it around the wrist, and when it snaps, you get to make a wish. I'm afraid a trinket like this is the most a poor settlement like ours has to offer, but we hope you will accept it."

Presumably, Tou had forced Leanne to make the bracelet for fear that her defiant attitude might incur the Maiden's displeasure.

Hoping to convey that she wasn't upset with the younger girl in the least, Reirin flashed her a bright smile and held out a hand. "It's lovely. Would you mind if I took you up on that?"

"It has to be tied with a special kind of knot, so it would be best to put it on now. Will you do it for her, Leanne?"

"...Fine."

Despite the standoffish look on her face, Leanne's fingers worked dexterously, and within moments, the braid was tied with a flower-shaped knot. Even the very ends of the thread were woven together and secured so firmly in place that there was no danger of it coming loose. It looked almost like a perfect, seamless circle. Truly impressive work.

"My, how gorgeous! I'm humbled to receive such a wonderful gift."

A harmonious atmosphere settled over the crowd as Reirin admired the elegant bracelet. Although Leanne awkwardly looked aside, she neither argued nor complained.

Upon observing this, the court lady desperate to win her mistress's favor—Kasei—took the opportunity to talk her up. "My, Lady Keigetsu, look at how the common folk sing your praises! Well, it's to be expected. Not many Maidens would bestow both rice and charity upon their subjects two days in a row. You have provided the people of Treacherous Tan Peak true salvation."

One of the men listening to their conversation in the background muttered something under his breath. The voice belonged to the porter named Anki, who was dabbing at his eyes, overcome with emotion.

“Anki?”

“My apologies, milady... I couldn’t help getting choked up. To tell the truth, I grew up in a disaster area very similar to Treacherous Tan Peak. I made a name for myself after I was conscripted, and now I’m employed at the imperial palace. Still, I must wonder how different my life could have been had a noble offered my younger self such kind words...”

His face crumpling, Anki became too choked up to speak. The locals shot him looks of solidarity and sympathy, while the court ladies puffed up with pride.

“Anki—”

“Oh, speaking of kind people,” Tou cut in before Reirin could say anything else to Anki, “what happened to the military officer who was here yesterday? We hoped to give him one of these bracelets as well.”

Leanne held out a second braid. It was clearly designed for a man, as it was an entire size larger than the one given to Reirin.

“He taught us how to fish and took excellent care of us. I assumed he would be joining you today, but I can’t seem to find him anywhere,” Tou explained with a discomfited look.

Reirin blinked. After determining that the porters could handle the job of transporting the rice, she had entrusted Keikou with a different mission and had him split off from the group.

“I appreciate your consideration. I actually sent him off to do something that I believe will better benefit Treacherous Tan Peak.”

“Oh? He’s busy with something else?”

“Yes, though we do plan to meet up on our way back, at least. Would you like to come with us to the encampment, Doctor Tou?” Reirin proposed, assuming it would grant him the perfect opportunity to see Keikou again. “It has clean beds and even better medicine than we brought here.”

Genyou would only speak one-on-one to those with severe conditions, such

as the blind and handicapped, but the wound on Tou's leg qualified him as a recipient of the verbal alms.

Tou appeared intrigued by the prospect, until Reirin added, "Occasionally those of supreme status will grace the encampment. You may even be granted the opportunity to rise in the world. You're more than welcome to join us."

All of a sudden, he jolted and turned her down. "Oh, no! Were a healthy man like myself to claim such an honor, the Heavens would see me punished. Such a rare opportunity should be reserved for those in more dire straits." Then his face fell with distress. "All the same, I would very much like to thank that military officer in person. The other locals have been clamoring for another lesson on making fishing poles, and I would like to take his instruction on how to deal with the brigands we apprehended yesterday."

Though he was being polite about it, Tou wasn't willing to take no for an answer. From the sound of it, he had ordered the brigands be tied up somewhere far away for the time being. He had a point that a military officer like Keikou ought to make the final call on what to do with them.

Besides, if I hope to execute my "aid" strategy, it would be best to bring Brother Senior along.

"Very well," Reirin agreed with a nod after briefly mulling it over. "I was actually just speaking with the children about this. I hope to provide further aid to Treacherous Tan Peak, so I was planning to return here one more time. When I do, I will be sure to bring Bro...Lord Keikou along with me."

"You plan to come back again?"

"I do. Apologies for imposing on you so many days in a row."

"Don't apologize! You're welcome here as often as you like!"

With a smile that clearly came from the heart, Tou implored her to return a few more times for emphasis. He entrusted her with the braid meant for Keikou as a reminder.

While Reirin was absorbed in conversation, the sun had begun to set. The trip back would be dangerous if she left too much later. Though reluctant to part, the locals saw Reirin off as she loaded the ailing and wounded into the wagons and started down the road to Cloud Ladder Gardens.

“The locals have grown quite fond of you.”

Reirin and Leelee were on their way back to the encampment, riding inside the palanquin. As Leelee pushed back the cargo crowding her from the floor and walls, she gave a shrug of her shoulders. Since the debilitated recipients of the verbal alms were riding in the luggage wagons, the palanquin occupied by the Maiden and her attendant had been packed with bundles of straw and medicine, and a moment of negligence could see those come crashing down.

Cramped as it was, Leelee was relieved for the chance to converse with her mistress without holding anything back. She had built up quite a bit of stress and fatigue after making the trip back and forth from Treacherous Tan Peak multiple days in a row.

“What’s your plan, Lady Reirin? You’ve already gone and promised the people a third visit. While I admire your benevolence, our court ladies and porters are nearing their physical limits. There’s no telling if they’d be willing to come along for another trip.”

“Fair point.”

Much like Kasei, the majority of court ladies were sheltered young women. After making the trek up and down the mountain with giant cauldrons and large quantities of food, even the strapping porters were starting to look exhausted.

At the moment, they were traversing a particularly steep, narrow, and punishing part of the mountain path, so the horses couldn’t be left to pull the carts alone. The porters were all struggling to heft the palanquin and loading platforms, sweat dripping from their brows.

“Perhaps only Brother Senior and I need make the final trip to Treacherous Tan Peak.” After double-checking that the palanquin window was pulled firmly shut and no one could overhear, Reirin added, “As there’s no telling who our enemy is, it would be safer to involve as few people as possible.”

“Speaking of which, where *is* Master Keikou?” Leelee frowned. Now that he’d come up in the conversation, she had to wonder why she hadn’t seen him since morning. “He’s technically supposed to be here as your bodyguard, so what could have possessed him to split off from the group?”

“Oh, about that—”

Before Reirin could finish that sentence, something went wrong.

“Whooooa! One of the horses is out of control!” came a scream from behind.

This was followed by even more flustered shouts from the men shouldering the palanquin.

“What?! Look out, it’s coming this way!”

“Run for it! Hurry! If it crashes into us, it’ll knock us off the cliff!”

“Hold on tight to the palanquin!”

From the sound of it, the horse that had been pulling the wagon full of invalids at the back of the cavalcade had gone on a sudden rampage. It had escaped its bridle and was charging toward the palanquin at the front.

“Run! Go faster!”

“No! We should set the palanquin down!”

This unforeseen development had the porters falling out of step, causing the palanquin to rock back and forth.

Thud!

“Aaaahhhh!”

The very next moment, there came the foreboding sound of a collision and another scream. A beat later, the palanquin began to tilt.

“Y-you idiot! Watch it! The Maiden is—”

“It’s too late! We won’t make it in time!”

The girls felt themselves lurch forward.

“Wait, seriously?” Leelee murmured in disbelief as her hips parted from the floor.

“Leelee! Assume a fetal position!” Reirin shouted, quickly pulling the redhead into her arms. The two girls buried their heads into one another’s bodies.

Crash! Thud, thunk, wham!

Their vision jerked and spun, and their bodies slammed against one surface after another. No longer sure which way was up, Reirin and Leelee hurtled down the cliff in the enclosed palanquin, bumping and crashing into things all the way down.

“Ah...!”

Their insides churning, they couldn’t even manage to shriek.

Ker-thunk!

At last, the palanquin came to a stop with an exceptionally loud *thud*. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it had fallen as far as it could go. Thanks in great part to the carrying poles protruding from the floor, it had managed to land right side up. The straw packed over the floor had been shaken up by all the jostling, and it rained down on the girls’ heads from the ceiling.

That was the only reason they were safe. The straw and medicinal herbs had cushioned their fall.

“Ugh...”

Once the last of the straw had fluttered to the floor, Leelee’s eyelids slowly drifted open. It appeared she had briefly lost consciousness. As she cast a dazed glance around her surroundings, she realized she was in someone else’s tight

embrace—and that was when she snapped fully back to her senses.

“Lady Reirin! Are you all right?!”

Reirin wasn’t moving. She still had Leelee’s head pressed into her shoulder to shield her.

“Did you hit your head?! Oh, why did you have to go and protect me like that?! Lady Reirin! Are you hurt?!”

“Oh! My apologies.” When Leelee grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a firm shake, Reirin finally jerked upright. “I’m perfectly fine. I was simply savoring that floating sensation. If there were a way to free fall with a guarantee of safety, I imagine some people could get addicted to the thrill.”

“Are you *sure* you didn’t hit your head?!” After yelling that disrespectful remark out of sheer dismay, Leelee let a long breath go. “We’re lucky all that straw was packed in with us. It’s a miracle that we could walk away unscathed after falling from such a height.”

“That’s true.”

Reirin slowly pulled herself upright and crawled out of the palanquin. She looked up to see the cliff towering high overhead. It was obscured by the canopy of trees and almost too high up to see. It was definitely too far for their voices to reach those up above.

“What an improbable stroke of luck,” she muttered, glaring up at the sunset peeking out between the leaves.

It was an impossible outcome for a freak accident. Their whole palanquin had tumbled down a cliff, yet no one else had been caught up in the crash and neither of them had so much as broken a bone.

Someone kept us alive.

Someone had ordered that the palanquin be stuffed with straw. Someone had set things up so that the palanquin would fall at that exact spot, at that exact time, and under those exact circumstances. That mystery person wanted to

isolate “Shu Keigetsu” somewhere far from her guard—and do it without taking her life.

It’s just like the time with the congee. Their plan must be to present me with a crisis and see if I respond with magic.

They had been plunged into an uncharted part of the mountains, after all. One small mercy was that she and Leelee were the only ones to have fallen, but even if the porters were to come looking for them, it would be a while before they managed to track the girls down and arrive on the scene. In the meantime, “Shu Keigetsu” would be stuck in a deserted wood with only a single court lady for company. It would be a simple task to observe her there—or even assassinate her, depending on the circumstances. A spy might be watching her from behind a distant tree trunk at that very moment.

Perhaps it had been a bit too incautious to send Keikou off on his own.

“I have no idea where we even are. What should we do, Lady Rei—”

“Shh!”

Assuming the two of them were alone, Leelee had nearly called her mistress by her real name, but Reirin cut her short with a wink. Now that they had left the palanquin, there was a danger of someone listening in on their conversation.

“You’re *my* court lady, for mercy’s sake! Shu Keigetsu’s! I don’t want to hear any whining! We’ve already fallen down the cliff, so that’s that. We just have to do whatever we can and wait for help!”

When Reirin raised her voice in her best imitation of Keigetsu, her court lady started in surprise but didn’t take long to catch her meaning. Leelee timidly surveyed her surroundings.

“...You’re right. That’s our best plan.”

“Of course I am. We were scheduled to meet up with Lord Keikou soon, anyway. The second he hears about our accident, he’ll be sure to come rescue

us.”

With a nod, Reirin drew a dagger from her breast. It was the blade she had received from her brother, the one that doubled as a bird whistle. When wind passed through the hole in the handguard, it would summon a dove with a sound human ears couldn’t register.

Well. Assuming that dove wasn’t killed by a spy, of course.

Even if this fails, people will come looking for me if “Shu Keigetsu” doesn’t return to Cloud Ladder Gardens. With how many witnesses there were to the accident, it has to reach the ears of an ally eventually.

If Keigetsu heard about the accident, she might use her flame call to inquire as to Reirin’s well-being.

As long as we can keep a fire going, we’ll definitely be res—

Halfway through that thought, Reirin’s expression turned grim. She couldn’t think like that. If there was a chance she was under surveillance, she couldn’t force Keigetsu to use her flame magic.

I must not depend on Lady Keigetsu for help.

She couldn’t stand in front of a fire either. That risked dragging Keigetsu into this mess. Instead of hoping for a magical rescue, she had to get through this predicament all on her own.

I can do this.

Reirin gave her cheeks a light smack and looked up again. Despite everything, she was a woman of the Kou, the patrons of self-sufficiency. Even against insurmountable odds, it was in her nature to never ask for help and to overcome the crisis with her own power.

“C’mon, Leelee. Let’s do this with a bang.”

She had been caught in an unforeseen accident. With dusk approaching, the forest was growing steadily darker, and the cold bit at the skin. Even so, Reirin clenched her hands into fists, determined to make it through this predicament.

Only after being stranded did Reirin learn how hard it could be to sit still and wait. Before the sun went down, she and Leelee had kept themselves busy locating a water source, moving the palanquin onto a level surface, and sifting through straw to wrap around their bodies. As soon as all that was done, Leelee had begun to talk less and less. By the time the sun had disappeared under the horizon and a pale moon had appeared in the sky, the pair had shut themselves inside their palanquin and gone completely silent.

“It sure is freezing,” Leelee muttered, huddled inside the enclosed space.

Things could have been worse. At least they had gone down in a covered palanquin that could block out the wind. Even so, the cold on a late winter night in the mountains was brutal.

Thanks to their earlier search, they had found a water source in the vicinity. Plus, the medicinal herbs they were supposed to bring back to Cloud Ladder Gardens would give them the means to combat any pressing injuries or illness. But despite their attempts to console themselves by listing off those advantages, the icy chill continued to eat away at their bodies and minds.

“So cold...”

It wouldn't be so bad if they could just light a fire outside the palanquin. But the faint possibility that Keigetsu might get worried and make a flame call, and that a spy might witness that, stilled their hands. The hunger and cold, combined with her rapidly darkening vision, were pushing Leelee to the end of her tether.

“What do you say, Leelee? Shall we light a fire after all?” Reirin suggested, struggling to sit back and watch this. “Perhaps I'm being too paranoid about surveillance. I'll stay inside the palanquin, but you can step outside and—”

Leelee immediately shook her head. “No. This situation is too contrived. I-I think someone is probably watching us. If I light a fire, we risk the spell

connecting if Lady Keigetsu thinks of me.”

Yet the very next moment, she pulled the straw wrapped around her body more tightly around herself.

“I’m scared...”

The howls of wild animals could be heard in the distance. Although there was some moonlight to see by, there was still a long way to go until dawn. She felt like she was trapped in eternal darkness.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed since their tumble down the cliff. Was anyone going to show up to rescue them? How much longer were they going to be stuck there? Would they make it back alive? Negative thoughts flooded Leelee’s mind in quick succession. Each time, she felt a suffocating pressure in her chest, and the words threatened to form sound and spill from her lips.

“W-we *are* going to survive this, right?”

“Of course.”

“There’s no landmarks or trails here, but...s-someone *will* be able to find us, right?”

“Without a doubt. Calm down, Leelee. Take some deep breaths,” Reirin said gently, noting that her attendant was on the verge of hyperventilating.

Much like Keigetsu, Leelee was a Shu woman with a strong affinity for fire. This made her rich in emotions, but when her active powers of imagination and fierce heart took a negative turn, she was quick to drive herself into a corner.

“Th-the dove hasn’t shown up, though...”

“True. But fret not. The sun will rise in the morning. If we can find our way back to a path, we can get down the mountain on our own.”

“Wh-what if we can’t find our way back?”

“We have straw, medicine, and salt in the palanquin. There’s also a source of

water nearby. We have all we need to survive in the short term. It will be fine.”

Reirin had meant to sound as soothing as possible, but Leelee still shook her head wildly back and forth, her voice hitching. “N-no, it won’t! Two women can’t survive alone in the mountains for multiple days! I-If a wild animal shows up, or we get attacked by brigands, all the straw and medicine in the world will be useless! We’re powerless!” After letting her emotions get the better of her, her face crumpled, tears forming in her round eyes. “I-I’m sorry. I’m being a bad court lady. I’m supposed to be the one comforting you.”

She was in the grips of regret and self-loathing. Fear, frustration, and discomfort. Biting down hard on her lip, she fought to suppress that ballooning jumble of emotion. Alas, with one of her body’s outlets sealed, tears began to leak from her eyes instead.

“F-forgive me, I—”

“Unacceptable,” Reirin said darkly, a complete turn from the patient responses she had been offering thus far.

Leelee jolted. “I-I’m sor—”

“Anyone who would make my dearest court lady cry deserves a fate worse than death.”

After scrambling to scrub the tears from her eyes, Leelee met Reirin’s ensuing comment with a surprised blink. “What?”

Reirin smiled softly from opposite her. The Maiden was supposed to be desperately staving off the cold, yet at some point she had shed her straw covering. She reached out to touch Leelee’s cheek with all the ease of someone bathing in a spring breeze.

“My apologies, Leelee. I thought it best to let the enemy spy to their heart’s content, but I should have given more thought to how scared you were. We ought to have called for help right away.”

“Huh?”

Chilled fingers wiped the tearstains from the redhead's face.

"But the dove isn't coming, and we can't make a flame call. What are we supposed to do?"

"Use a method available to us, of course," Reirin smoothly explained. "Fortunately, we have medicine and iron pots on hand. Not to brag, but I am quite knowledgeable about medicine and its potential uses."

Leelee looked dubious. How were they supposed to use medicine to call for help?

"Lady Reirin, excuse me, but—"

"The term 'medicine' most often calls to mind medicinal herbs, but a good deal of it is actually derived from minerals."

Her hands free after setting the straw aside, Reirin rummaged through the back of the palanquin and grabbed the packs of powder that had been shoved into a corner. She tracked down sulfur and saltpeter, known for their antibacterial properties, and activated charcoal, which could bind to toxins and expel them from the body. After deftly mixing those powders together, she rolled it all up in one of the emptied chartae and released the air inside.

"When different mineral medicines are *inadvertently* mixed together and *inadvertently* set on fire, they produce a volatile reaction. Thus, the doctors of ancient times took to calling that powder by a certain name."

Next, she grabbed one of the iron pots meant for preparing medicine, placed the ball of powder inside, and beamed.

"Fire medicine. Also known as black powder."

Something about that sweet smile sent a shiver down Leelee's spine.

"Wha...?"

"You claimed that medicine was useless. That we were powerless. Allow me to prove otherwise here and now."

Reirin took Leelee by the hand and led her out of the palanquin. After moving a safe distance away and setting down the pot cradled under her arm, she turned to her attendant with a bright smile.

“I had my concerns about starting a wildfire, but see if I care anymore. Time to stick it to that spy with a bang!”

“Uh... Hold on...”

Heedless of Leelee’s bewilderment, Reirin untied a rope from a bundle of straw before unraveling it with a fingernail. She picked up her dagger, struck her crystal hairpin against it to create a spark, and chunked the rope into the iron pot once it had caught fire.

“Come along now! We had best evacuate to the river!”

“What?!”

Perhaps to prevent any flame calls from connecting, Reirin grabbed Leelee by the arm and sprinted off toward the water.

Eyes darting to and fro in confusion, Leelee began, “Um, what did you—”

Ka-boom!

There came a deafening roar and a flash of light from behind them, and Leelee nearly toppled over on the spot.

“Get down!”

Though Reirin immediately pulled Leelee’s head into an embrace, the Maiden herself just looked toward the Heavens with perfect calm. The light had already vanished, and now a cloud of white smoke billowed in the moonlit night sky.

“Hee hee, that shot up straighter than I expected. The pot must have been just the right shape. A job well done, if I may say so myself.”

“Wh-wha... Wha...?” Leelee’s legs gave way under her. Slumped over on the ground, she followed her mistress’s gaze to stare blankly at the night sky. “Why do you know how to make a bomb?!”

“A bomb? Why, I would never craft something so dangerous. I simply lit up the night sky with a firework.”

“A likely story!” Leelee yelled at the top of her lungs. “You definitely mentioned something about ‘sticking it’ to the spy!”

Reirin pressed a hand to her cheek, looking a touch disappointed. “Mm... If only I had some persimmon peels on hand, I could have made it red. No such luck, I’m afraid.”

“Just drop the whole fireworks excuse already!”

If it meant a way out of a difficult situation, this Maiden would create explosives without batting an eye. Leelee’s commentary couldn’t keep pace with her crazy antics.

“By the way, we still have plenty of medicine left.”

“Stop! Don’t cheerfully announce your plans for a second explosion!”

Upon seeing the ominous smile on her mistress’s face, Leelee attempted to talk her down, but then Reirin followed up with, “If we send off a few more shots, the search party should be able to track us down. Help is on the way.”

As soon as Leelee heard that gentle assertion, she choked on her next words and teared up.

Oh, Lady Reirin...

Despite her concerns about connecting to Keigetsu’s flame call, Reirin had seen how scared Leelee was and decided to call for help through a different method. If she was setting off explosions accompanied by loud bangs, on the off chance the spell did connect, it would be impossible to notice a flame expanding or a voice coming through.

She’s one of a kind.

Leelee felt genuine respect for her mistress’s unwavering spirit and incredible resourcefulness. Fear had dominated her heart only moments ago, yet it was like the explosion had blown it all away.

“Thank you very much.”

Everything would be fine as long as she had Kou Reirin by her side. Just as Leelee was about to hold her head high in an imitation of her mistress, her morale boosted, she heard a voice.

“Milady! Miss Leelee! There you are!”

Someone parted the bushes behind them and popped out into view. Leelee whipped around in surprise.

“Sir Anki!” she shouted.

The man who had run up to them, leaving a trail of white clouds as he puffed and panted, was Anki, one of the porters.

“Oh, thank the gods! We were looking everywhere for you. Just as we were considering calling it quits for the night, I heard the blast and wondered if it might be a call for help!”

Tears of relief welled in Leelee’s eyes at the appearance of the exhausted, breathless porter. She was deeply moved to see that someone really *had* come to their rescue.

“Thank you so much! We truly appreciate that you all came looking for us!”

“Please! We hardly deserve thanks. This never would have happened if we hadn’t let that horse run out of control!”

Anki twisted his artless face into a tortured frown and went down on his knees. Leelee moved toward him, opening her mouth to insist that it wasn’t his fault—but much to her surprise, Reirin grabbed her by the arm and held her back.

“True.” Reirin stared down Anki with a gaze chillier than the moonlight. “It’s inexcusable.”

“Huh?”

Kou Reirin, the prince’s butterfly, was known to be the most benevolent and

forgiving woman there was. Even if his negligence had put her in danger, and even if she needed to play the part of the haughty “Shu Keigetsu,” it was unthinkable that she would lambast a servant who had rushed to their rescue all on his own.

Yet her next words made Leelee’s eyes go wide.

“Are you quite done getting a read on me?”

“Wha...?”

Much like Leelee, Anki gaped blankly at the Maiden staring down at him.

“Oh, you’re a decent actor,” Reirin said with a smile, then approached Anki’s kneeling form one slow step at a time. “If someone was out to test me, it’d have to be a person who’s kept an eye on me from the very start of our journey. From day one, I considered the court ladies and porters most suspicious. So yesterday, I split you all into two groups: those who would go fishing and those who would stay behind and make the congee. And then the culinary team—and *only* that team—got caught up in a string of incidents.”

There came the *crunch* of frosted wild grass crushed underfoot.

“Today, I split the culinary team into two more groups and assigned myself and Kou Keikou to one each. Just as I predicted, you came along with my group, and we got mixed up in another incident. And here you stand before me now. As the leader of the porters, you were the one who gave the order to pack the palanquin with straw, weren’t you?”

Anki’s voice trembled, his head bowed low. “I-I sincerely apologize that I allowed so many mishaps to occur on my watch. Both the horse’s rampage and the brigands’ intrusion were entirely outside of my cont—”

“Recall how you rendered the leader of the brigands unconscious?” Reirin finally came to a stop only a step or two away. “He was about to say something right before you hit him. Here, I’ll take a guess at what it was going to be: ‘This isn’t what we were promised.’ But because you were so quick about knocking

him out, he never got to finish that sentence.”

She refused to crouch down to the man’s eye level. She only gazed down upon him coolly.

“One last thing. You tried to cover it up by burying your face in your hands, but when Kasei was bragging about our relief efforts, I definitely heard you mutter something under your breath. It was ‘dhal.’ According to the children, that’s a word spoken around the Tan Region.”

Reirin swiftly drew the dagger stowed away in her sash. Without hesitation, she pressed her naked blade to Anki’s neck.

“As a matter of fact, I met a somewhat exotic man not too long ago. He was referred to as ‘Sir Tan,’ and he had such chiseled features that I wouldn’t be surprised if he did hail from that area. Oh, and on that note! I asked His Highness to do some investigating for me. Apparently, there’s a man from Tan among the emperor’s secret service. His name was, let’s see now...”

Blood beaded as her steadfast blade bit into the man’s skin.

“Akim.”

Pow!

Anki moved in a flash. Without a single wasted movement, he bent backward from his kneeling position, pressed both hands flat against the ground, and used the momentum to unleash a sharp kick. Reirin made an instantaneous retreat, but his leg still had the reach to land a hit on her hand, causing her to drop her dagger.

“Ah!”

Though he had only grazed her, there was tremendous force behind the blow.

“Milady! Are you all ri—eek!”

Leelee attempted to rush to her mistress’s side, but Anki lobbed something at her without so much as a backward glance. With a dull *thud*, a razor-sharp blade of an unfamiliar shape wedged itself in the hem of Leelee’s skirt.

“Yeesh.” Having rendered the two girls powerless in a matter of seconds, Anki—or Akim, as it were—shifted his weight onto one foot and raked a hand through his hair with a look of annoyance. “Here I thought it was all wild stunts with you, but you’ve got a good eye for detail. Or maybe you’re just persistent.”

He released his hair from its tight bun and tossed his forehead protector aside. As he let his locks fall loose with a mutter of “Man, that was suffocating,” a small tattoo on his temple was exposed under the moonlight.

With his hair a tousled mess, all traces of his conscientious aura evaporated. After lightly massaging his face, slowly but surely even his countenance morphed into a different shape. It was an incredibly dramatic change—almost like that upstanding manservant persona had vanished without a trace and a wily old man had usurped his body.

“So you can even alter your face and voice? I’m impressed.”

“Sure. It just takes the poke of a few needles. I can make myself look even younger than this, if I want.” Akim shrugged. To work out some of the lingering modifications, he continued to rub at his face. “Wanna hear more about it?”

The way he goofed around and stretched out his own cheeks came across as disingenuous.

Reirin carried on matter-of-factly, refusing to rise to the bait. “You went to all the trouble of disguising yourself to spy on me, but tell me, how has that worked out for you? Despite all your attempts at intimidation and pressure, I haven’t once used magic. Because I *can’t*. How about you stop dragging innocent disaster victims into your nonsense and consider your mission complete?”

“Hrm.” In the face of Reirin’s quiet checkmate, Akim only cocked his head to one side and scratched at his beard. “You’ve got a point there, little miss Maiden. As far as I’ve been able to tell, you haven’t used magic even once.”

Leelee had been nervously watching their exchange from the sidelines, but

that response made some of the tension bleed from her shoulders. It was true that Reirin hadn't utilized any mysterious powers thus far—she didn't have them, after all—and she had overcome her latest predicament without even relying on a flame call. It was about time the spy gave up and concluded that “Shu Keigetsu” was no sorcerer.



“My bad. Looks like I went about this all wrong.”

At length, Akim spread his hands with a flippant grin. His cavalier attitude left Leelee feeling weak with relief.

But the very next moment, his smile twisted into a savage one. “It’ll take a lot more than this to make you crack, huh?”

“Ah!”

Before she even had time to scream, the man sprang upon Reirin.

Chapter 6:

Keigetsu Mounts a Steed

IT WAS A LITTLE EARLIER that same day. After returning to Central Tan the day after the Congee Conferment Rite, “Kou Reirin”—that is, Keigetsu—engaged the common folk in friendly conversation all the way until it was time to head out in the afternoon.

“Take care, everyone.”

“Thank you for everything, milady!”

“I shall pray for peace in the lands of Central Tan.”

“We wish you the best of health as well, milady!”

She spoke to the grateful locals without a crack in her smile, tracked down the ill and injured, and led them to the wagons one after another. When an old lady impolitely stuck out a hand for her to shake, she grasped it without hesitation, and she used an expensive cloth to wipe a child’s runny nose without a care for how valuable it was.

Obviously, Keigetsu wasn’t doing any of this because she *wanted* to. Contact with impurities eroded the qi, so she absolutely hated all things dirty. Yet she knew it was what Kou Reirin would do in her shoes, so she had to grin and bear it.

Even in a dusty disaster zone, the girl would carry herself with grace. No matter how exhausted she felt after being accosted by dozens of people, she would keep a gorgeous smile on her face. She was noble and sophisticated, yet never haughty. The woman hailed as the prince’s butterfly could never be anything less.

“Long live His Imperial Highness! Long live his crown princess!”

“Safe travels!”

“We’ll never forget all that you’ve done for us!”

After receiving recognition of their struggles for the second day in a row, the locals were so moved that they continued to cheer for Keigetsu even after her group had boarded their carriage.

Ugh, please. Kou Reirin is still only a Maiden. It’s not a sure thing that she’s going to be crown princess yet.

Despite shrugging off the fanfare on the inside, Keigetsu continued to smile out the window at the locals who dutifully watched her go.

“Hey.”

Her guard lowered the drapes over the windows, and the driver set the carriage into motion, but she couldn’t relax just yet. She had to keep smiling a little while longer. Best to sit straight at attention too.

“Do you hear me, Shu Keigetsu? No need to work your charm any longer.”

There was still a chance one of the locals might run up and shove the drapes aside. Not to mention that Kou Reirin would never drop her smile around her fellow passengers. She was a radiant celestial maiden far removed from the filth of the secular world.

“Hello? Shu Keigetsu?”

“Anyone home, Lady Keigetsu?”

When she noticed the two men sitting across from her—Prince Gyoumei and the military officer Kou Keishou—either frowning with concern or waving a hand in front of her face, Keigetsu finally snapped back to reality. Glancing beside her, she found even Tousetsu looking on with worry.

“O-oh, sorry. Were you saying something?”

“I told you to drop the fake smile. You’re out of our subjects’ sight, and the rumble of the carriage wheels ought to drown out your voice.”

“There’s no one but us around, so you can go ahead and relax.”

“Please make yourself comfortable for the hour until we reach Cloud Ladder Gardens, milady.”

Hearing these assurances from the others in the know almost made Keigetsu sag with relief. But not a moment later, she nervously massaged her own cheeks and flaunted that innate skepticism of hers.

“Did my smile look stiff, by any chance?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” In a rare display, Gyoumei let slip a few chuckles. “It was an excellent showing. You kept a benevolent, beautiful smile on your face the entire time.”

Tousetsu nodded along with the crown prince’s compliment, while Keishou was quick to add his own stamp of approval. “You sure did. And I was impressed by how kindly you treated your subjects throughout. Whenever I watch my sister, it occurs to me just how hard it must be to keep up a smile when you’re feeling tired. You did well to push on to the end. Great work.”

“Indeed. I must admit, I had my concerns about conducting the Congee Conferment Rite with the swap still in place, but when push came to shove, you managed to throw the emperor off your trail and flawlessly carry out your duties. My lady’s body is in safe hands.”

After Tousetsu crafted that string of matter-of-fact compliments, Gyoumei smoothly added, “All your hard work paid off.”

It was one short, simple statement. For that very reason, however, it was easy to believe the words were genuine.

Keigetsu chewed on her lip. Gyoumei, Tousetsu, and Keishou had all hated her at one point. But after she changed her ways and started making a real effort, they had all proven themselves willing to acknowledge that.

They had been offering her compliments more frequently as of late. Each time, Keigetsu hoarded those words as carefully as smooth, gorgeous pearls, and she would pull them out to admire them every now and then. But

something was different this time around. She ought to have stored up quite a collection of pearls over the course of this adventure, yet the jewelry box in her heart still didn't have a satisfying heft to it. Were she to give it a firm shake, no doubt its rattle would ring empty and hollow.

"I'm glad to hear it. That's nice."

She recalled Kou Reirin's reaction the previous night. Keigetsu had successfully kept the emperor at bay, and that was all the other girl had had to say about it.

Knowing how overzealous her friend could be, Keigetsu had expected a different reaction to the news of her hard-won victory. She had been positive Reirin would go round-eyed with wonder. *Goodness! Is that really true?!* And then she might jump for joy and exclaim, *I knew you had it in you, Lady Keigetsu!* Keigetsu herself would go on to chide her friend for making a big fuss, while actually feeling more pleased than she cared to admit.

That was the exchange she'd been picturing, at least. Instead, all she had gotten back was a serene smile and stock response. A look of composure, not a hair out of place.

In the end, she really is a celestial maiden who looks down from on high.

Keigetsu gritted her teeth in spirit. She was embarrassed to have expected anything in the first place, and she was abruptly anxious that all of Kou Reirin's previous displays of friendship had been her own delusion.

After all, the more time Keigetsu spent as "Kou Reirin," the more painfully aware she became of how much Reirin had to dumb down their interactions for her benefit. Keigetsu didn't have the culture to incorporate the scriptures into her conversations like Kin Seika. She didn't have the quick wit to steer conversations for her own personal gain like Ran Houshun, and she didn't have the skill to get out of a difficult situation with a dance like Gen Kasui.

Kou Reirin could do all those things. Wouldn't she have more fun spending her time with the other Maidens? Wouldn't she be more comfortable

surrounded by friends as stunning, artistic, and knowledgeable as she was? Ever since last night, Keigetsu hadn't been able to shake those thoughts from her mind. If nothing else, finding a new companion would spare her the hassle of constantly cleaning up someone else's messes or coming up with compliments for a failure who never made any real progress.

She's given me plenty of praise in the past, but...maybe she was never really thinking anything deeper than "Good for you."

With the exception of the previous night, Keigetsu hadn't seen Kou Reirin in person for almost a month. She had completely lost sight of how close or how distant the two of them used to be.

"I appreciate the kind words, but I still have a long way to go," Keigetsu thus let slip. "I'm sure my attempt at playing 'Kou Reirin' would be insufficient by her standards."

The moment she closed her eyes, those same two words played back in her mind.

"That's nice."

It was a mild response, but one with no warmth to it.

"I needed my hand held all throughout His Majesty's interrogation and my return to Central Tan. No doubt she would be appalled to see how little I can manage on my own."

Her own words depressed her to hear. She chose to focus on the rumble of the wheels over the road, but after a while, she realized that the inside of the carriage had gone awfully quiet and glanced back up.

What she saw shocked her. The two men across from her, plus Tousetsu at her side, were all staring at her with the puckered faces of people who had taken a bite of something sour.

"Um, what is it?" Keigetsu ventured.

"Really?"

“Whew.”

“Oh dear.”

The other three exchanged glances, communicating something with nothing but their eyes.

Eventually, Keishou raised a hand and spoke on behalf of the group. “Um, are you serious about that? It’s not fake modesty or anything? If so, mind telling us what led you to such a nonsensical, pessimistic delusion?”

“Excuse me? Nonsensical? A delusion?!”

It was quite the rude remark to make about someone else’s worries. Perhaps that was his way of telling her to knock off the moping because it was annoying to be around.

Keigetsu nearly lost her temper and started yelling, but after reminding herself she was in the crown prince’s presence, she cleared her throat instead. “It is no delusion. As you all know, Kou Reirin came to Cloud Ladder Gardens to check on me last night, and she was quite curt with me during that encounter. I worked very hard to throw the emperor off my trail, but she barely reacted to the news.”

As she gave her explanation, she was overcome with resentment. Channeling her shame and anxiety into anger was the only way Keigetsu knew how to get by.

“Last night, for the first time ever, I accomplished something without making extra trouble for her. As a trade-off, I did have to rely on the help of the other Maidens and everyone sitting here...but I was still proud of myself, and I hoped to reassure her. Yet when I told her everything went well, all she said was that she was glad to hear it. She didn’t seem the least bit enthused.”

“Hold it. What were the exact words you said to Reirin?”

“Hm?” Keigetsu did her best to recall the conversation. “Something like, ‘I can manage just fine without you, so there’s no need to worry.’”

With identical timing, all three Kous set their elbows on their knees and buried their faces in their hands.

“For Heaven’s sake...”

“Oh no.”

The men in particular were groaning in perfect unison.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Um, listen. Hearing that probably, uh...wounded Reirin pretty gravely,” Keishou explained, his fingers pressed to his temples. “Enough that she couldn’t put on a cheerful act on the spot.”

“That was an ‘I’m done here’ if I ever heard one.” For his part, Gyoumei had gone pale, haunted by memories of the past.

“Say what?!” Keigetsu was so baffled that she forgot all semblance of decorum. “Why would that hurt her?! Don’t the Kou value self-sufficiency? I did my best to prove that I could get by without turning to her for every little thing!”

“She would rather you relied on her *more*, considering how much she loves you.” Keishou lifted his head to stare back at her. “For the Kou, having others depend on us is what makes us feel loved, wanted. If it were *me* you’d been giving that attention, only to turn it on someone else, I’d be furious. I’d go, ‘Don’t you dare!’ But Reirin is the type to get sad over angry.”

“I...” Keigetsu grew flustered, something about the earnest look in his eyes making her words dry up on her tongue. All he had done was offer an explanation of the Kou clan’s attributes, so even she wasn’t sure why her heart had skipped a beat.

For that matter, she truly couldn’t comprehend why those of Kou descent would be *glad* to have someone constantly imposing on them. Maybe they were all masochists.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. At the very least, *she* was the perfect

picture of composure. She was as graceful as ever, not a hair out of place. She kept a smile on her face, spoke softly, and didn't show a hint of concern for me." At first, Keigetsu had only jumped on Keishou's remark out of reflex, but the longer she went on, the sadder she became. "As far as she's concerned, I'm sure giving the emperor the slip isn't anything special. Neither is pulling off the Congee Conferment Rite or working together with the other Maidens. After all, *she* could do all those things easily."

"Excuse me," Tousetsu humbly interjected as Keigetsu talked herself into a funk. "I only saw Lady Reirin from a distance last night, so I cannot speak with certainty, but are you sure she was that composed?"

The previous night, Tousetsu had stayed beneath the pavilion with Keigetsu. She had seen Reirin walking down the cloister toward them, but couldn't rush up to her true mistress while she was wearing the form of "Shu Keigetsu."

"If I saw things correctly, she hurried to make herself presentable right before crossing the bridge to the pavilion."

"That's right," Keishou chimed in. "I only caught a glimpse of her from afar myself, but I believe she paused right in front of the bridge."

Keigetsu blinked. "She what?"

The pavilion had been lit with torches, while the bridge had been shrouded in darkness. Keigetsu hadn't been able to see what Kou Reirin looked like before she walked over.

"Th-that can't be right. Knowing her, she must have completed the Congee Conferment Rite without any difficulty. When we passed each other by the encampment gate this morning, it didn't seem like anything was amiss. She had her entourage with her and everything."

That morning, as she watched Reirin leave, Keigetsu had been shocked to see the court ladies and porters following behind without a crack in their formation. Their ranks included rebellious court ladies like Kasei and a mishmash of porters, so it was impressive how coordinated they were. Between Kou Reirin's

gods-given luck and ingenuity, any path would open before her, and all her endeavors were sure to succeed. Not even an assignment to the most perilous of disaster sites could bring her down.

Now look at me in comparison.

Keigetsu almost went back to hanging her head, but Gyoumei was the one to stop her this time. “Right. On that note...” In contrast to Keishou and Tousetsu, he looked more wistful than incredulous. “I actually had my concerns about that. Although Reirin claimed to have had no major issues, I asked Shin-u to look into whether there was any trouble on Treacherous Tan Peak.”

This wasn’t what Keigetsu had expected to hear, and her eyes widened with surprise. “You did?”

Just then, there came a knock on the carriage window from the outside.

“Apologies for the delay, Your Highness.”

Speak of the devil. Opening the window revealed none other than Captain Shin-u of the Eagle Eyes. In hindsight, it *was* strange that Keigetsu hadn’t seen him since morning, since he was supposed to go with her team to prevent the emperor’s obstruction. From the sound of it, Gyoumei had given him a special mission.

Still mounted on his horse, he slipped a folded piece of paper through the window. “This is the written report you requested. I interviewed the porters who were placed off duty after accompanying ‘Shu Keigetsu’ to Treacherous Tan Peak yesterday. I apologize it took me so long. It proved difficult to get them to talk, as Lord Kou Keikou ordered them not to make a fuss.” Something akin to anger was dancing in those cool blue eyes. “I suggest you read it at once.”

Gyoumei obviously didn’t need to be told twice. He unfolded the report right away, and as soon as he scanned its lines, he understood the reason for Shin-u’s irritation. “She *what?!’*”

On that page was written all the details of “Shu Keigetsu’s”—or Reirin’s—previous visit to Treacherous Tan Peak.

“Pardon me.” As Gyomei’s face went taut, Keishou leaned over to read the report with all the familiar ease of a childhood friend. “Let’s see here... ‘The porters lost half of the provisions during the journey. Upon arrival, the locals surrounded her and began shouting threats.’ Huh?!” No sooner had he read the very first line than a dark, menacing sound escaped his lips.

Having memorized the contents of his own report, the surly-faced Shin-u recited the next part without looking. “‘After deciding to supplement the supply by catching fish, she brought the men with her to a nearby river. She led the way onto the thin layer of ice and nearly fell into the water on several occasions.’”

He still hadn’t forgotten how just the other month, she had fallen into a spring during the Rite of Reverence—or how he felt like his heart had been doused in frigid water just watching her. Why did that Maiden have to be such a frequent subject of violence and drowning scares?

Tousetsu likewise snuck a look at the report from the opposite seat. “‘Back at the serving station, Shu Kasei and several other court ladies staged a revolt. They emptied the contents of a spittoon into one of the pots, only to dig in their heels and resort to verbal abuse when reprimanded. The Maiden remained calm and merely ordered the perpetrators to stand next to the pot as their punishment.’ Excuse me? The court ladies relinquished their duties? And then hurled abuse at Lady Reirin?!” Her eyes flashed when she learned of her colleagues’ injustices. “Perhaps I ought to remove their spines.”

What shocked the group most of all was the next part. “‘Soon after, a group of brigands raided the serving station. The majority of the men had gone to the river, so the Maiden incapacitated the brigands with an explosion of boiling congee and apprehended them with the help of the porters. She then descended from the mountain in the evening, but the porters noticed that the palanquin felt oddly light. When they asked Kou Keikou what was going on, he

explained that the Maiden had already left for Cloud Ladder Gardens to greet His Majesty, then demanded that they keep the matter quiet.”

Once he was done reading the whole thing, Gyoumei narrowed his eyes into a baleful glare. “‘No real issues,’ were there? She has some nerve.”

“Hold on... Does that mean she came down from the mountain all alone?!” Keigetsu groaned, her hands flying to her mouth.

Keigetsu’s assumption that Reirin had finished up without difficulty couldn’t have been further off the mark. She had overcome incident after incident and obstacle after obstacle to rush to her friend’s side.

Catching sight of Keigetsu’s pale face, Gyoumei huffed a frustrated sigh and raked a hand through his hair. “If she had left by carriage in the evening, there’s no way she could have arrived at Cloud Ladder Gardens when she did. If I had to guess, Reirin tidied up all her affairs and left Treacherous Tan Peak just after noon. All by herself. Blast it! I should have asked more questions when she told me to go on without her!”

As soon as she heard that, Keigetsu realized the truth: The reason Gyoumei had arrived at the encampment so far ahead of schedule was because he had forgone picking up Reirin. And that was no product of chance—Reirin had instructed him to do so. As a result, she had been forced to run down the mountain all alone.

And I told her she shouldn’t have bothered to come?!

Keigetsu felt the blood rush from her face. The pavilion had been so bright, and the bridge had been so dark. As she harkened back to last night’s encounter, it suddenly felt hard to breathe. What thoughts had run through Kou Reirin’s mind as she watched Keigetsu sitting beneath the torchlight, shrouded in warm fur and surrounded by companions, from her spot on that cold, gloomy bridge?

“In addition, I was told that ‘Shu Keigetsu’ snuck into Cloud Ladder Garden’s medicine room late last night to grab pain-killing herbs and bandages. Granted,

she claimed they were for the return visit to the disaster site.”

All traces of expression vanished from everyone’s faces. They clenched their hands into tight fists.

“That *idiot*!” Keigetsu hissed through clenched teeth. She had been oblivious to the fact that Kou Reirin was concealing scrapes and fatigue beneath that perfect posture and unruffled dress. The other girl was an idiot for hiding it, and *she* was a fool for failing to see through it. “His Majesty did go after her!”

Keishou laughed darkly. “Ha ha. I think my dear sister needs a lecture about keeping secrets. I’d better set a few days aside for this one.”

Gyoumei’s expression was equally grim. Outside the window, a bolt of lightning flashed in the distance. It was a wasteful display of his dragon’s qi, but no one could blame him under the circumstances.

When Tousetsu leaned her head toward the window to observe the storm clouds rolling in, her brow furrowed. “Hm? Do you see that raven? Doesn’t something seem odd about it?”

The court lady reached out a hand, and the bird swooped toward it as if it had spotted appealing prey. Birds with sharp beaks were dangerous. Outside, Shin-u’s first instinct was to drive it back with his sword, but he stopped when he saw that one of its black legs had a matching black cloth tied around it. He sheathed his sword, and the raven took that as its cue to complete its descent and hop inside the carriage.

The bird politely settled down on a seat and folded its wings. “What’s this?” Gyoumei mused as he unwrapped the strip of cloth.

Something was written on the dark cloth in black ink. The letters were difficult to make out, but it was Keikou’s handwriting.

In case my dove is killed, I’m sending the same message via raven. On the way back from Treacherous Tan Peak, the palanquin carrying the Maiden fell down a

cliff at about the halfway point. She and one of her court ladies are currently missing. A search is underway.

The unsettling string of words made the entire group gasp with horror.

“The palanquin crashed?!” Gyomei exclaimed, blanching.

“Do you think this is also His Majesty’s doing?” Keishou asked, likewise turning pale.

“No!” Keigetsu gasped out. “You mean he’s switched targets to her?! The other ‘Shu Keigetsu’?!” She then leaned out the window and shouted in the driver’s direction. “Turn us around at once! We’re going to Treacherous Tan Peak!”

“Milady!” When Keigetsu came dangerously close to falling out of the carriage, Tousetsu scrambled to pull her back inside. “It’s not safe.” Her normally emotionless face was awash with panic. She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Do you truly think it wise to charge right into an enemy attack? We... or at least *you* must not go anywhere near Treacherous Tan Peak.”

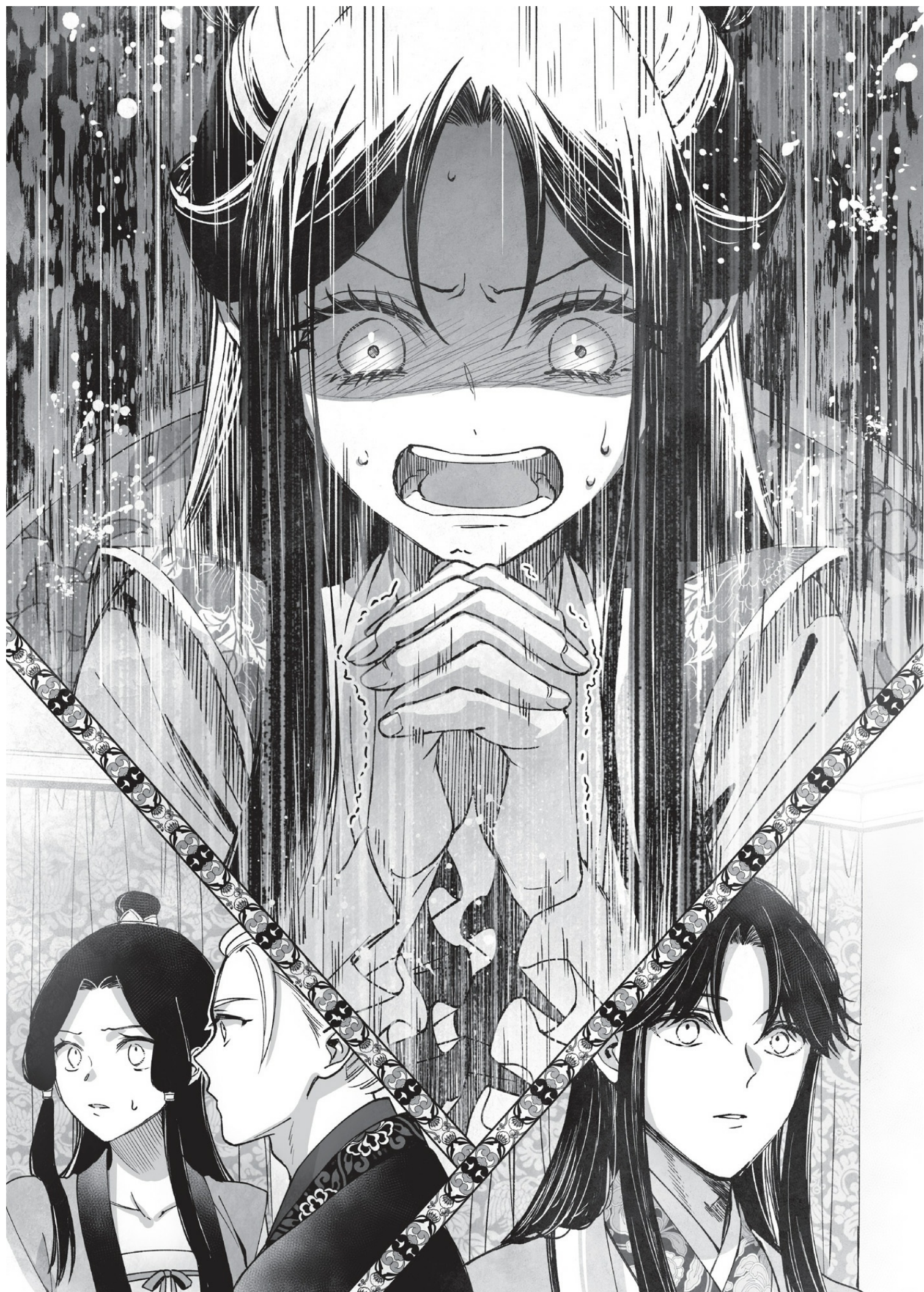
Keigetsu whirled on the court lady beside her, disbelief written all over her features. “What are you saying?! You want me to wait here by myself and twiddle my thumbs?!”

“Is that not what you asked of Lady Reirin when she came running to Cloud Ladder Gardens last night? You told her to stay away.”

Keigetsu assumed that remark was a scathing attempt at payback, but she was wrong. Tousetsu turned an anguished look on her.

“I do not mean that as criticism. You may have chosen your words poorly, but your overall point was correct. Our strategy has been to keep you two out of each other’s affairs.” Over the past month, the court lady had seen the lengths the two Maidens had gone to avoid one another. She gripped Keigetsu’s hands with a solemn expression. “This is what Lady Reirin would want. She kept the

harassment she endured a secret out of the desire to protect you. What will running to her side accomplish? Adding one more Maiden to the team will do little to aid the search.”



“That’s not true. If I use my magic, I can track her down in no—”

“After going to all that trouble to hide your magic, you plan to wield it now? That could be playing right into the enemy’s hands.”

It was a perfectly sensible assertion, and Keigetsu swallowed hard. Tousetsu was right. The Daoist arts were the only means of rescue she had at her disposal. And if she used her magic, all their efforts to throw the emperor off their trail would be for naught.

“Why did you bother coming back here?”

“You shouldn’t be talking to me.”

“I can manage just fine without you.”

All the things Keigetsu had said to Reirin last night came back to haunt her. Her fists trembled.

“Ggh...”

The Kou Maiden wasn’t the sort to want someone to come to her rescue. There was no need for Keigetsu to use her magic here. In fact, it only had the potential to make things worse. The correct response was to stay far away, sit still, and wait.

And yet...

“That’s not how this works.”

The protest rushed from her lips before she could even get her thoughts in order. Those words lit a fire in Keigetsu’s heart, and that became the spark to set off a raging inferno inside her.

“It doesn’t matter what the correct response is. It doesn’t matter whether my help is wanted. I *have* to do it, and that’s all there is to it!”

Why? Because it was what her heart desired.

“Wha—”

“Sure, I’ll admit it! I told her to stay away! I said that I could handle things on my own! And now our positions have been reversed. If I refused her help, it’s only right for me to stay out of her affairs in turn. But too bad!”

The arrogance of her declaration had Tousetsu’s mouth hanging open in shock.

“I expect her to suck it up. But I refuse to do so. I’ll do whatever I want, go running wherever I want, and save whoever I want. Because that’s who I am—a villainess without a scrap of self-control or good sense! Anyone got a problem with that?!”

Even addled by rage, Keigetsu knew it was an incredibly unfair and unreasonable thing to say.

She was too upset to realize that at its core, it was a promise to run to her friend’s rescue no matter the odds.

“Heh.” Keishou was the first to break the long silence that had settled over the carriage. With a chuckle, he turned to his cousin sitting beside him. “You heard the lady, Your Highness. What should we do?”

Gyoumei bobbed his head, one eyebrow raised. “Good question.”

Keigetsu craned forward, hopeful that he would agree to the change of course, but he stuck his hand out the window and gave Shin-u the signal to stop the carriage instead. She gaped at him, bewildered. “Your Highness?”

“We will not be taking this carriage to Treacherous Tan Peak.”

“You can’t mean that!”

Keigetsu nearly lost her temper upon hearing the prince’s callous response. His dearly beloved fiancée was lost in the mountains, and he refused to run to her rescue?

“We can’t make tight turns in a carriage. You and I are going to sprint up the mountain on the Stalwart Steed.”

“Uh, s-sprint? Up the mountain? On the Stalwart Steed?”

“You did well to bring me my horse, Shin-u.”

“Of course, sir. I assumed you might want to head straight to give her a lecture, so I took the liberty of borrowing it.”

Apparently, the horse Shin-u was riding was none other than the Stalwart Steed, which had been left behind in the encampment stable. Gyoumei alighted from the carriage, took the steed from Shin-u, and swung himself onto the saddle.

“Come along, Shu Keigetsu. I want you to track down where she is. But do take care not to scorch my horse’s mane.”

Needless to say, his extended hand was meant for her. To track down Reirin and Leelee, they would need to connect to the girls using her flame call.

“Huh? But I don’t know how to ride a horse...”

Despite how desperately she had urged the driver onward, Keigetsu lost her nerve as soon as it was a matter of her riding a horse herself. It was bad enough that she wasn’t used to riding horses at all. She certainly couldn’t imagine doing so up a steep mountain and casting a spell on the side.

“P-pardon me, on second thought, it seems a bit too reckless to use my magic. The risk of His Majesty or one of his underlings noticing is too great!”

“Don’t be absurd.” Gyoumei only twisted his masculine features into a grin. “We no longer have the luxury of keeping things hidden. I need only deceive the enemy’s eyes with my dragon’s qi.”

His menacing declaration was accompanied by the crack of a lightning bolt outside the window.

“Eep! I-I really don’t think your dragon’s qi should be wielded so casually!”

Keigetsu scooted away, overwhelmed by the aura swirling around him, only for Keishou to spread his hands with a smile and close in from the diagonal seat. “Now, now. This is no time for us to be keeping up pretenses.”

“Eeeek!”

Not a moment later, he scooped Keigetsu up with lightning speed, escorted her out of the carriage, and deposited her onto the horse’s back. As soon as she was secure in Gyoumei’s arms, they took off like the wind.

Looking back, she saw that Keishou had already mounted his own trusty steed, which had been helping pull the carriage from the back row.

“We’ll catch up to you on our own horses!” he shouted. “Stay safe!”

And thus was Keigetsu granted a more breakneck trip to Treacherous Tan Peak than even she had hoped for.

Chapter 7:

Reirin Gazes Past the Water's Surface

“I T’LL TAKE A LOT MORE than this to make you crack, huh?”

Beneath the moonlight, the spy with a savage smile—Akim—sprang into motion without so much as a sound. By the time Reirin thought to adopt a defensive stance, he had already lifted her off the ground in a choke hold.

“U-unhand—”

“Ooh, you’re a feisty catch.”

Reirin put up a struggle, but the man sidestepped the attempt, tossed her over his shoulder, and took off through the mountains.

“What are you...?!”

“Ha ha. I wouldn’t talk if I were you. Might bite your tongue.”

With a breezy laugh, Akim bolted through the wild grass. Leelee did her best to chase after him, but he was too fast to keep pace with.

Soon, a river with large rocks jutting out from the bank came into view beyond the foliage. It was the same water source that Reirin and Leelee had discovered. Fearing the worst, Reirin thrashed in Akim’s grip, but within moments, he was holding her by the waist.

Splash!

He dunked her into the river. The waters were so deep that Reirin couldn’t touch the bottom, and it wasn’t long before her body was sucked into the depths.

“Ggh!”

It was the biting cold more than the lack of air that first made her want to shriek. Near the rocks, there were still patches of ice bobbing on the water’s

surface. As she writhed and flailed, water flooded her mouth. Realizing it would spell the end for her if she choked, she struggled to hold her breath, forced her racing pulse to slow, and breached the surface.

“Whoopsie. Get back down there.”

Within moments of Reirin getting her head above water, Akim planted a foot on her shoulder and kicked her back into the river. Reirin squirmed and attempted to use the current to escape from under his foot, but the man hopped over to a rock and lazily pinned her down from a different angle. Her arm reached out in search of air, but it only managed to scratch the surface in vain.

While Reirin struggled, Akim leaned in from the other side of the water. “Ouch, that looks painful.”

Air escaped her lips with an ominous gurgle. She hadn’t had enough time to take a deep breath earlier. The primal fear that came with not being able to breathe was telling her to lash out.

Stop that! I must stay calm. Keep your cool, Reirin!

If she started flailing, she would drown. She had to keep control of herself at all costs. Alas, panic welled up within her at an alarming pace, to the extent that even Reirin was tempted to scream. She recognized this sensation. Death was right around the corner.

“Okay, let’s take a little break.”

“Gah!”

Just as she was reaching her limits, Akim suddenly removed his foot. Reirin rebounded to the surface and gulped for all the air her body desired.

“Koff... Koff! Urk...”

Except it wasn’t anywhere near enough. As she coughed and hacked in pain, Akim’s foot found its way back to her shoulder.

“And back down ya go.”

Splash!

He mercilessly shoved her back beneath the surface. Reirin was gripped with a spine-chilling fear as it dawned on her that this man held her life in the palm of his hand.

It hurts...

It hurt. It was painful. Agonizing. Anguished cries dominated every corner of her mind. Her vision flickered in and out of focus as she was assailed by blinding terror and pain.

“Aaand break time. Hurts, doesn’t it? How come you have to go through all this? Life is so unfair.”

“Ggh! Hah...”

Each time she surfaced, Akim spoke to her in a voice so soothing, it had no business coming from his mouth. His smooth drawl mingled with the ringing in Reirin’s ears and her own frantic gasps, slowly eating away at her like poison in a wound.

“I gotta say, something feels off about you. I haven’t seen you use any magic, but I don’t buy that you’re the real Shu Keigetsu either. You don’t match her reputation at all. Apparently, there are sorcerers out there who can swap people’s minds and bodies. Are you one of ’em?”

“Koff, koff!” Splash!

“Nah, that wouldn’t make much sense, since you can’t use magic. Does that mean the sorcerer is the real Shu Keigetsu? The one hanging out in ‘Kou Reirin’s’ body? I guess that makes you the innocent victim of a body-snatching. Poor thing.”

Splash! “Koff, koff!”

“If you’re a victim, I have no reason to torture you. Why not come clean? Tell me Shu Keigetsu stole your body. As soon as you do, I’ll let you go free.”

Akim sounded almost like someone comforting a child. In contrast, he planted his foot on Reirin's shoulder without hesitation, pushing her back down into the watery depths. Right before she was about to lose consciousness, he would yank her back above the surface, only to submerge her again before she could catch her breath.

Scant moments after she was given the hope of survival, it was dashed; yet before her body could give out, she was teased with another glimpse of life and release. The despair and fear grew with each iteration, until she felt like she might lose her mind.

Stay...calm...

The bone-chilling cold of the water left her feeling faint. Reirin's head spun with a disintegrating jumble of thoughts, which she scrambled to get in order.

Aren't I meant to be accustomed to this? Both pain and the fear of death?

Right, she was accustomed to it. She was used to having difficulty breathing. She was used to pain that never subsided no matter how she clawed at her chest, the fear that she might not wake to see the next morning. Anguish and terror were beasts she had tamed long ago.

I mustn't let him find out about the switch...or Lady Keigetsu's magic.

Reirin had to protect her friend at all costs. That was all she could do to repay the girl who had granted color to her world. She was a sickly girl who had never been capable of leading an ordinary life. The one advantage she had to her name was a high tolerance for pain. If she couldn't put that to use, what good was she? Water may have been "Shu Keigetsu's" weakness, but Reirin could overcome it with her own strong affinity for earth.

I doubt this man intends to kill me, Reirin thought each time water filled her mouth, stilling her hands before they could fly to her throat.

As a spy, he was likely familiar with various methods of torture. The reason he had picked water torture was because he didn't want to leave scars. Just in case

the “Shu Keigetsu” he was dealing with truly wasn’t a sorcerer, or perhaps for some other reason, he had chosen a method that would leave the Maiden’s dignity and extremities intact.

If she refused to talk, there was a good chance she would make it out alive.

I must maintain my silence to the end.

All she had to do was refuse to scream. All she had to do was decline to ask for help. All she had to do was stop seeking a way out. All she had to do was stay quiet, and she could keep Keigetsu safe.

“Let my Maiden go!”

Reirin felt her body float upward, and her head poked above the surface. Leelee had caught up and torn Akim away from behind.

“Get off her! I said let go!”

“Aww, I admire the heroics.”

Leelee attempted to drag Akim back by the arm, but he gave it a quick shake and slammed her against the rocky surface.

“Agh!”

“Sit back and watch like a good girl. I’d rather not kill commoners if I don’t have to.”

As Reirin hacked up water, she thought only of Leelee’s safety. *No, Leelee... It’s too dangerous...*

“Stop this insanity! Can’t you see?! She’s obviously not a sorcerer!”

“Eh, maybe not, but she’s got some hidden depths to her. You never know—if I keep up the torture, I might uncover a shocking truth.”

“She’ll die first!”

Even dropped flat on her backside, Leelee didn’t miss a beat. If she could divert even a fraction of Akim’s attention toward the shore, it would give Reirin that much more time above water. Her plan was to stall for as long as possible.

“She’s a noblewoman! She’ll freeze to death if you soak her in a river during winter!” Leelee shouted with all her might. “What are you going to do if you end up killing an innocent girl?! She’s not a sorcerer! She hasn’t done anything wrong! She’s a better person than anyone I know!”

“Dhal,” the spy muttered, his voice dripping with cynicism.

There it was again. That foreign-sounding word.

“There’s no such thing as a good noble.”

Akim was smiling, but he wasn’t amused. It was a smile of cold contempt.

“You’re from downtown, aren’t you? A poor part of the city? If I recall, you were the product of a nobleman having his way with your mother. I could’ve sworn you were closer to my side of society. Don’t you resent the nobility?”

Despite asking the question, Akim didn’t appear all that interested in the answer. He turned his back to Leelee and pushed Reirin back underwater with his foot.

“Gah! *Koff!*”

“Stop it!”

“Me? I hate them. Say, do you know why people flock to backwater areas like Treacherous Tan Peak? The Kin and Gen lords don’t want immigrants in their domains, so they promise them land and drive them off to the territory border. Impoverished citizens and immigrants who can’t speak the local language are thrilled to have a home suddenly fall into their laps.”

Reirin blindly reached out to shove the foot off her shoulder, but Akim caught her hand and made a show of slowly pushing it back under the water.

“Little do they realize that those lands are ravaged by floods every year.”

Her arm’s desperate struggle for air ended in vain, a strong force sending it sinking back down beneath the surface.

“Ngh! *Koff...*”

“And we’re not talking about the kind of floods that result in devastated crops or eye infections. As summer approaches, the ice covering the river melts and the entire district is washed away. The undesirables die, and the lords are happy men. There are a lot of dumping grounds like that sprinkled throughout this area. I come from one of them myself.”

“Gah...”

“No matter how many complaints the residents lodge about the damage, the neighboring nobles use the excuse that it’s on the border to refuse to help. And why would they? The whole point was to get rid of their unwanted subjects. Next thing you know, they turn around and hand out food on a whim. Gotta win points with the imperial family somehow.”

As Reirin floundered, the surface of the river rippled, contorting her view of Akim’s face across the water. The sight evoked images of “Anki’s” face twisted with emotion.

“I must wonder how different my life could have been had a noble offered my younger self such kind words...”

It was probably true that he hailed from a disaster zone. He had fled to the land allocated to him, made a name for himself somehow, and been picked up as one of the emperor’s spies.

The only lie was that he didn’t consider that a fond memory at all.

On the contrary, he despised the nobles who had invited him to disaster-prone lands and then refused to do anything to help. Thus, he had let an insult slip before starting in on his confession. He found Kasei’s bragging about bestowing rice and charity two days in a row completely ludicrous. He thought the nobility utterly delusional for considering the gift of a few bowls of congee “true salvation.”

And so he had covered it up by pretending to cry.

“No! Stop! You can’t do this!”

“I can’t stand nobles who’re all talk and pretty words. I feel the urge to kill ’em on sight. In fact, I really did kill that bastard Kin who was our lord at the time. It pays to be in the secret service sometimes.” Once Akim was finished rattling off the story of his past, he shrugged with a beleaguered sigh. “Yet here we are only twenty years later, and they’re already back to their old tricks. I knew the nobility were a hopeless case.”

His cadence was inappropriately laid-back as he concluded, “Well, there you have it. I’ve got no cause to kill this lady if she’s not a sorcerer...” After getting the girls’ hopes up with the start of that sentence, he abruptly flashed Reirin a grin. “But I wouldn’t mind if she just so happened to die.”

Akim stomped on Reirin with the most force yet, and her breath was stolen by the impact. She tried to adopt a defensive stance, but the cold had turned her body so stiff that she couldn’t even squirm underneath him.

She felt her body sink into the depths. As she watched the water’s surface slip away, it dawned on her that she had misread the nature of this man’s aggression.

He was nonchalant and made no effort to hide his past. The bitter hatred he had harbored over losing his family must have long since withered away. Despite his claim of wanting to kill nobles on sight, he looked almost put out about having to torture her, and there wasn’t a hint of emotion on his face. As such, Reirin had assumed she could survive if she played her cards right—but in reality, that lack of investment meant he didn’t care if he “just so happened” to kill someone.

“Stoooooop!”

“Yeah, yeah. If it’s too scary to watch, why don’t you take a little nap?”

It sounded like Leelee had tried to cling to Akim again. Alas, Reirin didn’t hear her voice anymore after that. Akim might have knocked her unconscious.

Lee...lee... Oh no, I’m about to faint...

Reirin tried to reach for the water's surface, but she couldn't lift her arm. It was swept away by the waters to no avail. Would Akim pull her back up if she passed out? Or would he leave her to die? Both options seemed equally plausible.

No, I can't... This is Lady Keigetsu's body...

She had to live. She couldn't let harm befall this vessel.

I mustn't lose consciousness... I need to get to the surface... I need to breathe...

She had to survive. She had to weather the attack and find an opening to reach the surface.

She would hold out. She would endure.

Isn't that...what I'm supposed to do best?

Gradually, Reirin was overcome with the sense that she was currently curled up in bed, fighting off a wave of illness. She was trapped in the darkness, the morning still far away. No matter how far she hunched in on herself, it did nothing to stop the malady's merciless assault. Her only choice was to hold her breath and wait it out.

It didn't matter how much she cried or screamed—no one could save her. Of course not. Her pain was her own to bear. Shedding tears would do nothing but inflict more suffering on her loved ones.

In that case, she would never scream. And she certainly wouldn't beg for her life.

She would never let anyone see her struggle disgracefully. She would fight to the last all on her own. That was how she had made it through her whole life.

"Get on with it—ask me for help!"

All of a sudden, a familiar shriek played back in Reirin's ears, and a faint smile rose to her face. That beloved friend of hers was blunt and quick to brush people off, but deep down, one of the most loving people there was.

How wonderful would it be if Reirin could ask her for help? The Shu Maiden brought about miracles as easily as she breathed. Somehow, Reirin got the sense that her friend might respond to even her unspoken cries for help—and she'd do it with that bewitching magic of hers.

No! I mustn't drag her into this!

Her last remaining scraps of reason called Reirin to a halt. Keeping her distance was the one way she could protect Keigetsu. Now that her friend was poised to develop her charms among friendly faces, having Reirin around would only drag her down. Besides, Reirin had long since forgotten how to ask for help.

The dark surface of the water rippled overhead. As the Kou Maiden gazed up at that silent, pitch-black world, she heard a sound.

Roaaaaar!

A brilliant vermillion light shot across the other side of the water's surface. Reirin's eyes went wide.

Huh?

It looked almost like a comet soaring across the night sky. It cut straight through the darkness, casting its powerful gleam everywhere.

A beat later, there came a woman's enraged shout. "What do you think you're doing?!"



Despite traveling through the water, the voice carried well enough to reach Reirin with clarity. Before she had time to doubt her ears, someone hauled her up above the surface. She coughed violently as air whooshed into her lungs.

“This way! Hold on tight!”

A hand slipped beneath her underarm, pulling her close.

Between the strong touch of that hand and the familiar voice booming in her ears, Reirin had to speak up between coughs. “Your...Highness?”

“Don’t push yourself to talk. I’m getting us back to shore!”

It was Gyomei, who had dived in from the opposite bank. He wrapped his arm firmly around Reirin’s shoulders and headed back from whence he came. Undeterred by the river’s biting chill, he swam with powerful enough strokes to prove his relation to the bloodline of water.

While he dragged Reirin to shore, several more flashes of light whizzed by overhead.

“How dare you! I’ll get you for this! I’m going to burn you alive!”

No, it wasn’t light. They were flames.

The other figure standing on the shore inclined herself toward the rocky bank across the river. Each time she lurched forward, flames sprang into existence around her and assailed Akim like arrows. It was the woman who clad herself in the fires of fury—Shu Keigetsu.

Lady...Keigetsu...

As Reirin slumped against the riverbank in a daze, Keigetsu’s flames were reflected in her eyes as myriad streaks of vermillion light.

“Monster! How dare you!”

That gut-wrenching cry was accompanied by the largest blast of flame yet. It merged with the other flames already unleashed, forming a gigantic pillar of fire that engulfed Akim’s entire body.

“Whoa!” Akim yelped. The seasoned spy had managed to dodge all the previous attacks, but this one caught him by surprise.

Still, he thought fast and jumped into the river, extinguishing the flames that clung to his robes. His head soon broke the surface with a splash, and he raked a hand through his wet hair, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Well, those clearly weren’t flaming arrows. Crazy stuff. So this is Daoist magic, huh? Which means...”

With an impressed whistle, he lobbed something at Keigetsu from underneath the water.

“It’s safe to say that you’re the sorcerer!”

Whoosh!

The powerful projectile zoomed ahead faster than the eye could see. Reirin’s first instinct was to shield Keigetsu, but before she could, she heard a metallic *clang*.

“Not on my watch.”

The one who had repelled the concealed weapon—a dart—was none other than Keishou, his sword held at the ready.

“Brother Junior!”

“This man appears to be proficient with concealed weapons. You girls should stand back. I’ll handle things from here.”

With a look that meant business, Reirin’s brother shielded both her and Keigetsu behind his back.

“No,” Gyoumei tersely interjected, then fired off a series of orders. “Keishou, protect the girls. If this is one of my father’s men, Shin-u and I should be the ones to deal with him. Shin-u!”

“Yes, sir!”

Shin-u was already in motion, having inferred Gyoumei’s plan. Akim hadn’t

wasted time wading back to shore, but in the meantime, Shin-u had hopped his way across the rocks jutting up from the river bottom, reaching the opposite bank in the blink of an eye.

“Watch out! He can dual-wield a dagger and darts!” Gyoumei shouted upon determining the cards up the enemy’s sleeve.

“Got it!” Shin-u shot back, then lunged forward with his sword.

The dripping wet Gyoumei rushed over to the rocky bank himself, taking his own sword in hand and joining the fight.

“Oh, come on! Two against one? That’s dirty!”

Akim still had it in him to banter, but fielding attacks from two sides had stripped him of his earlier composure. The look on his face had taken a turn for the serious.

“I shall escort Leelee to safety,” the familiar voice of a gamboge gold rang out from beside Reirin, making her eyes go round. Tousetsu made her way to the rocky bank as fluidly as water, rushed over to Leelee’s limp body, and distanced her from the heart of the battle.

Meanwhile, her rage yet to subside, Keigetsu thrust herself forward from her spot on the riverbank. “How dare you! How *dare* you! I’ll kill you! I’ll send you up in flames!”

“Calm down, Lady Keigetsu!” Keishou attempted to pacify her from the side. “Put the flames away! You might hit His Highness or the captain!”

That yanked Keigetsu back to her senses with a start, and she whipped around to look at the soaking mess that had become of Reirin. “Are you all right?!” She was out of breath, and her voice hitched. “You *are* still with us, aren’t you?”

“Ah...” Reirin wasn’t sure how to respond to the girl glaring down at her.

Lady Keigetsu...

She felt surprise, relief, and another emotion she couldn’t put into words.

That jumble of emotion swelled at a fast enough pace to crush her heart in her chest, only to come welling up in her throat. The water trickling from her eyes might have come from the river, or it might have been something else.

“Why?”

Sooner than she could answer that she was fine, sooner than she could say thanks, that one murmur escaped her lips.

“Why?”

Why did this girl always show up to save her from the darkness? How could she shine so bright? How did she know to reach out and seize Reirin by the hand even when she refused to scream for help?

My dear comet.

The sight of Keigetsu letting her emotions take over as she summoned flames to her side was breathtakingly beautiful. Overwhelmed by her friend’s fierce radiance and the guilt of making her use her powers, Reirin struggled not to cry.

“Why did you use your magic?”

What else could Reirin have done? She had held herself back from seeking help. That was the most she could manage. And yet, her own weakness had once again put Keigetsu at a disadvantage.

“Why? I’m not worth—”

“Say that again and I will burn you alive!”

The very next moment, Reirin was shocked to find her whole body engulfed in flame. Her robes fluttered within the vortex of red light. As the fire swept over her skin, she felt several old wounds tingle, but it didn’t burn. Soon enough, the mysterious flames melted away into nothingness.

It wasn’t particularly daunting. If anything, it felt warm. And in fact, all the water that had chilled her to the bone instantly dried, leaving her body enveloped in an intoxicating warmth.

“What is your problem?! Why are you always drowning or freezing?! And then when I come to save you, you have the gall to ask why I would! I’ve had quite enough of your nonsense!”

Keigetsu had the feeling she had done something rather similar, but she shamelessly shoved that aside to scream her heart out. Given her strong affinity for fire, she held a deep revulsion toward the concept of getting cold or wet.

Faced with her friend’s horrified, indignant rebuke, Reirin was more taken aback than offended. “But you worked so hard to keep your powers a secret... Now it was all for nothing,” she murmured in a daze.

“I know! How are you going to fix this?!” Keigetsu yelled back, irritated. “And what else was I supposed to do?! It’s your fault for always running off to die!”

“You could have just left me be. I swear I would have kept your se—”

Smack!

Before she could finish that sentence, Keigetsu slapped her across the cheek.

“Don’t make me hit you!”

“Um, but you already di—”

“Listen, you! Yooooou...!”

Keigetsu had put quite a bit of force into that smack. Reirin turned around to protest, cradling her cheek—but when she found tears falling from Keigetsu’s eyes, the words died on her tongue.

“I can’t *believe* you!”

“I’m sorry, Lady Keigetsu.” Reirin gently stroked her friend’s back as she choked with emotion. “Please don’t cry.”

“Aww, look at that,” Keishou playfully interjected from the side, his sword held at the ready. Reirin glanced up at him, consternation plain on her face. “You went and made her cry. And I always side with a crying girl. That means you’re in for a three-day lecture, Reirin.”

“Brother Junior...” Reirin’s face fell. This was the worst her brother had ever picked on her.

“Listen, Reirin,” Keishou softly began after repelling another dart that came flying their way. “Shouldn’t you understand how much it hurts to run to someone’s rescue, only to hear that your help wasn’t wanted? And you should put yourself in our shoes. Try to imagine how it feels to stand before a man who tried to drown your friend—or your little sister—under his foot.” A strong rage bled into his breezy tone. “I’ll see to it that he dies.”

His eyes were glued to Akim, who was still locked in battle with Gyoumei and Shin-u.

Reirin sat so straight at attention, it was like she’d been struck again. Everyone else’s feelings had finally reached her. “Lady Keigetsu, I offer you my deepest apologies.”

“A-as you should! I-I’m never letting you off the hook for this!”

Reirin tentatively reached out a hand, only for Keigetsu to bat it away.

“I’m sorry.”

Never one to give up, she made another grab for Keigetsu’s hand. This time, it was returned with an almost painful squeeze.

“I won’t let you forget this!”

“I never would.”

Hand in hand, the two girls watched the men fight on the riverbank.

“Whew, I can practically taste the bloodlust,” quipped Akim.

As the spy ducked the swords swinging at him from both sides, he landed with a hand flat against the rocky ground. Not a moment later, he used that arm as a fulcrum to unleash a roundhouse kick. He carried on skillfully parrying the attacks that came his way, blocking a sword with the dagger in his right hand while he threw a dart with his left.

“Not a great look for our young crown prince and Eagle Eyes’ captain to gang up on a middle-aged man who’s lost his touch. Don’t you feel any shame? And all of this over one little lady! A Maiden isn’t even that hard to replace.”

There was no form to his spontaneous, irregular moves. Although his fighting style lacked the beauty of martial arts, it carried a sharp intensity that could only be forged through actual combat.

His next move was to kick up a huge splash of water in Gyomei and Shin-u’s direction. The men reacted fast, blocking the spray with their sleeves and swords. Gyomei glared balefully when he spotted a dart camouflaged under the cover of the water.

“Most assassins back down when caught in the act. Are you so emboldened because you’re one of His Majesty’s direct reports?”

“Basically.” Akim pushed back his wet hair, dodging the sword slashes that interspersed the conversation. “As long as I’ve got this tattoo, I won’t be punished for killing one measly Maiden, at least.”

“Oho. But now that you’ve turned a blade on our kingdom’s one and only crown prince, I do wonder whose side His Majesty will take.”

“Guess we’ll have to wait and see. It’s true that the guy hasn’t got a lot of children to spare.”

Apparently, Akim was on friendly enough terms with the emperor to forgo any semblance of formal address.

“I think it’ll be a toss-up, personally. Not because he considers me that valuable or anything—but because he cares as little about you two as he does about me.”

After boldly disparaging Gyomei, the second-most exalted man in the realm, Akim unleashed a sweeping kick without a single wasted movement. There was an iron plate fastened to the back of his heel, and this time Shin-u was the one to block the blow.

“Full of cheap tricks, aren’t you?”

“An old man’s gotta rely on his tools or he can’t keep up.” Despite Akim’s claim, he wasn’t the slightest bit out of breath as he stepped back into a fighting stance. “Look, I’ve got no quarrel with either of you. Can I just take the Maiden behind you and go?”

“Over my dead body,” said Gyoumei.

“Well, that’s a shame. You may be our one and only crown prince, but we can always pick out a successor from the previous generation if you die. I wouldn’t assume your status makes you invincible, if I were you.” Even when Akim was surrounded by two skilled martial artists, there wasn’t a crack in his composure. “Here’s a tip. Killing one of His Majesty’s personal spies will amount to turning a blade on the emperor. Defending that Maiden will make you a traitor who endorsed the Daoist arts. Wouldn’t you rather turn your back on a girl or two than go down in history as a disgrace?”

Akim shrugged and asked why it was even a question, only to suddenly close the gap between him and Gyoumei a moment later.

“Ah!”

“Ain’t leaving women in the lurch what big shots do best? Just kill your pesky fiancées like you drown your pesky subjects.”

“Ggh!”

The man threw a right punch and a left kick. By the time Gyoumei managed to dodge, Akim’s remaining hand and foot already had darts ready to go. His assault was so fierce that not even an expert swordsman like Shin-u had room to cut in.

“Hey, don’t sweat it. You might burn with a desire for revenge for a while, but it’ll die down over time. I guarantee it.”

“Enough tomfoolery!”

Clang!

Gyoumei pretended to lean back in a dodge, only to thrust his sword forward, and Akim blocked the blow with one of his darts. A foreboding creak rang out as their blades clashed.

“With how sickly the Kou Maiden is, isn’t she bound to die sooner or later, anyway? She’d just be following her destiny.”

The moment Gyoumei heard that, a crash of thunder shook the whole forest.

Boooooom!

“The only one destined to die here is you.”

“Eeeek!”

A pillar of light gigantic enough to outclass Keigetsu’s flames struck near Gyoumei’s spot on the rocky bank, shattering a rock with a loud crackle. The one to yelp loudest over that bright flash of light and the accompanying rumble wasn’t Akim—it was Keigetsu, who was watching this from the other side of the river.

“Eep! I can’t believe the power of his dragon’s qi...” Her tears of moments ago forgotten, she reached her trembling hands to shake Reirin by the shoulders. “I-I can hardly breathe! Make him stop!”

“I understand the feeling.” Even Reirin was watching the men with a dash of fear as she stroked Keigetsu’s back. “I certainly hope this fight doesn’t escalate any further.”

Unfortunately, that hope was dashed when Akim deflected his opponent’s sword and tacked on another nasty comment. “Or is it the Shu Maiden you’re so hung up on? Trust me, with *those* looks, you’d be better off trading her for a new girl!”

Boooooom!

Lightning struck near Gyoumei again.

Keigetsu covered her face with another shriek. “Eeeek!”

Meanwhile, all Reirin's apprehension vanished into thin air, a dark growl escaping her lips. "Huh?! Care to repeat that?"

"Why are *you* getting angry?! Wh-when is all this lightning going to stop?!"

"Finish him, Your Highness."

Next to the quivering Keigetsu was no longer that moribund girl with eyes full of tears; it was a wrathful deity with a glassy stare, furious over an insult to her best friend. She seemed moments away from clapping along and chanting, "Do it, do it, do it!"

"I share the feeling. I hate men who make a show of how cool and detached they are. It makes me yearn to watch them suffer a miserable defeat."

"I couldn't agree more, Brother Junior. Let's pray that one of those lightning bolts strikes him right in the head."

"Mind if I go join the fight?"

"Just to be safe, I would rather you stayed here to protect Lady Keigetsu."

Despite the tense battle unfolding before their eyes, the Kou siblings were picking the oddest of things to get mad over.

In the meantime, more and more lightning rained down, and darts flew during the gaps between the strikes. The clash of swords resounded without end, the dragon's qi eddied and swirled with a lung-crushing pressure, and Keigetsu gradually grew delirious with fear.

"E-enough already..."

Keigetsu was no pacifist, and she wanted nothing more than to see this enemy spy dead. Still, she was tempted to tell the fighters to take this somewhere she couldn't get caught in the cross fire.

She finally broke down and pleaded, "Hurry up and put an end to this, will you?!"

Beside her, Reirin thoughtfully tapped a finger against her lips. "On second

thought...killing this man might only invite a second or third spy, and we'll all be branded criminals. Nothing good will come of it in the long term."

The Maiden stared into space, her brow furrowed in thought. The very next moment, her eyes snapped wide open.

"Brother Senior!"

"Huh?" Surprised to hear that name come up, the teary-eyed Keigetsu followed her gaze upward.

Above the dark cliff jutting out over the forest, a spark flashed, whizzed its way across the distance, and lodged itself into the bank near Akim with a dull thud.

"Whew, gimme a break!" Akim grumbled, dodging out of the way.

A split second later, the object wedged into the ground exploded.

Ka-boom!

"Didn't expect you to bust out rockets!"

The weapon unleashed from above was an arrow with a tube of black powder strapped to it.

"Sorry I'm late!" the man standing atop the cliff—Kou Keikou—shouted with a wave of his hand, then proceeded to nock his next fire arrow.

"How can he aim with such precision from that distance?" Tousetsu muttered, blatantly envious. At some point, she had crossed back to the safer riverbank with the unconscious Leelee.

Upon finding himself surrounded by three skilled martial artists—Shin-u and his swift sword strikes, Gyomei and his blasts of lightning, and Keikou and his surprise fire arrows—even Akim had to grimace. As soon as Reirin caught him crouching down, likely preparing to cut his losses and flee, she sprang to her feet.

"Stop right there."

The moment her dignified voice rang out, the entire group of men turned to look at her, tension hanging in the air.

Taking care not to upset the balance of the fight, Reirin regarded Akim with a steady gaze. Then she asked him, “Would you care to strike a deal?”

They had the numbers on their side to kill Akim, but that would equate to a rebellion against the emperor. If at all possible, they needed to resolve the matter through a discussion and change his mind.

“Let me start by saying that we have multiple means of killing you here and now. We are the ones with the upper hand in this battle.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” Akim shrugged off her attempt to gain an advantage in the negotiations. “If you kill me, every last one of you will be executed.”

Obviously, it was going to take much worse to rattle him.

Reirin shot him her best self-possessed smile. “Regardless, you would be the first of us to die. You would lose your life over a woman worth the same to you alive as dead.”

It was all over the moment she showed a hint of impatience. But she knew she would be fine. No one could best her in a contest of feigning composure.

With a hand to her cheek, Reirin tilted her head to one side. “Would that not be very ‘dhal’?”

Dhal. Reirin assumed it meant something like “stupid” or “pointless.”

When she made a point of pulling from the language spoken among the nomadic tribes, Akim gaped at her, then burst out laughing. “True. It’d be stupid. *Dhal*. You got that right.”

“Then why not stop wasting your life on something so pointless?” Reirin took the small bit of interest she’d managed to draw and kept pushing. “Magic is indeed both a taboo and a form of treason here in Ei. But you have no particular allegiance to this kingdom or His Majesty, correct?”

“I wouldn’t go quite that far. I do owe His Majesty a debt of gratitude for letting me kill all the incompetent aristocrats I want. It’s pretty fun to kill self-important nobles for a living.”

“Self-important nobles, hm?”

As she parroted Akim’s words, Reirin carefully approached the core of the issue. This man was driven by neither genuine loyalty nor an insatiable thirst for revenge. Despite his claim that killing nobles was fun, he had appeared consistently indifferent—even annoyed—about torturing Reirin and fighting off Gyomei and Shin-u. Due to his lack of emotional range, any attempts to either unnerve him or appeal to his better nature were unlikely to move him.

In which case...it all comes down to how well I can catch his interest.

Reirin steered the conversation along, paving the way to use the one and only trump card she had in her hand. “Do you call us that because we pat ourselves on the back for serving a single bowl of congee?”

“Oh, look, at least she’s self-aware.”

“It would be hard not to be.”

Reirin didn’t need Akim to tell her how powerless she was. It was the role of yin—of women—to provide comfort and make up for deficiencies. The Maidens were expected to cook rice to appease the people’s hunger, to soothe their souls with tender smiles. And she realized that was an important task.

Nevertheless, providing the solace of a single bowl of congee would do little to deliver her subjects on any fundamental level. After the Maidens left, the locals would go back to being tormented by the fear of having their houses swept away in floods, the frustration of their crops refusing to grow, the starvation, the sorrow.

As a Maiden, she didn’t have the authority to order flood-control projects or allot safer lands to the residents of other domains. Her station didn’t allow her to engage in politics. Reirin was perpetually frustrated with how brittle her own

arms were, how limited their reach.

“A girl on Treacherous Tan Peak told me that receiving a single bowl of congee wouldn’t stop the summer floods. She said that her land would never change.”

As Reirin caressed the braided bracelet wrapped around her wrist, she recalled the sight of Leanne’s face in profile. Nothing would ever change. Salvation would never come. The girl had forbidden herself from even holding out hope, much like Reirin had before meeting Keigetsu. And so Reirin wished for Leanne to be graced by a comet of her own. She wanted that girl to witness a miracle that would tear through the darkness and cast a brilliant light on its surroundings.

“I told her she was wrong—that it was possible to make a change. And I asked her to start believing that for herself if I were to bring about a miracle.”

Reirin raised one hand high overhead and held up three of her fingers. In the Kingdom of Ei, this gesture symbolized a vow to Heaven, Earth, and Man. Keikou shot her a surprised look from atop the cliff. Reirin met his gaze and nodded back at him.

“I swear upon Heaven, Earth, and Man that I shall give my all for my people. As short as my arms may be, I will gather up all those within my reach—and I shall call forth a miracle.”

Her noble declaration elicited nothing but a sneer from Akim.

“Is a statement of intent the best you’ve got?”

“Of course not. Talk means nothing without tangible results.”

“Took the words right outta my mouth.”

Even held at swordpoint, Akim remained as lethargic as ever, which proved he was taking his opponents lightly from start to finish.

The spy raised a cynical eyebrow. “Let me guess how you’re about to follow that up: ‘So I taught them how to fish! Aren’t I great?’”

“Incorrect,” Reirin declared. “So I planted explosives in the river.”

“Huh?”

Boooooom!

A moment later, a deafening roar echoed through the area. Beyond the dense woods, a blast of wind kicked up, sending a spray of white droplets towering over the treetops.

“Eeeeeek!”

Alarmed by the noise, Keigetsu buckled to the ground once more. Leelee snapped awake and sprang to her feet, while the men went on the defensive. The reverberations were *that* strong.

“My, that was louder than I expected. I really do wish I could have explained my plan to the residents before I went ahead with it.” As Reirin watched a startled flock of birds take flight from the forest, she cracked an embarrassed smile, then turned a sullen glare on Akim. “Alas, *someone* demanded that I accelerate the results. I had no other choice.”

“Uh, come again?”

Even Akim looked taken aback. But the one really in a tizzy was Keigetsu.

“Wh-wh-wh-what...?” Struggling to keep up with this sudden development, she jerked Reirin’s sleeves back and forth, completely forgetting that they were in the midst of urgent negotiations. “What did you do?!”

“As I said, I blew up the frozen river.”

“You were just going on about how you want to help the masses! What possessed you to set off a bomb?!”

“It’s a countermeasure,” Reirin responded with utmost seriousness. “Every year, right before summer, this entire region—Treacherous Tan Peak included—is devastated by floods. Didn’t you ever wonder why that is?”

“Well, because, um...it’s just that kind of land.”

“Indeed, it’s just that kind of land. It is that kind of terrain.” Reirin didn’t contradict Keigetsu’s vague answer, instead pointing to the river flowing before them and where it continued upstream. “Several rivers run through this mountain, and sections of them freeze over during the winter. During early spring, the ice begins to thaw, and the half-melted blocks of ice clump together and halt the river’s flow. As summer approaches, the embankment of ice melts, and the large accumulation of water overflows and washes away the settlements downstream.”

Geography was one of the academic subjects the Maidens knew the least about. Keigetsu’s eyes darted back and forth as she processed this response and realized where the conversation was going.

“Wait. So that means...”

“Yes. Breaking the ice during the winter will eliminate the summer floods. Thus, I planted explosives in the frozen river in advance, and Brother Senior just set them off with a fire arrow.”

As Reirin explained herself with a smile, she gave a light wave of her three fingers. Apparently, she hadn’t pointed her fingers to the skies as part of her vow; that had been the signal to set off the bomb.

But when did she and her brother have time to settle on a signal? Coming up with the idea to blow up the ice as a flood-control measure and preparing the necessary black powder weren’t things that could be done overnight.

“How long have you been planning this?”

“I actually thought of the idea to break up the frozen river before even coming to Treacherous Tan Peak. Thus why my brother and I took a look around the rivers and held frequent discussions on the journey here. Today was the day I asked him to plant the black powder. Unfortunately, it was splitting our forces that landed us in this very predicament.”

Reirin waved to her brother atop the cliff, which Keikou returned with a vigorous wave of his own.

“Maidens do not have the authority to order large-scale public works projects after a flood. Thus, I asked myself if there was a way to prevent it from happening in the first place.”

It was exactly the kind of idea that would occur to Kou Reirin, whose countless battles with illness had taught her the importance of preventive medicine and daily training.

“It shouldn’t be much longer now.” Reirin squinted upstream. “This way!” she shouted at Gyoumei and Shin-u, who were still standing on the rocks dotting the river, their swords held at the ready. Owing to their water-bound Gen blood, they immediately inferred her meaning and leapt to shore.

Whooooosh!

Within moments, a huge deluge of water surged forth, crashing against the rocky bank. Breaking the ice on the river past the woods had sent it gushing forward with enough force to temporarily flood the waters near Reirin’s party. The turbid waters of this flash flood completely engulfed the rocks where the men had just been standing, kicking up a spray so big that it was clear to see even at night.

“Whoa!”

Akim lost his balance and was swept a few paces downstream. Ever the force to be reckoned with, he quickly grabbed hold of a nearby rock, regained his footing, and popped back above the surface.

“Whew! The water’s friggin’ freezing!”

Tap.

Reirin closed in on the spy with a firm step onto the rock. The men behind her pointed their swords straight at Akim.

“Allow me to reiterate my previous offer, Akim. Would you care to strike a deal?”

A woman standing on the riverbank now coaxed a man submerged in the

water. It was a complete reversal of the scene from several minutes ago.

“You poor thing. It would be such a shame to see a man with no dedication to his job die in the line of duty. Now come, let’s hear it. Agree to let us go free. As soon as you do, I’ll let you out of the water.”

Akim stared up at her long and hard. His eyes held neither hatred nor irritation—only pure curiosity. If anything, he seemed to find her attempt at payback delightful.

“As far as you’re concerned, His Majesty’s orders are not absolute. And now that we’ve put our money where our mouths are, you can see we aren’t the ‘self-important nobles’ you so despise. Why not simply let us off the hook?”

Reirin had no intention of bowing her head and begging for mercy. All she wanted was to put forth a strikingly appealing option. She and her companions were willing to put themselves on the line to deliver their subjects. They weren’t like the nobles who had turned their backs on Akim in the past and Leanne in the present. They had a sense of justice—as well as reckless bravery, indomitable wills, and dreams.

Every now and then, wouldn’t it be nice to stop carrying out those boring missions and bet on an exciting hand instead?

“So this is what it sounds like when the ice breaks, huh?” Akim eventually murmured after a long silence.

“Hm?”

“I can hear a creaking noise past the woods. That must be the sound of the broken chunks of ice flowing down the river.”

Apparently, he had stopped talking to listen to the sound of the ice floes.

“I suppose so, yes.” Reirin gave a noncommittal nod, unsure what he was getting at.

The spy rubbed his nose before abruptly breaking into a grin. “I like it.”

“Pardon?”

Then, heedless of the swords pointed his way, he hoisted himself back onto the riverbank through sheer brute strength.

“Ah!”

“Fine. I’ll take a gamble on your team, since you managed to put a crack in the ice. But I’m only letting you off the hook for a day,” Akim nonchalantly declared before the battle-ready men, then tossed the dart in his hand aside.

Reirin’s party exchanged glances as the spy went from a threat to completely unarmed within seconds. Sure, they may have taken him by surprise, but none of them had expected him to be so easily won over. What’s more, his immediate reason for surrendering wasn’t the threat to his life; it was because they had “put a crack in the ice.”

Well...I’ll take that to mean I caught his interest?

On reflection, the world had weirdos like Ran Houshun who would grow enamored of those who threatened them, so only the man himself could know which part of it had struck a chord with him.

After pushing herself to that conclusion, Reirin moved on to the next part of her plan. “I’m glad we could reach an understanding. On another note, you might get frostbite if you walk around wet in the cold. Now that you’ve become a part of our team, we’ll take it upon ourselves to dry you off. Lady Keigetsu, could I ask you to do the honors?”

“Excuse me?! Why should I bother with him?!” Keigetsu blurted out when she was suddenly put on the spot. She was clearly still wary that Akim would turn around and betray them.

Reirin brought her lips to Keigetsu’s ear and whispered a short version of her true aim. With a click of her tongue, Keigetsu acquiesced and called upon her flames.

“Hmph. I’m not the group handyman!”

A gigantic pillar of fire enveloped Akim, then died down and vanished.

“Wow, mysterious. Unlike the flames from earlier, that one didn’t burn at all. How does it work?” Akim gave his freshly warmed-up body a once-over, then broke into a taunting grin. “You must really trust me if you’re patching me up. Aren’t you worried I’ll put up another fight?”

“Hee hee.” Reirin met that nasty comment with a serene smile, her hand pressed to her cheek. “Did you feel that tattoo on your temple tingle just now?”

“Hm?” Akim nearly reached out to touch his temple, only to stop and clench that hand into a loose fist. “Hard to say. I didn’t notice.”

“Oh, I know you did. We did just place a curse on you, after all.”

After pausing for a beat, the man stared back at her. “You what?”

“To ensure that you don’t go running your mouth, we placed a mark on the tattoo that identifies you as a spy. No matter how far from us you are, the moment you tell His Majesty anything about our magic, your entire body will burst into flame.”

Keigetsu could barely contain a smirk. *This woman certainly knows how to bluff!*

It was probably true that Akim had felt his temple sting. A tattoo could be considered an old wound, and damaged skin would always ache when exposed to flames. Magical fire was no exception.

“I’d like to threaten him a bit, so take care to toast his temple extra thoroughly.”

It also helped that, in accordance with Reirin’s request, Keigetsu had blasted his temple with a little extra fire. In hindsight, as benevolent as Reirin was, she never showed mercy to her enemies. No way she would have let the man who drowned her in a river and insulted her friend go unchecked. The girl reached out to others as readily as she breathed—but she wouldn’t hesitate to use that same hand to choke the life out of her foes. She was one heck of a villainess.

“You’re obviously pulling my leg,” the man muttered in his usual flippant

tone, but his voice came out a little strained. He turned to the others to back him up. “She’s making that up, right?”

When all the other men averted their eyes in lieu of a response, Akim sputtered in surprise, his face going taut. Since he didn’t know the first thing about the Daoist arts, he had no idea what could or couldn’t be done with magic. He couldn’t tell the difference between the pain of having an old wound burned and the pain of being imprinted with a curse.

A real curse can’t be activated under such convenient conditions.

Keeping the facts of the matter to herself, Keigetsu placed a hand on Reirin’s shoulder and tilted her head to one side. “Want to try your luck and find out?”

“Oh, Lady Keigetsu, you always take things to extremes.”

Keigetsu was as incendiary, aggressive, and fierce as ever, and the sight of it brought a happy smile to Reirin’s face.

“Eh, whatever. Here I took you for a Maiden who was all pretty words, but you’ve got quite the wicked streak. It’s encouraging to see, really.” With a dry chuckle, Akim conceded that she’d gotten one over on him, then cocked his head to the side. “So what do you plan to do with the time you’ve bought? For the record, I may be letting you off the hook for tonight, but that doesn’t change the fact the emperor’s got his eye on you.”

“Obviously, we—”

We’ll reverse the swap right away and hide all the evidence, Keigetsu was about to shoot back in a huff. However, Reirin cut her off before she could finish and turned a smile on the group.

“An excellent question. I actually have a proposal on that point.” The way she clapped both hands together gave her an adorably innocent air. “None of this will change the fact that the emperor has his eye on us—so why don’t we make a direct appeal to His Majesty?”

She dropped the proposal as casually as if she were suggesting, *We’re out of*

rice, so why don't we have potatoes for dinner?

Keigetsu's voice cracked. "Excuse me?!"

"What did you just say?"

"Come again?"

Even Gyoumei, Shin-u, Keishou, Tousetsu, and Leelee were shooting her wide-eyed stares. It was only the natural reaction. After all, they had spent the last month focusing their efforts on preventing Genyou from finding out about Keigetsu's magic.

"We were lucky enough to get a free pass, and you want to march right up to the person out to suppress us?!" Keigetsu yelled. "What was even the point of this whole do-or-die bargain?!"

"There's a world of difference between being dragged out in front of someone and going to see them with the proper preparations in place."

"No amount of careful preparation is going to help us! We're talking about the emperor here! He could have any one of us Maidens executed with a flick of his finger! Do you get that?!"

"Indeed. We are dealing with the emperor, the highest authority in the kingdom. That's precisely why we have gone to such desperate lengths to hide your magic." Reirin nodded along with Keigetsu's points, a hand pressed to her cheek. "And that was very foolish of us."

"What do you mean?"

In her mind's eye, Reirin saw a flame cut straight through the darkness—that light of hope she had witnessed from the dark, watery depths. Reirin had been enchanted by the beautiful magic Keigetsu wove, so very much like a comet. And that had led her to a new perspective.

Why should they be so desperate to hide such a glorious miracle?

"Upon reflection, anyone who would seek to suppress such wonderful magic—His Majesty or otherwise—is an utter fool. Our first move should have been

to make him realize as much.”

“Hold it! That’s downright irreverent!”

Keigetsu’s face twitched, her confidence of a few moments ago nowhere to be found, but Reirin paid that no heed.

I don’t want to hold back for so much as another second.

She had believed that all she could do to keep her friend’s secret was stay far away and endure, but that was based on an erroneous premise. Keigetsu’s magic had never been something to be ashamed of showing to the world. It wasn’t meant to be a forbidden secret.

The answer wasn’t to hide Keigetsu because the emperor was out to suppress her—it was to march right up to the man, grab him by the collar, and tell him off for insulting her pride and joy.

Besides, even if they did manage to destroy the evidence this time around, there was no telling how long the investigation would continue. They were better off addressing the root of the problem.

“Better to attack than flee. What’s the highest authority in the kingdom before our forces?”

“I-I’m serious, you need to knock that off! Come on!”

Keigetsu stole a few fearful glances at Gyoumei, the son of that highest authority in the kingdom, but he didn’t appear particularly offended. He only shot his radical fiancée a wry smile.

“Well, speaking as the man’s own son, I must admit that I would rather settle things with a discussion than mount an assault. I believe Shu Keigetsu’s status as a Maiden ought to work to our advantage in the negotiations.”

“Good point.”

Reirin glanced back at Gyoumei with a nod and a smile. She knew full well how outrageous her proposal was, so she was glad that her fiancé had so readily agreed to give it a try.

“R-really? My status as a Maiden helps?”

“Yes. Were an influential vassal or even a male commoner to study the Daoist arts, it would be difficult to escape suspicions of treason, but a Maiden is meant to conceive children with His Highness.”

“C-conceive—?!” Keigetsu choked on her words, a very graphic image popping to mind.

Reirin responded with a quizzical tilt of her head. “In other words, the imperial family can bring that mighty, mystical power into their own bloodline.”

Gyoumei put a hand to his chin and nodded. “We can argue that far from inviting potential rebellion, it’s an opportunity to make Daoist magic ours. I wonder what sort of evidence we ought to prepare.”

The two natural-born nobles had the occasional habit of skipping over questions of romantic feelings and focusing solely on matters of blood or inheritance.

“First, we must take care to stress that we have no designs on the throne. All we have done is swap bodies. We have no intention of committing—”

“I hate to interrupt when you’re getting so into the conversation, but let me stop you there,” came a man’s lazy drawl. When everyone shut their mouths and turned to look, they found that the voice belonged to Akim, who was sitting cross-legged on the rocky bank. “The swapping bodies part is the actual problem.”

“Huh?”

The group struggled to grasp his meaning right away, the sight of which made the man spread his hands in disbelief.

“Come on, people. The man has the strongest Gen blood of anyone. Did you really think he’d be hunting sorcerers for a sensible reason like preserving his authority or preventing rebellion?”

This observation hadn’t occurred to Reirin before, and she felt her heart leap

in her chest. She had assumed that Genyou must be going after Keigetsu because, much like all the emperors before him, he was concerned about potential rebellion. But what if they had been overlooking a crucial piece of context all along?

“Hell, if anything, he probably wishes the whole kingdom would collapse.”

Genyou’s sons, Gyoumei and Shin-u, exchanged looks with a start. Something about all this hadn’t sat right with them. The Gen blood was beholden to nothing. Its descendants were apathetic, their hearts ordinarily like the still surface of a lake—except when those waters raged for the sole object of their obsession.

“He’d never make a rational judgment like, ‘Oh, if it could benefit my bloodline, I’d better stop the persecution.’ His motivations aren’t political. He’s driven by revenge, plain and simple. And revenge is more fervent, vicious, and nonsensical than any other reason there is.”

Emperor Genyou was mild-mannered and left most of his policies up to his vassals. He rarely involved himself with the inner court, and he had only managed to father two children. He didn’t care about authority, carnal pleasures, or wealth. Probably not even his subjects. There was but one thing he hoped to accomplish—and it didn’t matter how long it took him or how roundabout a method he had to take.

“Revenge for what?” Reirin asked in a hoarse whisper, clutching her hands to her racing heart.

Just as things had seemed headed toward a resolution, she got the foreboding sense that they had taken a strange turn. For some reason, that mournful requiem she had heard the night before played back in her ears.

The emperor was still an enigma. He never showed any emotion—nothing but a fathomless chill. And yet, his stoic bearing belied a lamentation that made the listener’s chest feel tight just to hear it, much like the song of his flute.

“Revenge for *whom*?” Reirin amended.

With a chuckle, Akim gazed at the river running past the bank. If he strained his ears, he could still hear the creak of ice on the other side of the forest. After a long period of stagnation, time had been set back into motion with a renewed momentum, at last flowing toward spring.

“Sure, I’ll talk. I do owe you for the show you just gave me.”

The entire group turned to stare at Akim. Swallowing hard, they eyed him with caution and a determination to protect one another. Those defiant gazes of theirs were so youthful, so foolhardy, and so very beautiful.

Here’s hoping his revenge will feel this full of youth.

Akim didn’t know all the details of how Genyou felt about his past. Still, from his perspective as one of the man’s closest spies, Genyou’s revenge was like a thick layer of ice formed over a river. It was rock-solid and long frozen in place, no longer able to flow without an extra push.

Who knows? Maybe these Maidens will become the black powder he needs.

It was delightful how it occurred to this girl to save people with an explosion. The same went for when she had blown up those iron pots in the woods or made a pot of congee boil over.

Something about this reckless Maiden gave people the hope that she could break through the status quo. And so, with the slightest bit of optimism hidden beneath his detached exterior, Akim answered thus:

“It’s revenge for his half brother—Gomei, the disinherited first prince.”

Bonus Story:

Breaking the Ice

IT WAS AKIM'S eighteenth spring when he and his family moved to Torrential Tan Gorge, located on the frontier of Ei's western Kin domain. Originally, they were nomads who roamed the outskirts of a country known as Tan. They raised livestock, pitched tents, and traveled in search of fresh pastures, migrating to cooler highlands in the summer and warmer lowlands in the winter. They made a living trading the dairy products, meat, and fur they derived from their animals.

Akim himself was a foundling who had been taken in and raised by the tribe reputed to be the most moral and upright of the many in the area. Rumor had it that he was even slated to become the next chieftain.

Unfortunately, a few months back, Akim's good-natured guardian had found himself ensnared in a conflict and stripped of all his livestock. The law of Tan dictated that the losing tribe in a conflict become the slaves of the victor. Akim had braced himself for a lifetime of humiliation, but much to his surprise, the chieftain of a different tribe—an old friend of Akim's adoptive father—had taken it upon himself to mediate and allowed the family to escape to the Kingdom of Ei's Torrential Tan Gorge.

Torrential Tan Gorge was a stretch of land that had been ceded from Tan to Ei's western domain as the result of a recent territorial dispute. Although Ei had taken a crack at cultivating the land, a lack of manpower was making it slow going. Thus, residents of Tan had been offered citizenship on the condition that they break the ground as its first set of pioneers.

Akim's people had already been deprived of the lifeline that was their livestock. Determining this offer preferable to becoming slaves and having their women ravished, Akim's father had disbanded his own tribe as the price for his escape to Ei.

Upon arriving at Torrential Tan Gorge, they had found that, although it was a rather inhospitably rugged and mountainous area, the several rivers running through the area made it an ideal place for farming. Ninety percent of their neighbors were Ei natives who didn't speak their language, but because those residents were a mishmash of pioneers from all over the kingdom, it was actually quite easy for immigrants like Akim and his family to blend in. With a newfound confidence that they could make this work, they grabbed hoes in lieu of reins and resolved to become farmers on this new land.

On the first day, they repaired the derelict house granted to them and moved their scant belongings and food rations inside.

On the second day, they checked out the land assigned to them for cultivating and went exploring in the mountains.

And on the third day, Akim started a brawl with several of the men from the settlement.

“Un-be-lievable, Akim! How could you get into a fight within three days of moving?!” a woman yelled in the language of Tan, so mad that her words came out in staccato. She glared down at Akim, whose head was resting in her lap.

The woman's name was Fatma. A year Akim's elder, she had flaxen hair and dark-brown eyes. She was the daughter of the former chieftain—Akim's adoptive father—and thus Akim's foster sister. That said, her strong-willed and obliging nature made her feel like a big sister to just about everyone she knew, so the entire tribe had taken to fondly calling her “uka,” their word for an older sister.

Currently, she was in the midst of wiping Akim's mud-spattered cheeks with a cloth and looking him over for injuries.

“Come, let me have a proper look inside your mouth. Were any of your teeth broken? Did you get any cuts on your cheeks?”

“You must think awfully little of me if you’re worried I’d take even a single punch from one of those light-skinned flatlanders,” Akim responded from atop her lap. “I knocked every last one of them down. Gotta establish the pecking order right out of the gate, or they might get ideas about messing with the rest of you.”

“Oh, stop that. We’ll find ourselves ‘ah-struh-sized’ starting tomorrow.” Fatma groaned. “We’re not nomads anymore, remember? We can’t just pack up and leave as soon as we run into trouble, and we have to learn to get along with people outside our tribe. This is the Kingdom of Ei, and we’re the strangers on this land. Got that, badu?”

Fatma affectionately referred to Akim as “badu,” the word for little brother. Ever since the day she found him abandoned in the shade of a tree, she had thought of him as a high-maintenance younger sibling.

As Akim savored the feeling of Fatma’s fingers against his skin, he cracked one eye open and grinned in amusement. *“There’s a lot of things wrong with what you just said, uka. For a start, I’m not your ‘badu’ anymore. We’re married. That’s ‘er’ to you.”*

Although Akim thought of Fatma much like an older sister, she had become his wife a month ago. The chieftain had arranged their marriage out of a desire to set Akim up as his successor, but the couple also had genuine feelings for each other. The cheer that permeated Fatma’s voice even when she was angry and the scent of sunshine she carried always put Akim’s heart at ease.

Scooping up a lock of flaxen hair that had spilled into his face, Akim went on, *“An er’s job is to lord it over others to protect his women and his livestock, and throwing a punch to establish dominance is the easiest way to ‘get along’ with most people.”*

“Excuses, excuses! By your logic, I shouldn’t be ‘uka’ either! I’m your aya! Your wife!”

The hotheaded Fatma heaved an exasperated sigh, but she showed her

affection in how she pinched Akim's nose and twisted it this way and that. She was the only one who had ever been allowed to cut a sourpuss like Akim down to size.

"Though, honestly, it works in our favor if you keep the men of Torrential Tan Gorge in check." Fatma softened her tone and bumped her own forehead against Akim's, still cradled in her lap. She chose her next words carefully. *"My parents were getting worried about how to keep their distance from those people. They're a bit, well...rough around the edges, aren't they?"*

Akim shrugged. *"Not 'a bit.' A lot. That's why I had to prove that we're better than them—and show them why they'd better not mess with us."*

As far as he was concerned, it was clear at a glance that Torrential Tan Gorge was a bad neighborhood. Despite the language barrier, the locals' tone of voice came across as rough, and there were more than a few hot-blooded types and tattooed men among their ranks. Because the residents were a mishmash of pioneers, there was no hierarchy and no real rules. Everyone just set up their huts along the lower reaches of the river and tilled their own fields without a semblance of coordination.

Getting taken for easy pickings in a land with no law or order would spell the end for them. It was this logic that had driven Akim to beat up the men who leered at Fatma and establish the pecking order.

"Fair point. This village hasn't been around for long, so you're right that it doesn't have much structure yet. But on the whole, isn't Ei a wonderful nation where everyone obeys the laws laid down by the emperor?" Fatma detested talking about people behind their back, so she pulled herself together with a smile. *"They welcomed immigrants like us with open arms, rationed out enough food for us to get by in the short term, and even gave us a dilapidated hut to work with. As long as we pay our taxes, we can receive an education, jobs, and aid in times of disaster. It's almost a paradise."*

She listed off all the differences from when they were self-sufficient nomads,

then said a prayer of thanks to God.

“We ought to be thanking Father’s friend for letting us escape to this land. Friendship always comes through when it counts.”

“Maybe so,” Akim replied with a noncommittal nod as he sat up from his wife’s lap.

Ever since his parents abandoned him as a child, Akim had become a much less trusting person. As far as he was concerned, there was no such thing as pure goodwill. The reason the other chieftain had stopped him and his adoptive father from becoming slaves had nothing to do with friendship; he simply hadn’t wanted the victorious tribe to expand its forces any further. Still, Akim thought it would be tactless to confront Fatma with the facts, so he always settled for shooting back a curt nod whenever the topic came up.

“What kind of half-hearted response is that? We have to repay the chieftain by doing well for ourselves here!”

“Eh, no need to work yourself up,” Akim let slip as his wife clenched her fists to psych herself up. *“If life here doesn’t suit us, we can always sneak back to Tan and start a new tribe from scratch. I spent a long time handling trade for us. I can manage it a second time around if I need to.”*

Fatma and her parents were always going on about how they had to adapt to their new environment, but Akim didn’t see any reason to impose limitations on his own life. If they didn’t like being farmers, they could stop any time they wanted. If life in Torrential Tan Gorge didn’t suit them, they could leave whenever they saw fit. The only thing to his name that he could never stand to lose was his family of four: him, Fatma, and their parents. Everything else could be discarded or disappear for all he cared.

Akim’s attitude didn’t sit well with Fatma, and she twisted her lips into an unhappy pout. For a change of subject, she pointed to a bundle of spices hung up on the wall. *“I do still think you went too far, so I’m thinking of sharing some of our spices with the men you beat up. Tomorrow, maybe. That ought to keep*

them from holding a grudge.”

“Dhal. Don’t bother pandering to those assholes. They’ll just take advantage.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? We don’t know the first thing about farming. We need to find someone to give us guidance.”

“Dhal. Farming can’t be—”

After Akim shook his head at his worrywart wife one too many times, she pressed a slender finger to his lips. *“I don’t like your habit of saying that. The more time you spend being cynical, the more good fortune escapes you.”* Fatma narrowed her earth-colored eyes in a huff. She was the perfect picture of an older sister lecturing her sibling. *“Listen here, Akim. You lack the open mind to accept life as it comes. We decided that we’re going to live here. Instead of giving up or calling things stupid at every opportunity, you need to settle down and find something fun to do. Let’s look on the bright side!”*

Fatma and her father were always saying things like that. Since they were part of a tribe that moved from one place to the next, one might assume they wouldn’t care about their relationships with the people around them, but that was the very reason they believed in treasuring even the most trivial of connections.

“For instance...when you’re living in one place, if you make a friend in the neighborhood, you get to see them all year long. That sounds like a lot of fun to me.”

“Wouldn’t you get sick of seeing their face every day? And you’d run out of things to talk about too.”

“All the more reason to make a big deal out of the little things. I bet the people here share drinks just because it’s sunny out or whoop for joy just because it’s a warm day. Or they do in my imagination, at least.”

“They must have a lot of time on their hands.”

Akim thought it sounded stupid. The way he saw it, that kind of optimism just

got the rug pulled out from under people. Yet when he saw the joyful sparkle in her dark-brown eyes and the beaming smile on her lips, he lost the will to argue. And he thought to himself, *Well, it'd be nice if that kind of world could exist just for them.*

"Plus, the wives get to spend their whole day chitchatting. While you're working in the fields, I'll be weaving textiles—and having fun bad-mouthing my husband on the side. I'll make myself some lifelong friends, and we'll get together every single day."

"Sounds like a blast."

"You're not very convincing! Oh, that reminds me, we have to start work on renovating the house. Right now it's all mud bricks and wooden boards, but I'd like to live in a stone house one of these days. I want us to have a place that's spacious and sturdy. The perfect forever home."

To people who had once uprooted their lives with the seasons, the words "forever home" carried a strange and unfamiliar ring.

Fatma gently wrapped her arms around Akim's neck and whispered into his ear, *"That way, no matter how many children we have, we'll never have to worry about them destroying the house."*

"I like the sound of that." A cheek that smelled of sunshine nuzzled against his own. *"Now that's how to get me motivated, aya."*

It hadn't been long since Akim dragged himself upright, yet he wrapped his hand around the back of Fatma's head and dropped onto the bed once more. As he planted a kiss upon her wrist, the ruby bracelet he had given to her just last month sparkled in the light.

He was in a house bathed in warm rays of sunlight with a woman who smelled of sunshine. The pot his wife had just put on rattled atop the stove.

In a sense, it certainly could be called a paradise.

Nearly three months had passed since the move to Torrential Tan Gorge. A summery heat was slowly but surely seeping into the chilly air, and it had become easy to work up a light sweat after devoting a whole day to farmwork.

The field Akim had been allotted was right near a river, which made watering the crops an easy task. Unfortunately, his adoptive parents had hurt their lower backs within three months of their foray into hoeing, so he had advised them to rest back at their hut. Fatma was likewise at home, weaving with the hemp they had recently harvested, which meant he had to handle an entire day's worth of farmwork by himself.

Deep down, Akim would have preferred to quit the whole farming business, but the rations his family had received back at the beginning were starting to run out. If he wanted to put food on the table, he had no choice but to keep on swinging his hoe.

As it was nearing the end of the spring wheat harvest, tax collectors from the Kin domain would drop by every now and then. From the sound of it, the well-dressed men were the sons of noblemen who held fairly high positions within the domain. They would haughtily inspect the wheat Akim's family of amateur farmers had grown, then shove the bundles into their wagons with looks of dissatisfaction. After that, they would take a closer look around Torrential Tan Gorge, scoop up dirt, observe the farmers in their fields, and discuss something among themselves.

Akim put his hoeing on pause to listen in on their conversation. Although he had no intention of getting buddy-buddy with the people around him, no matter the time or place, more information was always a good thing to have.

The soil here is "in-ah-duh-quit"? As is the "kah-luh-bur" of the "in-ha-buh-tints"? No "fai-nan-shul val-yoo"?

If he wore his wide cloth headband to play up his foreign roots and shot the tax collectors the blank kind of stare that screamed, *Me no speak Ei*, they would relax their guards and spill all sorts of secrets in front of him. Over the past

three months, Akim had picked up a decent bit of Ei's language by listening to the conversations between the locals—though a majority of the words he knew were lowbrow or vulgar, and he couldn't make out most of the complicated vocabulary the nobility used. Nonetheless, Akim leveraged his excellent memory to file away the pronunciation of each word.

I don't love the sound of that.

A glance at the sky showed dark clouds threatening to rain down at any moment. The locals tilling their fields up and down the riverbank looked ready to throw in the towel, the tax collectors wore looks of disgust, and the humidity in the air clung to the skin—everywhere you looked, there was something unpleasant to be found.

Eventually, the tax collectors decided to take their leave. After casting a glance at Akim and the others standing in their respective fields, hideous grins rose to their faces. They held the same mixture of revulsion and pleasure with which someone might watch an insect drown.

What's that look for?

Just as Akim was starting to grow wary, a man rushed out in front of the tax collectors with a shout of "Hey!" It was one of the men Akim had beat up upon first arriving at the settlement. Of all the residents who had relocated from within Ei, he was one of the ones who had been around the longest, as well as the most arrogant and violent of their ranks. If Akim's memory served, his name was Yuu.

Over the past half month, Akim hadn't spotted any of the man's hangers-on in the fields, so he'd assumed they had all left the settlement. Apparently not.

Yuu grabbed the tax collectors by the arm and made some sort of desperate appeal, spittle flying everywhere.

"At wuhns," "with-een the day," "hur-ee"... Damn, it's too hard to make out.

The man shouted at the top of his lungs, sometimes pointing to the skies,

other times indicating the wheat in the wagons. He spoke so fast and gruffly that Akim couldn't understand most of what he was saying. Perhaps because he came on too strong, or perhaps due to his grimy appearance, the tax collectors batted his hand away in disgust and screamed something back.

“Bla-stud,” “peh-zunt,” “know your stay-shun”?

Akim had no idea what they were talking about. Whatever the case, the negotiations appeared to have broken down. The tax collectors cut the conversation short and retreated to their carriage.

With a curse, Yuu kicked up a spray of dirt before emphatically turning on his heel toward his own dilapidated hut near the fields. After grabbing the sort of belongings he would need for a long trip—his rolled-up bed, hand-me-downs, a dagger, some long-lasting food, and a hemp raincoat—he stormed off into the forest. Said forest was in the opposite direction of the huts scattered downriver, and it led into the mountains.

What is he doing?

Akim couldn't begin to guess why the man had abruptly gone mountain climbing with such a huge load of luggage. Finding this behavior bizarre, he decided to follow Yuu. He tossed his hoe aside and left his field behind.

When Yuu made his way onto an animal trail too overrun to be called a proper path and began to climb the mountain in earnest, Akim followed suit. “Wait, Yuu!”

It was clearly about to start raining, but Akim knew from experience that whenever he got a bad feeling about something, it was best to listen to his instincts.

“Stop!” He had already become proficient enough in Ei's language to manage basic conversation, albeit in broken speech. “Rain fall soon. Danger in mountains. Where you go?”

Yuu didn't slow down even when spoken to. He just continued his steady

march toward the top of the mountain.

Akim was dying to know why he insisted on going for a hike despite the incoming rain. Had he discovered a particularly high-quality quarry, perhaps? But that wouldn't explain why he kept heading to higher ground and distancing himself from the river rather than setting out for the upper basin. It was faster to hunt animals near the water. Or was he simply planning to pack up and leave the settlement? But then why would he trek deeper into the uninhabited mountains instead of heading down to the base, which led back to the Kin domain?

It was right after his argument with the tax collectors that Yuu had sprung into action, so perhaps the two things were related. In that case, Akim wanted to know exactly what those officials had said. Their grins had been vulgar and foreboding enough to fill his mind with questions.

“Hey! Rain get stronger. Not safe!”

Despite Akim's persistent attempts to call out to him, Yuu only quickened his pace with a click of his tongue. The rain beat down harder and harder, until it broke through the protective canopy and began to wet the ground under their feet. That natural umbrella had initially kept the rain to a trickle that only soaked their shoes, but by the time the two of them had reached the highest point of the mountain, it was coming down by the bucketload.

I didn't know this area saw so much rain during this season.

Akim marveled at how fickle mountain weather could be. Collecting some of this rainwater could spare him the trouble of making trips to the well. Benefits aside, getting caught in a downpour on a steep slope was a bit nerve-racking, given the risk of landslides and falling rocks. He had to hurry home soon, or Fatma might start to worry.

“Hey! Why climb mountain now?”

“Can it!” the man snapped back, raking a hand through his hair in frustration. “Keep your awful attempts at speaking our language to yourself!”

“Right. Awful at speaking, so you tell me. What those men say?” Akim kept on asking, unperturbed. It didn’t make a lick of a difference to him how much this man despised or insulted him. “Tell me, or I hit you.”

The next thing Yuu said with those dark, sunken eyes put a crease in Akim’s brow.

“That settlement’s about to get washed away.”

“Huh?”

It took him a moment to register what “washed away” meant in this context.

A moment later, however, as if the Heavens themselves had deigned to offer Akim an explanation, the events were set into motion.

FWOOM!

An earthshaking roar tore through the forest behind them.

“Wha—?!”

“It’s already begun.”

With another click of his tongue, Yuu cast a baleful glance over his shoulder. Past the woods was a cliff, and a river ran below it. The river wasn’t a particularly vast one. The waters were supposed to be tranquil, and it certainly shouldn’t have made such a ghastly roar. Spurred onward by a foreboding premonition nonetheless, Akim made his way out of the forest and leaned out over the cliff. The sight that greeted him was a swirling eddy of turbid waters. The water levels had risen unusually high, and even the width of the river had expanded.

“What?!”

While Akim stood there in a daze, Yuu caught up with him and peered down from atop the cliff. “Damn! It came with a hell of a magnitude this year. All our fields and houses are goners.”

It came with a hell of a magnitude. Their fields and houses were goners. There

were some words Akim didn't know mixed in, but he could more or less infer what that meant. The area this river flowed toward—its lower reaches—was home to the fields they had just been tilling and the huts they lived in.

“What’s going on?!” Before Akim realized what he was doing, he had slipped back into his mother tongue and grabbed Yuu by the collar. *“Did the river overflow?!”*

He gave the other man a firm shake but quickly let go. This was no time to be yelling at a neighbor. He had to get back to the foot of the mountain.

Without a care for how drenched he became, Akim sprinted down the path from whence he came, splashing mud everywhere in his wake.

“Fatma!”

Today she had said that she would stay at home and weave instead of working in the fields. She was safe inside their hut. Surely she would be all right.

And yet, a moment later, another voice inside him howled, *Didn’t you see how wide that river was?! How those muddy waters roared and raged?!* If it was that bad around the middle reaches, the river must have been even wider downstream—more than enough so to swallow their modest hut whole. He rushed toward the bottom of the mountain, slipping down the slopes again and again, heart pounding in his ears.

And lo, the other, fatalistic voice inside him turned out to be correct. When Akim made it out of the forest and back to the bottom of the settlement, he found that all the fields and huts had been swept away without a trace.

Where a community once had been was nothing but an expanse of turbid waters. All Akim could do was stand on a rocky tract that sat far and high above the riverbank and look out over a district transformed into a giant river.

“This can’t be happening...”

The river continued to surge forward with a loud roar. Each time the current crashed against the rocks—or perhaps the huts at the river bottom—it made

waves almost like an ocean.

A pillar from who-knew-where floated along and crashed into the rocky tract with a dull thud. All manner of items—farming tools, chunks of roofs, clothes—rocked back and forth among the waves, only to be carried away once more.

The rainy sky was dark, and the muddy waters of the river were opaque. For a while, Akim stood there in silence, speechless before this hellscape painted with a dull palette.

“Fatma... Dad! Mom!”

When Akim eventually snapped to his senses, he waded into the turbid waters with a splash. But where was he supposed to go?

“Fatma!”

It didn’t make any sense. Just a few hours ago, the river had been so tranquil. What had caused it to swell to such monstrous proportions?

“Uka Fatma!”

His gut-wrenching cry disappeared into the bestial roar of the current.

The search for Fatma and her parents proved difficult.

Once the rain stopped, the water receded within about two days. Unfortunately, with the former settlement trashed, mud and building materials had piled up everywhere, blocking the bottom of the river from view. Over time, the livestock, fish, and human corpses floating along the current began to emit a foul stench. As the weather gradually warmed, the river grew muddier and muddier, making even the task of securing drinking water difficult.

Asking someone else for help wasn’t an option either, as all the new settlers had been swept away, huts and all, just like Fatma. On the other hand, the longtime residents aware of the risk of flooding—like Yuu—had already dispersed to higher ground, thinking only of themselves. The reason Akim hadn’t seen any of them around recently was because they knew the river had a

high probability of overflowing at this time of year, so they had moved their huts deeper into the mountains.

His only option was to fight a one-man battle. The more time passed, the more Akim's mind flitted back and forth between images of the drowned corpses he'd seen and the smiling faces of Fatma and their parents.

Then, one late afternoon, he spotted two figures standing among the quiet ruins of the settlement.

"Ugh, it reeks."

"Let's get this over with and head home."

It was the same tax collectors who had come for an inspection a few days ago.

As the men walked along, kicking up mud puddles with scowls on their faces, Akim glanced up with a start. He suddenly recalled that in the absence of tribal unity, the Kingdom of Ei had a government that looked after its citizens. In exchange for paying taxes, its people were provided protection. These officials must have rushed to the scene as soon as they heard news of the flood.

"Please help!" Completely forgetting he had once looked down on them as wimpy flatlanders, Akim clung to the men in desperation. "I can't find my wife and family. Help me look!"

Despite his distaste for Ei's language, he spoke in words they would understand. He didn't care how pathetic or obsequious it made him look. For the first time in his life, Akim was glad to see these pompous-looking noblemen. All that mattered to him right then was that they devoted a few dozen men—no, even just ten would be plenty—to the search efforts.

"Hurry—"

"Hands off, you vile foreigner."

Akim's eyes went wide as the men pushed him into a mud puddle. He couldn't quite make out what they had said, but at the very least, it certainly wasn't the reaction of people who had rushed to his rescue.

“This foul stench is burning my nose. Hurry up and put up the official notice so we can get out of here.”

“What a waste of our time. It’s not as though anyone here can even read. Where exactly in this quagmire am I supposed to drive a stake?”

“The lord of our domain is a stickler for formalities, so we simply have to accept it as part of the job. No need to bother with the post. Just lay out the notice over there somewhere. If anyone asks, the stand was washed away in the rain.”

Shrugging and grinning, the men tossed a sheet of paper into the mud. The page was filled with neat rows of letters, its edges were gilded, and it was even stamped with a seal.

When the men turned to go, Akim reached out to grab them by the arm. *“Hey, what is that?! What are you doing? Didn’t you come to aid us?!”*

The officials grimaced in disgust and shook him off. They rubbed fastidiously at the mud spots he had left on their sleeves, spittle flying as they shouted something back.

“Don’t touch us, you filthy wretch! Your land was deemed unworthy of saving!”

“What are you saying?! What’s written on that paper?!”

“Ugh, what a foul-smelling man. This place is nothing but a dumping ground for immigrants and criminals. The very sight of it sickens me.”

The two sides of the conversation were completely talking past each other. Eventually, one of the tax collectors grew frustrated enough to kick up a puddle of mud.

“Die the dog’s death you deserve, worthless scum!”

That mud was contaminated with rotting corpses. When Akim wrenched away to keep it from getting in his eyes and mouth, the men took their chance to abscond, lamenting how they had gotten filth on their shoes.

“Aww, I was hoping the mud would’ve dried by now. Damn, does it reek down here,” a voice abruptly came from behind.

The one to show up holding his nose with a scowl was Yuu, who had taken refuge in the mountains for the past few days.

“I see they put up another token official notice. Pretty damn shameless of ‘em after brushing off all our desperate appeals. And once all the excitement dies down, they’ll come right back to demand their taxes. Real assholes, huh?”

Undeterred by Akim’s lack of response, Yuu picked up the sheet of paper with a click of his tongue.

“‘To aid the defiled is to rebel against the divine. We must abide by the will of the Heavens and cleanse the filth.’ Well, there you have it.”

Evidently, he knew how to read.

Still staring down at a mud puddle, his back turned to Yuu, Akim demanded, “Explain.”

“Hrm? Well, to sum it up: ‘This land is a den of dirty criminals and immigrants we can barely even tax. His oh-so-benevolent Majesty says that helping them would go against the will of the Heavens, so the Kin clan is leaving this place to rot,’” Yuu blurted out, pressured by the intensity in Akim’s voice. After a moment, he realized that wasn’t likely to get through, so he rephrased it in simpler terms. “This place is a dump, so the emperor said to leave it alone.”

He shook the mud from the sopping wet notice, then tossed it over to Akim.

“Oh. Got it.”

The paper hit Akim square in the chest, dirtied his garment, and slid back down to the earth. Without thinking, he picked it up and clutched it tight in his hands.

Unworthy of saving. A dumping ground. Cleanse. The emperor. Leave it alone.

He didn’t know what all of those words meant, but there was one thing he did know. The emperor and those so-called noblemen thought of him and his family

as nothing but “scum,” and all it took was one single official notice—nothing but the word of that man called the emperor—to make it fair game to “cleanse” them.

“Got it.”

Akim didn’t take his eyes off the mud puddle near his feet. It was the same one the tax collectors had kicked up earlier, revealing its slimy depths.

Sprawled limply over the ground, among the rotting carcasses of fish and textiles so dirty it was possible to tell what color they had been, was the arm of a woman wearing a ruby bracelet.

Akim stayed at Torrential Tan Gorge for the next month after that. He recovered the bodies of Fatma and her parents, washed them clean, and fit them into a coffin like babies nestled in a womb. He then dragged the coffin deep into the mountains and buried it on high ground.

“I’m sure you’ve had your fill of living near a river, right?”

He settled down by the spot where he had buried the coffin for days on end. No matter if it rained or if night fell, he sat around without even bothering to eat.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of anymore, uka.”

Beneath the moonlight, he stroked the bump of dirt. Whenever Akim stroked her neck or back, Fatma had always giggled and wriggled under his touch. But now, the moist soil returned the gesture with nothing but silence.

“Wait, I got that wrong. I should have said ‘aya.’”

That’s strange, Akim thought in a daze. Fatma was his aya, not his uka. Whenever he called her by the wrong name, she was supposed to correct him in that cheerful voice of hers.

Right. She had been Akim’s wife. Yet he had let her die.

He hadn't managed to predict the flood. He had failed to realize that those tax collectors would leave people to die over a single official notice.

"I got a lot of things wrong."

A dark glint dwelled in the depths of his sunken eyes. From his high vantage point, he gazed down at the pitch-black foot of the mountain—and looked past it to Ei's Kin domain, illuminated by a multitude of lights.

He had been wrong. And there was no one left to set him straight. That meant he had to fix his mistakes for himself.

On that night, exactly a month after Fatma and her parents had passed, Akim left Torrential Tan Gorge behind.

After coming down from Torrential Tan Gorge, Akim made his way to the capital of the Kin domain, where he signed up to become the slave of a wealthy farmer. He mastered the language of Ei in the blink of an eye and leveraged his natural ingenuity to establish himself as his master's favorite. Little by little, he expanded the scope of his activities and gathered information.

During this time, he gained a deeper understanding of what this kingdom—and particularly those in it classified as the nobility—was like. He also learned exactly what kind of place Torrential Tan Gorge was.

To put it simply, the Kin domain regarded it as a dumping ground for its undesirables. As a way of keeping obtrusive criminals and disaster victims out of the capital, the Kins lured them to the frontier with a promise of free land grants. They even accepted immigrants with open arms.

In their view, it was better to indulge the troublemakers by driving them off to a worthless land than let them run riot in the heart of the domain. Since those people were still technically citizens, they could be taxed. The domain's leadership would first secure the land as their territory, and if the agricultural efforts went surprisingly well or a specialty product emerged—that is, if the

value of the land appreciated—they could impose heavier taxes and start developing the area in earnest. If it turned out to be a barren land through and through, they could leave the recurring floods to handle the cleanup. Rivers frozen by the winter cold would melt just before the summer and rush forth in a single blast, washing away the settlements downstream.

It was an easy way to get rid of their unwanted subjects and keep hold of the land. Aid wasn't even on the table. All they had to do was wait around for the Heavens to turn the place into a vacant lot.

Upon further investigation, Akim discovered that there were several such districts scattered around the outskirts of the Kin and Gen domains, which both shared a border with other countries.

Akim was sickened by how cheaply the nobility regarded the lives of their fellow humans. They killed their own subjects as casually as one might gather up a pile of dust and toss it aside. If anyone deserved to be trampled as easily and nonchalantly as ants underfoot, it was them.

The hatred he held in his heart deepened with each passing day, while on the outside, he quickly assimilated the culture and language of Ei and perfected his “friendly young man” act. He would eat their tasteless food with a pretense of relish and guzzle their weak booze like it was the nectar of the Heavens. He would clap his colleagues on the shoulder with a hearty laugh, then go back to his room, stare off into space, and wait for the night to end. Every now and then, he might unfurl the notice he always carried on his person over a desk, tracing its mud stains with his fingertips.

After about six months of the same drudgery day in and day out, an opportunity finally presented itself. The tax collectors came to visit the wealthy farmer under the pretense of an inspection. This was exactly what Akim had been hoping to happen ever since he first set foot in his master's house.

Akim slipped into the banquet his master held for the tax collectors, where his first move was to get the men dead drunk on alcohol. He then carried them to a

guest room, acting the perfect part of a capable servant. Needless to say, the drunken tax collectors didn't recognize his face.

Once out of sight, Akim restrained the men and waited for them to sober up before getting down to business. For one man's crime of discarding a notice on the ground and leaving an entire settlement to die, Akim gave him the same drowning fate as the residents. For the other man's crime of insulting him and kicking Fatma's corpse, Akim smashed his kneecaps and decapitated him like a common criminal.

During the murder, the men had gone pale and begged for their lives as soon as Akim mentioned Torrential Tan Gorge. "Pl-please spare us! We were only following orders! It was the will of His Majesty that we turn our backs on the settlement! The will of the Heavens!"

They offered plenty of excuses and apologized in tears, but none of that did anything to lift Akim's mood. The filthy tears and regrets of these vile men could never hope to make up for Fatma's death. He assumed that he would at least feel a weight off his shoulders after killing the tax collectors, but that wasn't the case either. Two feeble fools had died, and nothing more.

As he stared down at the unsightly corpses strewn over the floor, Akim pondered why he felt this way. He still didn't believe he had been wrong to take revenge. If Fatma were around, she might offer a platitude like, "Nothing good ever comes of vengeance," but refusing to strike back wasn't an option as far as Akim was concerned. In that case, there was only one possible explanation for why killing the tax collectors made him feel nothing: His retribution had been insufficient. His prey had been too scrawny.

The men themselves had said that the order to forsake the disaster site had come from the emperor. Akim's revenge wouldn't be complete until he taught the man at the top just how ill-considered his actions had been.

He couldn't rest on his laurels after getting back at these small fry. He had to bring the root of the problem to justice. That meant going after the Kin lord—or

perhaps even the emperor who had given him the order. The ultimate power in the kingdom.

“Isn’t Ei a wonderful nation where everyone obeys the laws laid down by the emperor?”

As he recalled what Fatma had once said, determined to blend into her new home, Akim settled on his next objective. He would subject the emperor to the disgrace known as death.

The same night he killed the tax collectors, Akim disappeared without a word to his wealthy master and headed for the imperial capital. He used his savings to spruce himself up, and this time around, he earned his keep as a servant in a large trading house. Being versatile, a quick thinker, and physically fit, Akim quickly grew on the master of the trading house, who gave him permission to spell his name with the characters for “Anki.”

At this point, a year had passed since Fatma’s death. Akim spent yet another year working as a merchant and steadily building up contacts within the imperial palace.

For a start, he gained access to the palace’s delivery area in his capacity as his master’s porter. With his knack for conversation and generous bribes, he gradually extended his reach all the way to the inner court. In the process, he expanded his knowledge of the eunuchs and menial workers. He learned how many of them there were, where they slept, what time they passed through which streets, and what jobs they did.

Once Akim had a feel for things, he went so far as to counterfeit their uniforms and accessories and disguise himself among them. With the number of personnel it took to support such a vast empire, no one could remember the faces of every single worker. And the expansive inner court housed slaves and menial workers gathered from a number of regions, so it was easy enough for a man with foreign features to blend in.

The emperor was perpetually surrounded by an elite group of military officers. Still, it was unlikely anyone would notice or care if the eunuch who dusted the rooms or the menial worker who changed the water in his flower vases was someone different from usual.

Akim did not fear death, and it made him bold. He did so well at acting the part of a regular, long-serving eunuch that a newbie even asked him for advice on how to do his job. It was hard not to laugh over that one.

At the time, the emperor was in his fifties. After the recent string of suspicious deaths among his sons, he had grown paranoid enough that not even his empress was allowed anywhere near his bedchambers at night. That meant the only option was to kill him in broad daylight.

On that day, two years after his family's deaths, Akim showed up with a washbasin and towel in hand just as dawn had begun to break. The task of wiping down the emperor's sacred body was entrusted to his personal attendant—but it was a menial worker's job to bring that attendant a tub full of water.

Akim's first move was to call the attendant into the waiting room and knock him out right as he handed over the tub. Then, after quickly changing robes and posing as said attendant, he leisurely approached the bed where the emperor lay.

This was the bedchamber of the all-powerful emperor who ruled over tens of thousands of people. Yet as soon as Akim made up his mind and accepted the risks, getting inside had proved a truly simple task.

"If you would allow me to speak, Your Imperial Majesty, the sunrise is upon us."

I'd better wake him up for this, thought Akim. He wanted this man to know that he was about to be killed—and why.

"I have brought water to wash your hands and face."

What kind of face did the man with all the wealth and people of the continent at his disposal wear in his sleep? Would he look peaceful? Or perhaps euphoric? A good start would be to rouse him from his blissful slumber and knock him down into the depths of hell.

But alas.

“Your Majes—”

The moment Akim glimpsed the face of the man lying on the bed, he clamped his mouth shut. The emperor ought to have been wrapped in the embrace of the most comfortable slumber imaginable, but instead he had gone stiff as a board, his eyes saucer-wide with anguish.

“The hell?”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but this man is already dead,” came a voice from somewhere within the bedchamber.

Brandishing his concealed dagger, Akim sliced his way through the curtains hanging around the bed. Tearing away the cloth revealed a refined, unarmed man sitting in a chair and flipping through a book. Akim frowned.

“I’ve no clue who sent you, but you were a step too late. He succumbed to poison the empress planted not too long ago. I checked his vitals myself, so I’m quite certain.”

His jet-black hair was reminiscent of the darkness, and his eyes were the same color to match. His emotionless, shapely features were as chilly as a winter lake, lending him an unapproachable aura.

After casting the dagger-wielding Akim a brief glance, the young man immediately shifted his gaze back to the book in his hands. “I suppose I could have you arrested as the culprit, but that would disrupt my plans. I might as well give you a pass. Now get out of here.”

The man spoke slowly enough, but it was still difficult to process what he was saying. Akim’s best guess was that this young man was either an assassin or

another avenger plotting the emperor's death.

"Who are you? An assassin sent by the empress?"

"Far from it." The young man pulled the grimace of someone who had just heard a terrible joke. Then he slipped a bookmark between the pages and offered an unexpected reply. "I'm that man's son."

"Come again?"

That would make him the son of the emperor. A prince.

"What is a prince doing in the emperor's bedroom?" Akim mused aloud. Meanwhile, his mind scanned through the imperial family tree.

Lately, the emperor's children had been dying of mysterious causes. Of the ten princes, nearly all of them had died of "accidents" or "illness," and the one to rise to prominence amid the tragedies was the youngest prince no one had ever paid any heed, Genyou.

"Would that make you Ei Genyou?"

Akim quickly devised a hypothesis. The Gen empress had been desperate to set up the youngest of the bunch as the crown prince. Word had it that in order to catapult her son through the ranks, she had demonstrated her acumen by murdering her way through the other clans' princes. Yet even after disinheriting the first prince, whom the emperor had initially named his successor, he was still dragging his feet about naming his youngest as the new crown prince. That must have made her impatient enough to do the deed.

No doubt the empress had pulled the strings, and her son, Genyou, had come to make sure the poison did its work.

"You'd leave your own father to die for a shot at the throne? Whew, royalty really is made of different stuff."

Genyou snorted. "Don't be absurd. I have absolutely no interest in any throne this man occupied."

Dagger held at the ready, Akim slowly circled around the bed. Genyou

remained seated, not a crack in his composure.

“He died as a result of his own foolishness. He sowed too many seeds of conflict and fell for baseless slander. His actions have simply caught up with him.”

“Huh, nice story.”

Genyou’s speech was so abstract that all Akim could glean was that the prince had a grudge against his father. But there was something else he understood with perfect clarity.

This man had beaten Akim to the punch and ruined his revenge.

“I’m afraid you’ve made a huge mess of my plans.”

Akim grabbed the seated prince by the collar and held his dagger to his throat.

Drip...

As rubies of blood formed on the patrician skin of Genyou’s neck, he narrowed his eyes in mockery. “I just said that I would give you a pass. Only an imbecile would point his blade at the next emperor.”

“I’m doing it *because* you’re the next emperor.” Akim playfully raised an eyebrow. “I came here to teach that fellow not to kill his subjects like throwing away food that doesn’t agree with him. I spent two whole years on this plan, so imagine my surprise to find him gone and dead! I figure I might as well pass the message along to his successor.”

“Oho.”

It was then that Akim felt a chill against his own neck.

“Well, I certainly hope you live to see that wish granted.”

In the blink of an eye, Genyou had removed his bookmark from between the pages and pressed it to his would-be assassin’s neck. That so-called bookmark turned out to be an incredibly thin, naked blade, and sliding it even the slightest

bit to the side would cut through Akim's artery like paper.

Both parties stared at one another in silence. The stillness was much like when two swords clashed with such force that they wedged against each other and ceased to so much as budge.

Genyou was the first to break the silence. "I heard you speaking a foreign language earlier. And your features look familiar. I assume you hail from the Tan Region. 'Killing his subjects like throwing away food that doesn't agree with him,' you said? Shall I take that to mean you were the victim of a cleansing?"

"A what?"

"It's a policy of gathering problematic refugees and criminals in the frontiers and letting natural disasters cull the herd."

His response was so blunt and inhumane that Akim's mouth twisted into an ironic grin. "Wow! You people call mass murder a 'cleansing'? That's quite the sense for names you've got."



“About a year and a half ago, there was a buzz over someone butchering two tax collectors from the Kin domain. Was that your doing as well?”

“You got me. I wasn’t wild about how they left innocent citizens to die over an official notice. Some glorified piece of paper,” Akim replied nonchalantly. “But I realized after the fact that I’ve got to punish the source of the evil, not just the grunts.”

The young man sitting before Akim looked him straight in the eye. He was clearly more skilled than he appeared. He moved without making a sound and wielded his weapon without even stirring up a breeze. If Akim didn’t end the chitchat there and kill the man soon, his own life could be in jeopardy. His best move was to continue feigning a deadlock while waiting for the right moment to thrust his blade into the prince’s throat.

Just as Akim discreetly put more force into his grip, Genyou asked him an unexpected question: “About that notice you mentioned. How many claws did the dragon on its seal have?”

“Come again?”

Genyou sounded almost like he was asking just for the sake of it. Apparently concluding there was no further point in threatening Akim, he removed his blade from his assailant’s neck and stuck it back into his book. A faint smile played at his well-proportioned lips.

“The emperor could have refugees and criminals executed whenever he sees fit. Why would he bother with a roundabout method like thinning out the population? It’s the lords of the clans who prefer to adopt cleansing policies. But loath to incur their subjects’ resentment, a handful of them lie and claim it to be the emperor’s own orders. Any true imperial edict will have the five-clawed golden seal, but the masses don’t have any way of knowing that.”

Akim’s eyes went wide in spite of himself. The mud-caked official notice from that fateful day was folded up and tucked away near his chest. He had spent so many nights staring at it that he had long since memorized its contents and

even the design on its seal. If he remembered correctly, the notice was indeed stamped with the mark of a dragon—but that dragon only had four claws.

With a bare hand and the utmost indifference, Genyou grabbed the dagger Akim had pressed to his neck and pushed it aside. “The Kin lords have been the negligent sort for generations. Furthermore, fastidious elitists that they are, they feel compelled to eliminate the weak rather than extend an offer of help. Yet they insist on borrowing the emperor’s authority to do so, which causes no end of headaches for us.”

When Genyou saw that the assassin had gone silent, he more or less inferred what was going through the man’s head. He raised one eyebrow in an imitation of the look Akim had given him earlier.

“It would seem you wasted two years of your life prioritizing the wrong revenge.”

Bam!

A savage glint overtook Akim’s eyes at the snide remark, and he wordlessly slammed his dagger against the ground. With the considerable muscle he had put into the throw, it wedged itself unbelievably deep into the solid flooring.

Heedless of the mild surprise in Genyou’s expression, Akim closed his eyes to calm his anger and exhaled a long breath. By the time he opened them, his usual bored look was back on his face. “Much obliged,” he grumbled as he made to leave the bedroom empty-handed.

The emperor was already dead, and the true source of the evil had been the Kin lord assuming his name. Akim felt unbearably frustrated to have wasted so much time, but all the more reason to move on to plan B as soon as possible.

At that moment, however, Genyou called out to him from behind. “A word of advice.”

When Akim turned around, he found the prince staring at him, chin resting languidly in his hand atop the armrest.

“Your target—that former Kin lord—transferred leadership to his son about six months ago and set out to wander the land. I imagine it will be difficult to track him down. He’s also getting up there in age, so it’s entirely possible you might run out of time to take your revenge.”

A groan escaped Akim’s mouth before he could stop it. “You sure do have a knack for grating on people’s nerves.” He was keenly feeling a missed opportunity.

“On that note, I have a proposal for you.” Genyou tossed his book onto the bed and rose from his chair for the first time thus far. “Would you care to become one of my personal spies?”

“Come again?”

Akim couldn’t count how many times he had repeated that same question over the past hour. It went to show how wild the things this man said and did were.

Genyou leisurely circled the bed and made his way over to Akim, who eyed him with suspicion. “It won’t be long before I become emperor, and all manner of information falls into the emperor’s lap. That includes the whereabouts of retired lords, of course. What’s more, becoming my spy will allow you to kill noblemen without consequences.”

For that matter, it didn’t have to stop at the Kin lord. Included among Genyou’s political opponents were a good number of other noblemen who had promoted cleansing policies.

“As long as you remain under my protection, you can kill *all* your most hated nobles to your heart’s content. Doesn’t that sound like quite a good time?”

He was more or less offering Akim everything he needed right then.

“I’m not buying it. What reason could you have to hire an idiot who wasted two years of his life?” Akim asked, wary that the deal was too good to be true.

Genyou’s lips curved into the slightest of smiles. “You say that as if two years

is long, but I commend your ability to infiltrate the emperor's bedchamber within such a short time frame. You're light on your feet, and you appear to be a relatively quick thinker." More softly, he added, "And I am looking to acquire a pawn of my very own, one who isn't under the thumb of one of the five clans. It's a necessary step in my own revenge."

His own revenge. Those few words moved Akim more than anything else the man had said thus far. Revenge was a nonsensical, emotional impulse, more fervent than self-interest, more vicious than ambition.

"You've also got someone you want to kill?"

The question left Akim's mouth before he could stop it. And the answer came just as quickly.

"Yes," Genyou said in a dark voice, the smile running away from his face. "I can't count the number of times I have ripped them to shreds in my imagination."

The young man's black eyes weren't focused on Akim; they simply glared into nothingness. Even so, the tinge of concentrated resentment there was enough to send a chill down the other man's spine.

Akim instinctively understood this man was the same breed as him. In that moment, he felt a strange swell of emotion that he hadn't felt in the past two years—no, that he might never even have felt when living a peaceful life with his adoptive family.

To use a term Fatma would prefer, it was probably something close to "trust." In reality, however, it was a much more twisted, dark, and unscrupulous sentiment.

Whatever the case, Akim stopped walking out the door and took a step back toward the bed.

"How do we seal the deal?" As the pair faced each other before the opulent bed, this time Akim was the one to speak up. "I've been working as a merchant

for the past year and a half, so I'm big on contracts. I want to see proof that you'll grant me rank and duty."

"A reasonable demand."

Genyou leaned over the writing desk beside the bed, grabbed the closest paper at hand, and took to writing with fluid brushstrokes.

"What is your name?"

"You can call me Akim, or Anki, or 'that man from Tan.'"

Both parties' names, the promised remuneration, the responsibilities of the job—Genyou jotted down all the necessary details of the contract, then concluded it thusly:

Contract valid until both parties have taken their vengeance.

"That's vague. There's no telling how many years that could take."

"It won't be long if you do your job well. Feel free to take anyone with promise under your command. You have my permission to structure the organization however you like."

It was an unprecedented deal.

Or so Akim thought, but he quickly amended that. This man simply couldn't be bothered with appearances. Nothing more, nothing less. He had put everything on the line for revenge. Nothing else mattered to him.

"So you *are* planning to tell me the specifics of your dream revenge, right?"

"Before we get to that, fix the way you speak to me. I am your master, and you are my loyal servant."

"Uh-huh. As you wish, Your Majesty the Soon-to-Be Emperor."

On the bed right beside them, the most exalted man in the nation—or *formerly* most exalted—lay dead. Yet neither of the two men spared him so much as a glance.

Light gradually flooded the room with the rising sun. By the time the real

menial worker brought a washbasin, Akim had already become Genyou's spy.

After that, the long and short of it was that Akim got his revenge over with quickly. He tracked down the Kin lord and put him to death. Armed with the flood of information that reached the emperor's desk on a daily basis, it was child's play. Almost an anticlimax.

The gaping old man had failed to comprehend why anyone would be out to kill him, so Akim had told him the story of a woman who died in a flood. He talked about the way her corpse had swelled and what a cheery person she had been while she was still alive, but to the bitter end, the former lord wore a blank look that said, *Why is this ant talking to me?*

Akim had been sure that this would be the kill that finally made him feel like the sun had broken through the clouds, but it turned out to be no different from the time he had killed the tax collectors. No righteous thunder rained down from the Heavens, and no tears sprang to his eyes. Revenge had proven to feel no different from cleaning up a mess—maybe even defecating. It was like the act of dispassionately eliminating waste. Not doing so wasn't an option, but neither could he surrender himself to a sweet, long-lasting sense of accomplishment as a result.

He next tried killing the Tan chieftain who had lured his adoptive father to Ei. He murdered noblemen who were committing similar atrocities in the other territories. Each time Akim stared down at the floor where those hideous corpses lay, realizing that no dramatic change would be wrought in himself or the Heavens, he walked away with a shrug of his shoulders.

The same exact scenes played out over and over again.

To make matters worse, killing his hated foe had robbed him of his purpose in life. Now that he had taken his revenge, all that awaited Akim was a life of tedium. If not for the higher cause of killing self-important nobles, he probably would have died of boredom—though, quite frankly, he was even starting to

get sick of those assignments.

“Listen here, Akim. You lack the open mind to accept life as it comes.”

Every now and then, Fatma’s grumpy voice would play back in his mind.

She had been exactly right. For all that he was versatile, Akim was also quick to lose interest; in all his years, he had hardly ever settled down and poured his focus into one project. He was always meandering his way through life. If something didn’t work out, he would move on to the next thing. If it did go well, he would start on something new. Sometimes it felt like he was gazing at the world through frosted glass.

Things were quite different for Genyou. His revenge was nowhere closer to becoming a reality after twenty-five years, and his black eyes were still filled with a deep hatred.

Akim felt both envy and pity for the emperor still lost in the raw throes of revenge. After all, he had been by the man’s side for more than twenty years. Genyou was as good as a longtime friend—or something even deeper than that, like another part of himself. He was the Akim of a world where he had never completed his revenge.

Akim’s thirst for vengeance had raged so fiercely that it burned out to ash, but Genyou’s ongoing craving was like ice. Layer built upon layer, and the more time passed, the more solid and immovable it became.

But then...

“I planted explosives in the river.”

A Maiden came along to defy Akim’s every expectation, shattering the frozen river with a graceful smile and a deafening roar. She claimed that breaking the ice during the winter and preventing the formation of a natural embankment would stop the summer floods. Rather than ordering a large-scale public works project, the Maiden had found another way to unceremoniously—and fundamentally—help the community. It had been a while since Akim felt such

pure delight.

So that's her play, eh?

"Allow me to reiterate my previous offer, Akim. Would you care to strike a deal?"

For the sake of a loved one, she wouldn't hesitate to make an enemy of the emperor. Her recklessness was the spitting image of his former self, who had once plotted to assassinate the emperor in revenge, and Genyou, who had made sure to be present for the moment of his father's death.

The difference was that neither of the two men had ever looked so full of life. Their eyes had never sparkled so bright, they had never stood so tall, and they had never worn such a fearless smile upon their lips.

Ah, to be young.

Beyond the forest, he heard the creak of the ice floes. He had never known what sound a frozen river made when a crack formed in the ice and its flow was restored.

"Instead of giving up or calling things stupid at every opportunity, you need to settle down and find something fun to do. Let's look on the bright side!"

For the first time in quite a while, he recalled the sight of Fatma's smile. Whenever she scolded her badu, her voice would sound angry, but the corners of her mouth would turn up ever so slightly as she pinched his nose.

"I like it."

Akim rubbed his nose as if to trace where his wife had once touched it.

The frozen river had been shattered that night. Perhaps this year, instead of rainy skies and muddy waters, Treacherous Tan Peak would be graced by a summer of sunshine.

Let's see what you've got.

With a twinkle of eager curiosity in his eyes, Akim hoisted himself to shore

with a splash.

Afterword

HELLO! Satsuki Nakamura here. Thanks to your support, we've entered the No-Magic Repose of Souls Arc of *Inept Villainess*.

In this arc, Reirin and friends face the most powerful threat of all. I love comic relief episodes like Volume 7, but nothing says “main plot” quite like standing against a formidable foe. It's the best!

By the way, it pains me to say this after setting the mood for a climactic finish, but I have some news to share. Thanks to your support, the *Inept Villainess* series will continue past the fifth arc! Wait, seriously?! So it's confirmed that the series will run longer than ten volumes?! Are you sure you want to let me do that?! I mean, don't get me wrong, I fully intend to put my all into it! Yippee!

There's still so many story elements I want to dig into: our dual protagonists' character arcs, the friendship between the five Maidens, a certain couple's romance, and the male cast's time in the spotlight (please don't forget they exist). I'm itching to write both lighthearted comedy and tear-jerking drama!

Once again, I would like to thank my dear readers for keeping this series alive for so long. We launched a character popularity poll to commemorate the release of Volume 8, so remember to cast your vote if you feel so inclined!* There might be a special little surprise for the top-ranking characters!

I would like to thank my editor for enthusiastically keeping pace with me on this journey, as well as Kana Yuki-sensei, Ohitsuji-sensei, and my designer. The party isn't over yet, so let's do this with a bang! Thank you for your continued support!

—Satsuki Nakamura, April 2024

** This poll has since passed and is no longer open to voting.*



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