

# THE SWORD OF KAIGEN

*A Theonite War Story*

— M. L. WANG —



BETTER TO DIE SHARP IN WAR THAN  
RUST THROUGH A TIME OF PEACE

# THE SWORD OF KAIGEN A THEONITE WAR STORY

M. L. WANG

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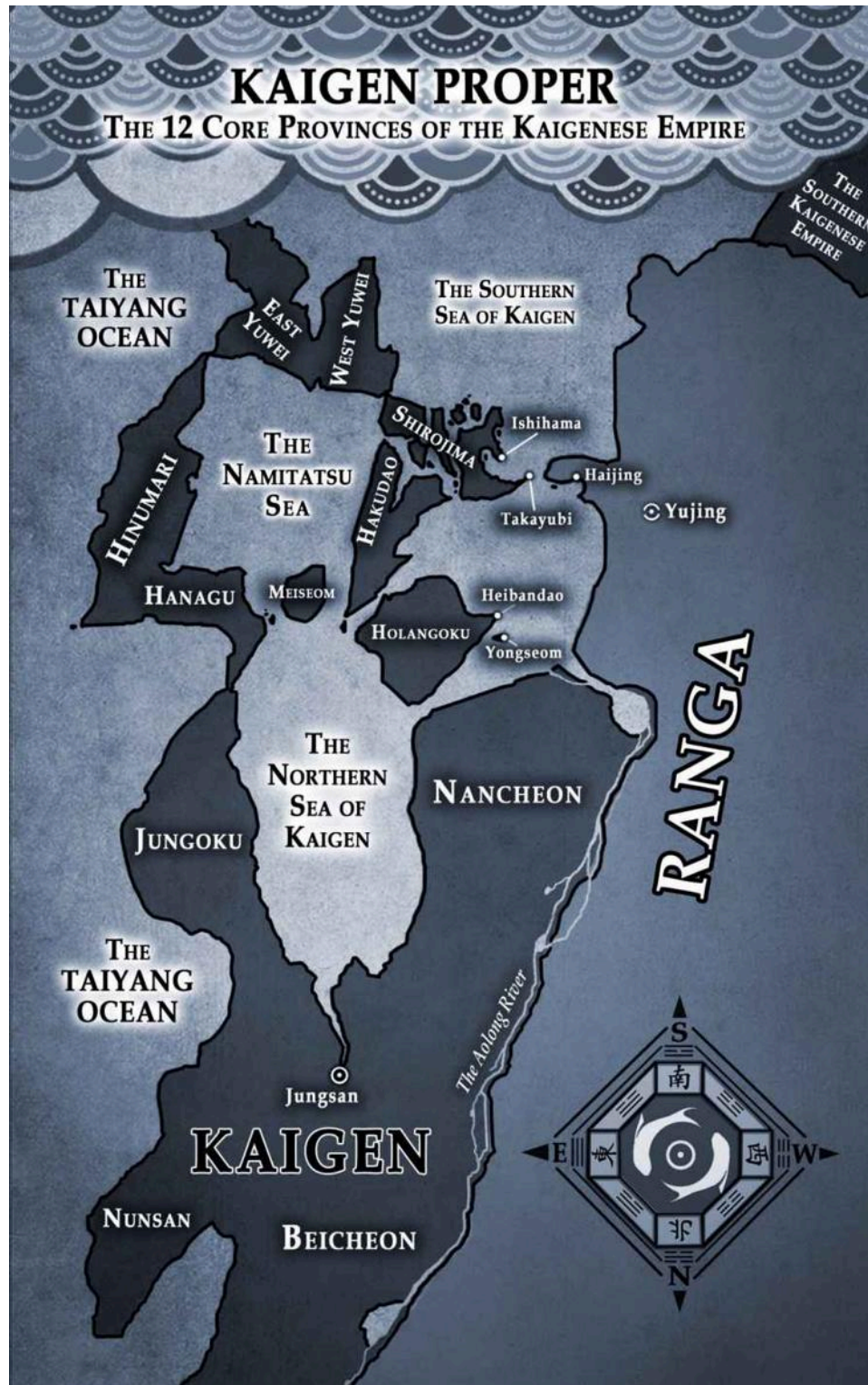
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*For Grandma Wang  
whose grave is marked by trees*







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## CHAPTER 1: THE NORTHERNER

Mt. Takayubi, Kusanagi Peninsula  
Shirojima Province  
The Kaigenese Empire  
Planet Duna  
5369 y. s. p.

It was a harrowing climb to the high school. Eight hundred twenty-one steps. Mamoru had counted one time on his way up—no easy feat while focusing on not toppling off the side of a mountain. For most fourteen-year-old fighters, the winding way up to the school was a true test of nerve and agility, but Mamoru, with his springy legs and boundless energy, woke each morning looking forward to the challenge.

“Mamoru!” his friends panted from the steps far below him. “Not so fast!”

Itsuki and Yuuta had no choice but to take the steep path to the school because they lived in the western village, further down the mountain. Mamoru’s family compound was built high enough that he could have taken an easier way if he chose, but Matsudas weren’t known for taking the easy way to anything. He rose every day before dawn, amid the chanting of crickets, so he could make the loop down the mountain toward the western village and tackle the steep climb with his friends.

“You two are too slow!” Mamoru called back. “We don’t want to be late!”

“We’re not going to be late,” Itsuki heaved in exasperation from the mist below. “Just wait up! Please!”

“Fine, fine.” Mamoru lowered himself to the rock ledge and sat, letting his feet hang over the edge.



It had still been dark when the three boys began their climb, but by now, morning had seeped through the veil of fog to touch the rock face with its pale brushstrokes. It was rarely possible to see the base of the mountain from the Kumono steps. Beneath Mamoru's dangling legs, there was only mist, rolling in slow waves against the cliff side, growing gradually lighter with the sunrise.

The moment Itsuki and Yuuta dragged themselves over the ridge where Mamoru was perched, he grinned and bounced to his feet.

"Finally!" he said. "Are you two ready to keep up now?"

"Are you kidding?" Yuuta gasped, doubling over to catch his breath.

"You're a monster!" Itsuki groaned.

Mamoru slapped each of them on the back. "I'll wait for you at the school," he said cheerfully and took off up the mountain.

His toes knew each crevice, each jutting rock, and he took the steepest part of the path in swift, confident bounds, skipping six steps at a time. He had just rounded the last curve when his feet slowed. There was a figure hunched over in the fog up ahead, a boy clinging hard to the rock wall as he gasped for breath. Mamoru wouldn't have thought much of it—there were dozens of students who climbed these steps each morning—but this boy's clothing wasn't right. Instead of Kumono blue, he wore a modern-looking black uniform Mamoru had never seen before.

"Good morning," Mamoru said, approaching slowly, so as not to startle the newcomer off the edge.

"Morning." The boy raised a hand in greeting before putting it to his chest, still breathing hard. He had a heavy accent.

"Are you..." Mamoru started and then switched to Kaigengua, the imperial standard. "*Are you a transfer student?*"

The boy nodded. "*I'm Kwang Chul-hee. Nice to meet you.*"

A northern name. This boy hadn't just transferred from a neighboring province; he had come from a long way away. His uniform was the kind worn in the big cities on the Jungsan Peninsula, with its Yammanka-style cut and military bogolan patterns.

“Matsuda Mamoru,” Mamoru introduced himself, bowing.

“Matsuda Mamoru...” the boy repeated. “*How much farther is it to your damn school?*”

“*You’re almost there,*” Mamoru laughed. “*I can walk with you the rest of the way.*”

“*I’m not afraid I’ll get lost.*” Kwang looked vaguely exasperated. “*I’m afraid I’ll fall off the edge.*”

“*No one’s ever died falling from the steps.*” Below the mist, there was a spring-fed lake that never froze waiting to catch clumsy students who lost their footing.

“*That’s what I heard,*” Kwang said, “*but I bet it still hurts.*”

“*It does.*” One time, in his first year, Mamoru had jumped from the steps to see what it felt like to fly. He had regretted the decision deeply when he hit the surface tension of the lake, but he would never forget the feeling of the wind roaring around him, so ferocious it started to feel like ocean.

“*But don’t worry,*” Mamoru reassured the boy. “*I’ve climbed these steps a hundred times. I know where the rough places are, so if you miss a step, I’ll catch you.*”

“*You’re that fast?*” Kwang didn’t look convinced. Mamoru didn’t mind. Let him think what he wanted.

“*Speed is valued in this village,*” Mamoru said by way of explanation. “*We’re all swordsmen here.*”

“*I see that.*” Kwang nodded at the wooden practice sword sticking out of Mamoru’s schoolbag.

“*We can fight empty-handed too,*” Mamoru assured him, “*but traditional swordplay is the preferred fighting style.*”

“*You any good at it?*”

“*I’m a Matsuda.*”

“*I don’t know what that means.*”

“*It means ‘yes,’*” Mamoru said. “*And what fighting style is popular in your region?*” he asked, curious about what kind of warrior this boy was.

“*What fighting style?*” Kwang raised his eyebrows. “*Video games.*”

Mamoru laughed. *"We don't play many of those here."*

*"Why not? You do have info-com devices, don't you?"*

Mamoru shook his head.

*"What?"* Kwang looked stunned.

*"Well, the mayor has one, I think. We're a fairly traditional village."*

*"Yeah, I noticed."*

Itsuki and Yuuta caught up to the pair on the last stretch of stairs, and the western village boys introduced themselves.

"I'm Mizumaki Itsuki," Itsuki said, unthinkingly using the Shirojima Dialect the boys all spoke with each other. "This is Yukino Yuuta."

"Oh. I-I'm Kwang Chul-hee," Kwang said in a valiant attempt at a Shirojima Dialect greeting. "Yoroshiku onegashimasu."

"You mean 'o-ne-ga-i'," Mamoru corrected him. "Onegaishimasu. And you don't really pronounce the 'su' part unless you're a little kid."

"Oh."

*"Don't worry,"* Mamoru said. *"A lot of the classes are taught in Kaigengua."* That was standard across the Empire.

By the time they reached the school, the city boy was out of breath again. The stately pillars were the first part of the building that came into view through the mist, their black finish slick with condensation, followed by the curving clay-tiled roof. Kumono Academy was built into the rock face, its inner structures carved right out of the mountain. The intricate wood and lacquer front of the building was supported by a network of pillars and beams that creaked in high winds but had held the structure in place for a hundred years.

Kwang paused at the front steps, clinging to a carved wooden railing for support, looking like he might empty his stomach into the mists below.

*"Why would you build a school in a place like this?"* he said in horror.

*"Kumono wasn't actually built to be a school,"* Yuuta said. *"It used to be a monastery."*

*"Oh. That explains the decor,"* Kwang said, eyeing the fearsome statues of Ryuhon Falleya saints standing guard at the doors.

*“The place was left vacant after the fina monks built the new temple, further down the mountain in the western village,” Yuuta said.*

*“And they decided it was a good place for a school?” Kwang said, incredulous.*

*“Well, Kumono is Takayubi’s elite koro school,” Mamoru explained as the boys mounted the front steps into the genkan. “The village officials thought it would be appropriate if you had to be an elite koro to reach it.”*

The smell of incense had never quite left the wooden halls of Kumono. The familiar scent enveloped the four boys as they joined the sleepy gaggle of students at the shoe shelves and knelt to undo the fastenings on their tabi. As Kwang, still shaking, fumbled with his shoes, Mamoru’s gaze was drawn to the northern boy’s feet. Instead of the two-toed tabi the Takayubi boys wore, Kwang was sporting bulky, shiny Yammanka-style shoes that fastened with magnets around the ankles. Mamoru had seen shoes like that on TV, but no one in Shirojima had ever owned a pair.

*“I don’t know how I’m supposed to make that climb every morning,” Kwang said, cramming his oversized shoes into an open slot.*

*“If you want an easier walk, you could always transfer to Takayubi Public High School,” Itsuki suggested.*

*“Oh, no,” Kwang laughed. “My father won’t have me in any school but the best in the region whenever we move to a new place.”*

*“You move often?” Yuuta asked.*

Kwang nodded. *“My father’s a traveling representative for a communications company, so we move all over the country, sometimes outside it.”*

*“Outside it?” Itsuki said in astonishment. “Where have you been?”*

*“Um...” Kwang took a moment to think. “I’ve been to Yamma a few times, Kudazwe a few times, Sizwe once, for a few weeks—”*

“Boys,” a voice said, “if your shoes are put away, you should be in your classrooms.”

“Yukino Sensei!” Itsuki exclaimed as he and the other boys bowed. “We’re sorry.”

Yukino Dai was the best swordsman in the province—or the second best, depending on who you asked. There was debate about whether he could beat Mamoru's father, Matsuda Takeru, or his uncle, Matsuda Takashi in a duel. The Yukino clan had none of the Matsudas' secret bloodline techniques, but Yukino Dai was about as good as a man could get with a naked blade.

"We have a new student with us, Sensei," Mamoru explained. "He isn't sure where he's supposed to go."

"I see." Yukino Sensei looked past Mamoru at the new boy, who stuck out starkly in his bogolan uniform. "You must be Kwang Chul-hee?"

"Yes, sir." Kwang bowed and said very carefully, "Yoroshiku onegaishimasu."

The swordmaster visibly suppressed a smile at Kwang's pronunciation. "*Welcome to Kumono Academy,*" he said in Kaigengua. "*How was your first time up the steps?*"

"*Super easy, sir,*" Kwang said, despite the obvious flush in his cheeks. "*I can't wait to do it again.*"

Yukino Sensei's face broke into an open smile. "*I like you, Kwang,*" he said. "*You can follow me to the office to pick up your schedule.* Matsuda-san." He turned to Mamoru. "Run to the storeroom and find a uniform for Kwang-san. Your size should do."

"Yes, sir." Mamoru bowed and hurried to do as he was told.

He moved quickly through the narrow halls to the supply closet, his legs absorbing the shifting of the floor as the school swayed on its posts.

"Morning, Mamoru-kun!" other boys greeted him.

"Good morning, Matsuda-senpai!"

He made sure he gave each of them a bow and a smile as he went.

There was no lock on the storeroom door. Kumono was a small enough high school—Takayubi was a small enough *town*—that no one worried much about theft. Where would a thief even keep a stolen item? Where would he try to sell it? Everyone here knew everyone.

Mamoru had to calmer over a box of broken practice swords and a stack of dummies to reach the shelf of spare uniforms. Keeping his footing became



a challenge as the school creaked and the dummies shifted beneath him, but what kind of Matsuda would he be if a little breeze threw him off balance? With the next gust of wind, the stack of dummies tipped toward the shelves. Mamoru leaned forward, snatched a size-four uniform from its shelf, and sprang from the top of the stack to the floor before anything fell.

After double checking the uniform size, he hurried to the office to meet Yukino Sensei and Kwang.

“Thank you, Matsuda-san,” Yukino Sensei said as Mamoru handed the new boy his uniform. “Now, Kwang-san is going to be entering our second-year class, which means his schedule is identical to yours.” Mamoru nodded. Being the more exclusive of two high schools in a small town, Kumono Academy had only one class per grade level. “I’m putting him in your charge. You’ll look after him for today.”

“Yes, Sensei.”

“Start by showing him where the changing rooms are. And be quick. You boys only have a few siiranu before classes start.”

Kwang took longer than Mamoru would have thought to change into his new uniform, and Mamoru found himself pacing impatiently on the creaking floor before the changing room door. When Kwang finally emerged, he was still fiddling with the waist tie as if he had all the time in the world.

*“This is so funny,”* he said, shaking out the uniform’s broad blue sleeves. *“I feel like I’m in one of those old samurai movies.”*

*“Well, for us, this is just a normal school uniform,”* Mamoru said, frowning.

*“This place is weird.”* Kwang ran his hands over his sleeves, looking at the ornately-carved temple halls around him. *“It’s like I stepped through a portal back in time.”*

Mamoru felt annoyance bristle up inside him. He wasn’t sure why. He opened his mouth to say something but before he could come up with the right words, the old temple bell sounded. The single ancient note reverberated through the hall, as it had done for a hundred years, calling the boys of Takayubi to class.

## MISAKI

“Healthy, just like his brothers?” Hyori asked, leaning in to put a hand on the infant’s head.

“Yes,” Misaki said, “if a little smaller.”

“I can’t believe this one is your fourth!”

“Yes,” Misaki sighed, trying to make her tone light, despite the heaviness in her limbs, “hopefully the last.”

“No!” Hyori exclaimed, scandalized. “How can you say that?”

“Yeah, you’re doing so well, why stop now?” Setsuko joked, shifting her own baby to her other hip to nudge her sister-in-law.

“Seriously, Misaki-san!” Hyori said with an ache in her voice. “You’re so lucky!”

“Mmm.” Misaki nodded, forcing a smile. “I suppose I am.”

And Misaki *was* lucky. By Shirojima standards, she was the luckiest woman in the world. Fresh out of theonite academy, she had been fortunate enough to marry into Shirojima’s greatest warrior family. And following that, she had been blessed with son, after son, after son. There had been a rough space of years, after Mamoru, when she hadn’t been able to give birth, but five years ago, she had borne Hiroshi, then soon after him, Nagasa, and now Izumo. Four healthy boys, every Shirojima woman’s dream.

“May I?” Hyori asked, an eager sparkle in her eyes.

“Of course.” Careful to support the infant’s unsteady head, Misaki handed Izumo to her friend.

“You’re looking much better,” Setsuko commented as Hyori gushed and cooed over an oblivious Izumo.

“I *feel* much better,” Misaki said, rolling her shoulders, “at least now that you’re here. I missed you two.”

Normally, the three housewives spent the majority of their waking hours together, letting their little ones play together, passing around the babies as they did their shopping, laundry, cooking, and sewing. Since giving birth to Izumo, Misaki had been too exhausted to do much except look after the infant, and Takeru had insisted that she wasn't well enough for company. This was the first time Izumo was meeting Hyori and his aunt, Setsuko. He could be a fussy baby, but he didn't seem bothered by the new faces—if he could even make out facial features. He was still so young that his eyes hadn't found their focus yet.

"Four sons," Setsuko mused, burping her own daughter, Ayumi, on her shoulder. "I don't know how I'm ever supposed to catch up to that. Although, look at these chunky little arms! Ayumi could almost pass for a boy. Perhaps I'll start dressing her in boy clothes and just pretend I've given my husband a healthy son." Baby Ayumi, only two months Izumo's senior, was nearly twice his size. "What do you think?"

"I think she's perfect the way she is." Misaki was being honest, but of course, the other two women laughed.

When she was younger, Misaki had always pictured herself having daughters. She had enjoyed the vague fantasy of raising powerful, forward-thinking young women with the courage to amount to more than their mother, but it was just that: a fantasy. Misaki had long since let go of the idea that she could raise her children the way she wanted—or that they were even *her* children at all. Her sons were Matsudas first and foremost. Their sole purpose was to grow to be powerful warriors, like their father before them, and his father before him. They belonged to the Matsuda house, as she did.

"I'm being serious," Misaki insisted as Hyori passed baby Izumo back to her. "I would be happy to have a daughter." With a daughter, at least, she might be allowed to pass some of herself on to her own child.

"Easy for you to say when you're on your fourth son!" Hyori said indignantly.

Setsuko hummed in agreement. “You’re going to have to tell us how you pulled it off.”

“I want to know how she pulled it off and kept her figure!” Hyori said.

“Oh, shut up you!” Setsuko swatted Hyori on the back of the head. “The prettiest little slip of a woman in the village doesn’t get to say things like that!”

“Setsuko-san,” Hyori said, blushing furiously. “I’m not the prettiest—”

“Shut your pretty mouth, Hyori-chan,” Misaki said fondly. “You don’t need to play dumb with us. We like you better when you’re smart.”

Hyori was rarely smart, but Misaki thought she might as well keep encouraging her. Popular wisdom said that a woman as pretty as Hyori didn’t need to be smart. ‘Pretty’ wasn’t even the right word to describe Hyori, in Misaki’s opinion. The woman was achingly, devastatingly beautiful, with an artless smile and eyes as soft as melting snow. Many Shirojima women were ‘pretty,’ but Hyori was the kind of legendary beauty men went to war for.

“Couple of pure-bred princesses, both of you!” Setsuko said, looking from Hyori to Misaki in exasperation. “With your smooth skin, and your teensy little waists. Don’t you sit there and complain about your weight to me when I could fit the two of you inside me.”

Ironically, it was Setsuko who Misaki considered to be the most beautiful woman on the mountain. When fisherman’s daughter had married into the Matsuda family, she had brought with her all the crude shameless joy Misaki missed so much from her life before Takayubi. Her sort of beauty had little to do with physical attributes. It wasn’t the short hair cropped about her ears; it was the way she shook it out and sighed in pleasure when she was enjoying the weather. It wasn’t her big eyes with their dark lashes; it was the way they crinkled up with mirth at the smallest things. It wasn’t her bulky frame; it was the way she threw it around with careless confidence in a world where everyone, ladies and swordsmen alike, stepped so lightly.

Before they were sisters-in-law, Misaki had known Setsuko—as everyone had known her—as the fresh fish lady. Her voice could be heard on any trip

to the markets at the base of the mountain. “Fresh fish! Get your fresh fish!”

It wasn't a glamorous job, but Setsuko was the kind of person who could be at her most charming elbows deep in fish guts, with loose strands of hair sticking to the sweat on her temples. Misaki had to imagine that many people had fallen in love with the stocky fisherwoman with the carefree grin, but it was Matsuda Takashi, the first son of the highest house in the region, who fell the hardest.

Misaki had first suspected the morning her brother-in-law stopped her on her way out the door and said, “You look tired, Misaki. I can go to the market for you.”

For a moment, Misaki had only managed to blink up at him. “You want to go to the market?” she said blankly. Shopping for meals wasn't something a man was supposed to do—certainly not a nobleman like Takashi.

“I—uhh—I have business to attend to at the base of the mountain anyway.” Takashi didn't meet her eyes.

“I'm feeling fine, Nii-sama,” Misaki assured him. “If you have important business, you shouldn't trouble yourself—”

“It's no trouble,” Takashi said and Misaki realized that he was speaking in a low voice, as if worried that his father and brother would hear from inside the house. “Just give me a list of what you need.”

“Alright.” Confused as she was, Misaki wasn't going to argue.

“And Misaki?”

“Yes, Nii-sama?”

“If you could maybe... not mention this to my father?”

Misaki's suspicions were confirmed when Takashi returned late that afternoon and deposited eight bulging baskets of fish in her kitchen. No man but a Matsuda could have carried such a load all the way up the mountain. As strong as Takashi was, the effort had lent his face a bright flush.

“Fish,” he said with a drunken smile that ill became the son of a warrior family. “You said you wanted fresh fish, right? I'm sorry. I might have missed the other things on your list.”



“Um...” Misaki looked in horror at the heaping baskets on her kitchen floor. “I’m sorry, Nii-sama, what do you want me to do with all this?” The Matsuda compound didn’t have freezer space to store this many fish. “Are you expecting company?”

“What? No. Why? Is this too much?”

Misaki looked up at her brother-in-law, incredulous and more than a little annoyed. *If you like the girl, just tell her straight*, she wanted to snap. *Don’t blow the family fortune on fish!* But it wasn’t her place to question him, and it wasn’t that simple. A nobleman couldn’t just propose to a fisherman’s daughter and whisk her away up the mountain. Not in Takayubi. Peasants with no bloodlines to protect might marry whoever they liked, but men and women of noble houses didn’t have that luxury.

“Is it too much?” Takashi asked again, still dazed and so much giddier than usual, like a love-struck teenager—like Misaki had been once. The thought pierced her chest with a sudden and unexpected pain.

*Be careful, big brother*, she wanted to say then, *be careful how hard you love what you know you can’t have*, but that also was not her place.

So instead, she pursed her lips, looked down at the fish and said, “I’ll think of something.”

“Good,” Takashi said, though he didn’t really seem to see or hear her. “Good,” and he wandered out of the kitchen, still smiling. On his way out, he passed Takeru, who regarded his older brother with the same sour expression he took on whenever he saw someone happy.

“Is my brother ill?” he asked when Takashi had gone.

No, Misaki thought sadly, *just doomed to misery*.

But Takashi had been lucky—or rather, just the right combination of lucky, reckless, and clever. He had struggled, and schemed, and spun excuses, and somehow managed to hold off marriage until his tyrannical father had passed away and there were no Matsuda elders left to tell him what to do. Then, instead of marrying a pure-blooded noblewoman his family’s choosing, Takashi married the woman he loved—the peasant with the loud laugh who sold him his fresh fish.

Takashi would never know, but in marrying Setsuko, he might have saved Misaki's life. The fisherwoman had moved into the Matsuda compound shortly after Misaki's second miscarriage, a loud burst of color when everything seemed gray.

"You haven't smiled the whole time I've been here," Setsuko had observed as Misaki helped her unpack the few belongings she had brought with her. "Why so glum, little sister?"

Misaki was two years older than her new sister-in-law, but Setsuko had married the older of the two Matsuda brothers, and in this world, the man's status was the only thing that mattered.

"I'm sorry," Misaki murmured. It had become her default response to anything over the past few years.

Setsuko planted her hands on her hips. "That's not good enough."

"Excuse me?"

"Look, you and I are going to be here in this house together until we're both wrinkly old hags with all our teeth falling out. I don't know about you, but I don't want to spend the next forty years with a woman who doesn't know how to smile."

"I know how to smile." There had been a time Misaki had been accused of smiling too much, but over the years, Takayubi had worn away at her, turning her into this quivering, brittle thing, afraid the sound of her own voice might shake her to pieces if she spoke too loud.

"*I've* never seen you smile," Setsuko said skeptically. "What's wrong with you? Are the corners of your mouth busted or something?"

No. It was the inside of Misaki that was broken. "I miscarried," she said bluntly, "twice."

"Oh." Setsuko pulled up short, her joking demeanor evaporating in an instant. "Oh, sweetheart... I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

Misaki thought she might crumble under the concern in Setsuko's eyes. The years had hardened her against her father-in-law's cruelty and her husband's indifference, but she had no armor against that honest gaze.