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NOVEL

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THOUGH I AM AN INEPT VILLAINESS

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

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"If I
could have
any wish.."

"Begone, you
accursed
woman!"

On the night a comet shone bright,

the pair traded fates.

Kou Reirin

Maiden of the Kou clan
Beautiful & benevolent
Frail & often sick
The prince's
butterfly

Shu Keigetsu

Maiden of the Shu clan
Freckled face & thick
makeup
The court sewer rat
Everyone's least favorite
villainess



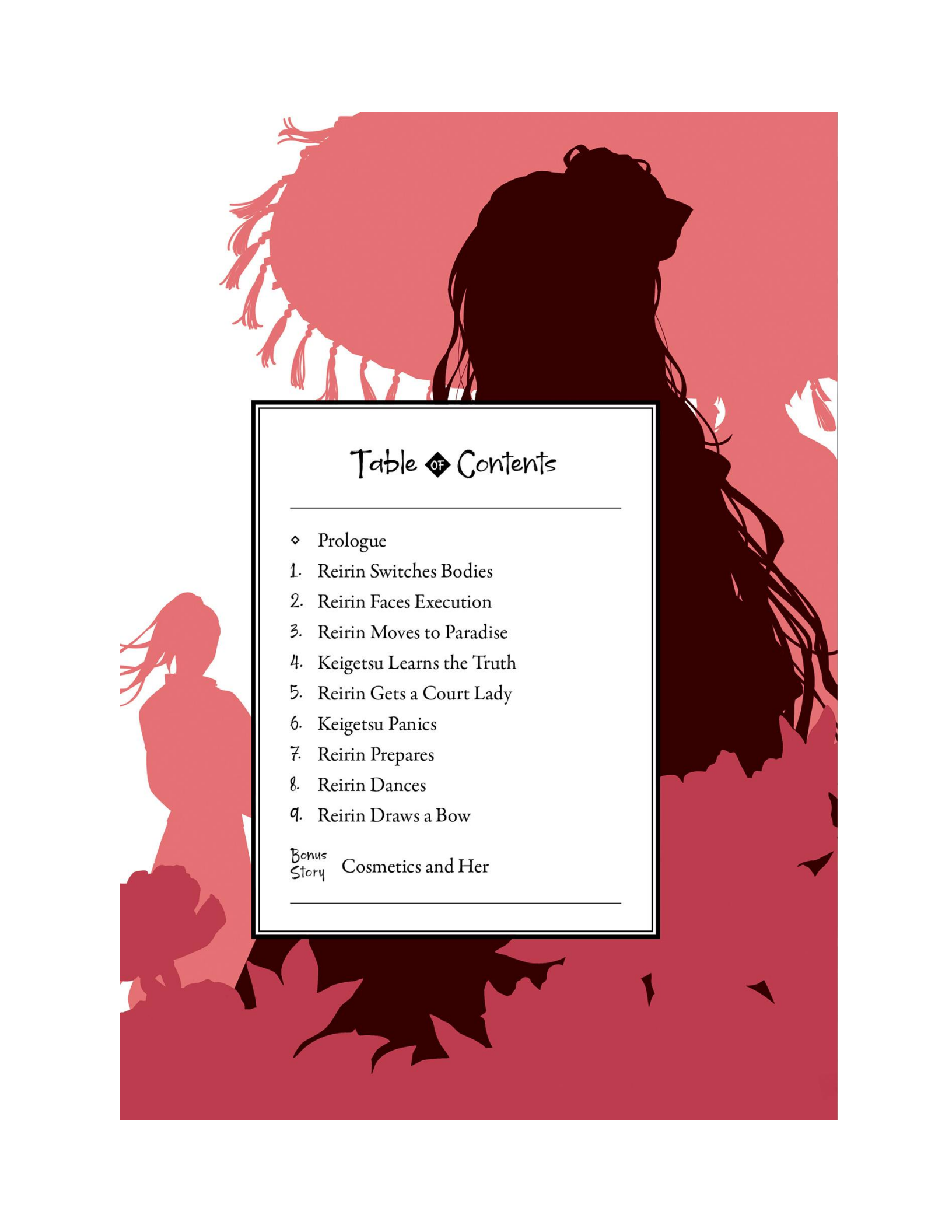


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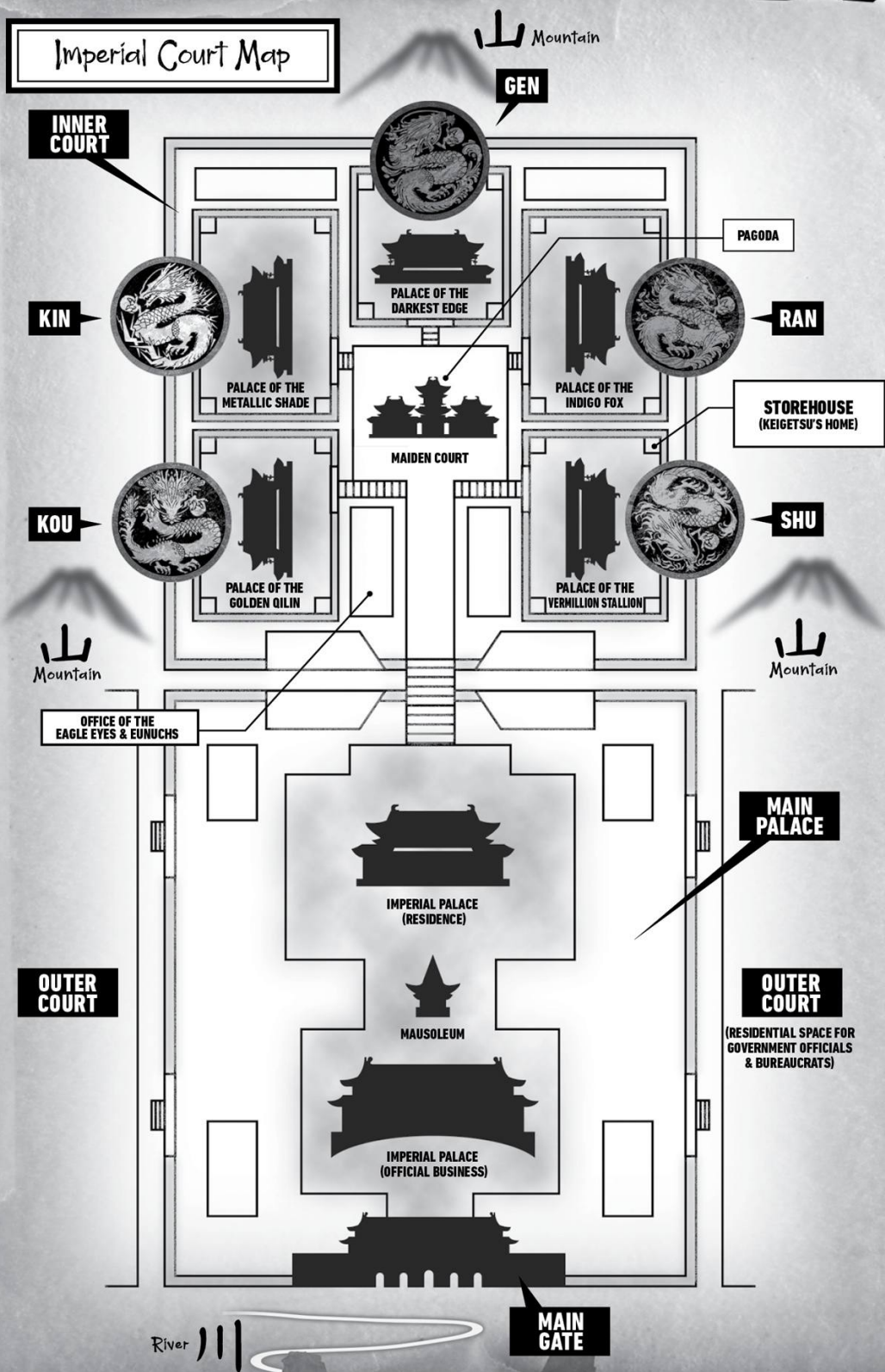
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Seven Seas Entertainment

Imperial Court Map



Relationship Chart

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

KIN CLAN

(METAL / WEST / AUTUMN)



GEN CLAN

(WATER / NORTH / WINTER)



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

RAN CLAN

(WOOD / EAST / SPRING)



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

KOU CLAN

(EARTH / CENTER / CUSPS)



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

SHU CLAN

(FIRE / SOUTH / SUMMER)



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

THE MAIDEN COURT



Futsutsukana Akujodewa Gozaimasuga Vol. 1
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Prologue

IT WAS THE NIGHT of the Double Sevens Festival. Inside a pagoda tucked away in the inner court, the well-dressed court ladies let admiring sighs escape from behind their fans.

“Take a look at Lady Reirin’s most splendid embroidery! Do you see how the moonlight reflects off the bright threads of her stars? Why, it’s almost like a real night sky!”

“So it is! Even the Weaver Girl herself would envy her skill.”

These girls were captivated by a delicately embroidered length of silk and the highborn lady who had hung it over the balustrade. Her soft shades of black hair were pulled back into a gorgeous style, and her large, round eyes held a smile as vibrant as a flower coming into bloom. Together with her porcelain skin, she possessed a fragile sort of beauty. This fifteen-year-old girl was called Reirin.

Beside Reirin, four more ladies of noble birth held their embroidery for all to see. On the night of the Double Sevens Festival—the sole day of the year when the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl were reunited—these girls were to offer their handiwork up to the starry heavens in hopes of improving their sewing skills. This tradition also happened to serve as a contest of their needlework, but it was easy to see that Reirin’s work far outshined the rest.

The women went on whispering among themselves.

“Her skill with a needle is on par with the Weaver Girl’s, and with a brush in her hand, she can string together the most elegant of verses. If I recall, the dance she performed for the Lantern Festival even moved one of the court ladies to tears. She’s truly a girl of many talents.”

“And she has the looks to match! If all that wasn’t enough, can you believe how compassionate she is? I heard from one of her court ladies that she wouldn’t crush an insect under her heel! Oh, what I wouldn’t give to serve under her!”

“Shh! Not so loud. You wouldn’t want *your* mistress to overhear. Though being a retainer of the magnanimous Ran clan, I doubt you’d be in for too harsh a reprimand.”

“You’re right. Our lady is our master. If we break the laws of the Maiden Court, the Eagle Eyes will have us put to death. We’d better watch what we say.”

The Maiden Court was the very place where those five well-born ladies and their attendants were gathered.

Nearly a hundred years ago, a bloody power struggle that had broken out during the reign of Emperor Kousou saw the reorganization of the bloated inner court, and consorts were now selected from a mere five clans.

The Ran clan, who ruled over the lands to the east.

The Kin clan, who ruled over the lands to the west.

The Gen clan, who ruled over the lands to the north.

The Shu clan, who ruled over the lands to the south.

And the Kou clan, the rulers of the central territory.

The five aristocrats sent from each clan were to be divided up into one empress and four consorts. They spent their days in their respective palaces, which were arranged in a pentagon around the inner court, taking care to uphold the established order all the while.

But of course, these five clans were perpetually in competition with one another; it wouldn't have been any fun for one family to monopolize all the glory. Moreover, the fact that the emperor—who until that point had possessed thousands of concubines—was forced to find an heir from only five women raised concerns over the dynasty's longevity. Given what vast lands the Kingdom of Ei boasted, the country needed a firm hand to guide it.

So it was that the five clans worked together to build a cloister leading from each palace, converging on the "Maiden Court" erected at their center. It was purported to be a place of study for unmarried girls, where they would receive etiquette training from the emperor's consorts, the finest women of their time. These students—referred to as fledgling "Maidens"—would grow as close to their teachers as their own mothers. In addition to the guarantee of a stable livelihood in the Maiden Court, each girl was granted a room within her respective consort's palace.

In practice, however, the only girls permitted entry to the Maiden Court were those with ties to one of the five clans. In other words, this was a training program for the consorts' successors under the guise of an etiquette school. The consorts put their skills to the test to see who could raise their Maiden the best, aiming to make their protégé into the next empress and bring prestige to their clan.

The current emperor, Genyou, was past the age of forty. The Maiden Court had been opened to a new generation, and Reirin and the other four

girls had been assembled to fill its ranks. Until the crown prince, Gyoumei, ascended the throne, these girls were to spend every daylight hour in the Maiden Court, competing to determine who possessed the highest value as a woman.

However, when it came to this particular generation of the Maiden Court, it was safe to say that the winner had been decided long before the day of appointment arrived. Anyone could see that Reirin was the clear choice to become the next empress.

Reirin was the niece of the current empress, Kou Kenshuu, as well as cousin to Prince Gyoumei. It's said that names and natures do often agree, and Reirin—her name meaning “the chime of jewelry”—boasted a graceful bearing and features as refined as a gem. Add to this the fact that she was erudite, talented, and good-hearted besides, and it was little wonder that all those she knew couldn't help but adore her.

After she had lost her mother in nearly the same moment she was born, her father, brothers, and the rest of the Kou clan had taken great pity on the beautiful young girl and loved her unconditionally. Taken by the affection she had shown him from a young age, Gyoumei seemed to have settled on her as his empress already.

Reirin had but one shortcoming: She had a weak constitution and was often laid up with fever. However, in the present Genyou Era, delicacy and grace were prized above all else. Her snow-white skin and slender, frail figure were hailed as the pinnacle of beauty, and her unwavering virtue in the face of her ailing health inspired even greater compassion in those around her. Even within the Maiden Court, where it was the way of things to look down upon the Maidens of the other clans, Reirin was widely beloved and respected.

“Did you catch the subtle way His Highness placed a hand on her shoulder as she leaned over the balustrade? Oh, how perfectly matched they are in their beauty! It’s no wonder she’s called the prince’s ‘butterfly.’”

“Indeed. See how proud her retainers look? For all her poise, even her head court lady can’t help but crack a smile. Honestly, if everyone knows the outcome, I don’t see why we shouldn’t close the Maiden—”

“Shh! The captain of the Eagle Eyes will hear you!”

The prince was only allowed to set foot inside the Maiden Court for the observance of each seasonal festival. Much like the Cowherder anxiously awaited his reunion with the Weaver Girl, the gorgeous Gyomei had been delighted to descend upon the court and take every opportunity to connect with Reirin. The court ladies had been watching the pair in rapt fascination, but with a backward glance, they hurried to school their expressions.

In a dark corner of the room, far from where everyone had gathered around the balcony overlooking the garden to gaze up at the night sky, there sat a man dressed in black from head to toe. This gentleman, whose face showed not a flicker of expression in the presence of all these stunning women, was the captain of the Eagle Eyes—the officials responsible for enforcing discipline in the inner court. His name was Shin-u. Save for the calculating look in his eyes, he had been blessed with rather handsome features.

Men were forbidden to enter the inner palace; traditionally, the Eagle Eyes’ ranks were comprised of eunuchs. However, there was a good explanation as to why a man—and such an attractive one, at that—was serving as the captain of the order: He was a descendant of the emperor.

Meanwhile, his mother had been anything but a daughter of one of the five clans; as a foreign slave, she'd never stood a chance of becoming a consort. A hundred years ago, she might have been granted the position of a lower concubine, but there was no place for her in the modern incarnation of the inner court. Instead, she had been dismissed with a reward, and her son, Shin-u, had been taken in by a childless military officer and raised as a vassal. Despite demonstrating great skill in the art of war, his complicated lineage had ultimately consigned him to the inner court. On the off chance he *did* lie with one of the women, it would be immediately apparent if the child was Shin-u's. Though the man's black hair was common enough, his blue eyes were an impossibly rare sight among the people of Ei.

His role was to resolve any violent disputes that arose within the inner court and to root out any women who proved vulnerable to temptation. Several court ladies had already made advances toward him, drawn to his good looks, and been imprisoned for their trouble. Ever since, the girls had come to fear Shin-u as a ruthless executioner.

Fortunately, the cold-blooded captain of the Eagle Eyes hadn't taken offense to their irreverent comments. His only responsibility was to crack down on serious transgressions or scandals, and he held little interest in idle gossip. As soon as the girls remembered as much, relief washed over them, and they went right back to their imprudent chatter.

"We all know that Lady Reirin is the empress's favorite, and His Highness cares for her just as deeply. The throne is as good as hers. My Maiden even said that she's given up on the position of empress and set her sights on becoming the Noble Consort."

Ordered from highest to lowest, the ranks of the four consorts were the Noble, the Pure, the Virtuous, and the Worthy.

“The same goes for mine. She’d hate to take the title of the Worthy for the second generation in a row. But then again...” She broke off and cast a meaningful glance toward the balustrade. “She’s fortunate to be in the same batch as Shu Keigetsu. There’s no question who the Worthy Consort is going to be.”

The court ladies’ eyes held an unmistakable glint of disdain. The subject of their gaze was the girl standing next to Reirin, a Maiden by the name of Keigetsu.

Her hairstyle was crooked, and perhaps in an effort to offset her freckled, sinister features, she’d dressed herself in garish attire. Her embroidery left something to be desired. Never from her lips fell a pretty line of poetry, and she would clam up whenever Gyoumei went out of his way to speak to her; then the moment he turned his gaze elsewhere, she would cast a woebegone glance his way and a baleful glare at Reirin.

It was a well-known fact that Keigetsu pined for Gyoumei with his good looks, virile charm, and mastery of the pen and sword, as was it common knowledge among the court ladies that she was deeply jealous of Reirin.

“Now there’s a girl who doesn’t know her place. Her ungainly frame is the only ‘grand’ thing about her, and there’s always a sneer in her eyes—the very picture of the court ‘sewer rat’! And to think *her* guardian is the most prestigious of the four consorts, Noble Consort Shu! The world works in mysterious ways.”

“I heard Consort Shu chose Lady Keigetsu as her Maiden out of pity. She couldn’t turn her back on the most wretched of her relatives. The depth of Lady Keigetsu’s ineptitude speaks to the depth of Consort Shu’s compassion.”

Though it sounded like she was speaking in Keigetsu's defense, in reality, her words bore nothing but the utmost contempt. And it was no wonder why—the Maiden had a reputation for fawning on her superiors while coming down hard on those below her. As these girls were privy to the grumblings of Keigetsu's own court ladies, there was no one more despicable in their eyes. The nickname they had given her was the court "sewer rat." It was a far cry from Reirin, who was extolled as the prince's "butterfly" for her place in his good graces.

From their cloth-covered seats upon a raised section of the floor, the empress and four consorts watched over the fledgling Maidens. Even they didn't bother to hide their sighs and sneers over Keigetsu's boorish conduct. Discomfited, her guardian tried to redirect the conversation.

"My, do you see that? Comets. There's even a shooting star! How auspicious," said Noble Consort Shu. And indeed, a glance in the direction her fan pointed revealed a parade of stars leaving their trails through the night sky.

Some time ago, predictions held that this summer would mark the first sighting of a comet in hundreds of years, and the Maiden Court's pagoda had been constructed in time to see it happen. Excitement bubbled within the crowd. Everyone was delighted that the comets' advent had not only coincided perfectly with the night of the Double Sevens Festival but that it had even arrived with a shooting star to wish upon.

"Oh, we have to make a wish before it disappears! Though given how slowly it's moving by, we ought to have plenty of time."

"The big, slow one is a comet, silly! You're supposed to make your wish on the star streaking by over there. Oh no! There it goes. Looks like I missed my chance."

“Don’t be so sure! Here comes another one! And another!”

“Wow, that’s quite a number...”

The meteor shower grew in intensity until it looked almost like a rain of light. The onlookers devoured the sight, their breath stolen by the miraculous spectacle.

And then...

Just as a single comet in the swarm of meteors shone so brightly it nearly blotted the sky in white, there came a dull thud.

“Begone, you accursed woman!”

“Eeeek!”

That spiteful shout and the piercing cry that followed snapped the court ladies to their senses. They looked in the direction of the voices, only to find Reirin dangerously close to tumbling over the balustrade.

“Reirin!”

“Lady Reirin, take my hand!”

“Eagle Eyes! Help her!”

Gyoumei and the court ladies spun on their heels, throwing themselves out over the balustrade like a crowd possessed. Alas, their efforts were in vain, and Reirin’s hand slipped past the railing as she slammed down against the eaved roof below.

“Reirin!”

Fortunately, the long trail of her *ruqun*’s skirt caught on the balustrade like a lifeline, bringing her descent to a halt.

Seeing this, Gyoumei began barking orders, flames of anger burning in his calm, light-brown eyes. “Captain, rescue Reirin at once! The remaining Eagle Eyes are to take that woman—Shu Keigetsu—into custody!”

The subject of his glare was none other than Shu Keigetsu’s limp, unconscious figure, her arms left outstretched from shoving Reirin over the balustrade.

Awakened by a drop of water hitting her cheek, the girl let her eyes drift open.

“Ugh...”

She felt unusually thirsty. Rubbing at her throat, she sat upright and then frowned in puzzlement at the damp clumps of hair clinging to her face.

I feel gross...

Although she was no stranger to physical discomfort, this particular sensation of stewing in squalor was an unfamiliar one. Brushing her fingers

through her disheveled hair, she strained her eyes against the dim light of the room.

“Hm...?”

Her hand stopped moving. What she saw before her was not the familiar sight of her bed and bamboo blinds but a row of crude iron bars.

“Huh?”

As she pushed down the sense of dread creeping over her, her eyes darted around the chamber. There was a stone wall to her right. A stone wall to her left. A stone wall behind her. Laid out over the floor was the shabby straw mat she was lying on. The stone ceiling didn't let a single sliver of moonlight through, but there came the occasional drop of whatever substance had managed to seep into it.

“Is this...the dungeon?”

The dazed murmur of her voice sounded wrong to her ears. It was slightly too deep to be her own.

She stared down at her hands. Their shape vaguely differed from how she remembered them, and she had no recollection of the bulky, heavy attire she was wearing. It was too dark to tell what color it was, but when she slid her fingers over the cloth, its tightly sewn threads felt hard to the touch. It was almost certainly goldwork.

This was an excessively extravagant garment.

Before this bit of information could lead her to an epiphany, light flooded her cell.

“I see you’re awake.”

It was the voice of whoever was holding the candlestick. A woman, apparently.

Squinting into the bright light, the girl watched as this woman drew closer, her shoes scraping against the floor. Upon seeing that the owner of the candle was someone she knew, she grasped the bars of her cell and leaned toward her, relieved.

“Oh, Tousetsu—”

Yet the woman interrupted her in a voice as cold as ice. “How *dare* you address me with such familiarity.”

The girl’s eyes went round. Her hands still gripping the iron bars, she stiffened, and Tousetsu—Reirin’s head court lady—stared down at her, narrowing her almond eyes into a glare.

“Because *you* pushed Lady Reirin from the Seventh Pagoda, she continues to suffer into the morning hours. You hurt the flower of our Maiden Court, and for that you shall pay with your life, Lady Shu Keigetsu.”

“Pardon?”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. With the bitter glare of her own court lady turned upon her, Reirin was left wide-eyed with shock.

Chapter 1: Reirin Switches Bodies

“**I**...WHAT?” the accused murmured in disbelief.

Tousetsu gave a derisive snort at Reirin’s—no, “Shu Keigetsu’s” reaction. “Don’t play dumb with me. In a fit of irrational jealousy, you took advantage of the moment we were distracted by the shooting stars to push the helpless Lady Reirin from the pagoda. All those present heard you disparage her as an ‘accursed woman.’”

“I...” She *did* recall that.

Indeed, Reirin had heard Keigetsu yell as much as she closed in, her hair flying in all directions. Moments later, she’d felt the flash of the comet’s light burning her up from the inside out, and before she knew what was happening, she’d found herself crouching on the spot. And then, on the edge of her fading consciousness, she’d heard what sounded like “Reirin” screaming and something hitting the roof.

In other words...that was the moment Lady Keigetsu and I switched bodies. As unbelievable as it was, that was the only explanation she could come up with.

Her hands clutching the iron bars, Reirin thrust herself toward Tousetsu. “Um, I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but I’m—”

However, the moment she attempted to finish that sentence with “Reirin,” to her great dismay, she felt the air rush from her lungs. Again and again she tried to say her name, but each time, her voice vanished into thin air. Reirin was at a loss.

What’s going on?!

She tried to communicate that she wasn’t Shu Keigetsu, if nothing else, but her lips refused to form the name. And not just the name—any words that could have described her situation, like “switched places” or “different person,” failed to form a sound in her throat.

Drawing her own conclusions as to why Reirin kept opening and then closing her mouth, Tousetsu scowled in disgust. “Do you mean to tell me you meant her no harm? How laughable that you can’t even manage a decent excuse.”

It appeared that Tousetsu held “Shu Keigetsu” in the utmost contempt.

How do I tell her I’m Reirin?

Hit with a flash of inspiration, Reirin raised her voice. “Tousetsu! I know you like sweets. You’re especially fond of moon cakes. Red bean paste is your preferred filling. Horse mackerel is your favorite fish. You have a low tolerance for alcohol, which makes things hard when your position so often calls for social drinking with the bureaucrats. Isn’t that right?”

Her idea was to recite facts only the two of them would know. Surely Tousetsu, who was known for her intelligence and composure, would realize what was going on soon enough.

“You have one younger brother. His name is Kouyuu. The age difference is just right to make him the apple of your eye. Oh, I believe he was the same age as me! That’s why, not long after you first began to serve me in the Maiden Court, you asked me to think of you as an older sis—”

“Silence, you rotten witch,” Tousetsu interrupted her. Her voice was immeasurably darker than the one she’d been using only moments ago.

Reirin gulped. “Tousetsu?”

“I never want to hear you...an impudent sewer rat like *you*, without a scrap of beauty or talent or decency to your name, emulate Lady Reirin! Let me tell you something: I’ve already heard about how you snuck into her room and stole her diary a few days ago.”

Reirin was taken aback by her court lady’s harsh tone, but even more so by what she was saying. *I don’t even have a diary!*

Tousetsu continued to fume, heedless of Reirin’s consternation. “She came clean to us about your theft in spite of the awful fever racking her body. ‘I didn’t report it sooner so as not to worry you, but I fear Shu Keigetsu might use clues from my diary to hurt those close to me or perhaps even sway them to her side. It wouldn’t be right to keep quiet about it any longer,’ she said.”

At that, the court lady gave Reirin a look that could kill. “Did you think that if you read her diary and imitated her mannerisms, you could turn yourself into Lady Reirin?! Well, you were sorely mistaken!” she roared.



“What?!” Reirin was baffled.

But I am Reirin!

As ridiculous as it sounded, there was a good chance that “Reirin’s” body currently housed the soul of Shu Keigetsu. Her actions—that is, plotting to keep anyone from finding out that “Shu Keigetsu’s” true identity was Reirin herself—suggested no small amount of malice. In other words, this switch had been no freak accident, but something she had orchestrated in order to take Reirin’s place.

“For a grimy rat like yourself to even envy the lovely, wise, benevolent Lady Reirin, one who graced our land like a celestial maiden in the flesh, is the height of arrogance.”

“A celestial maiden?! Erm, I’d say that’s going a bit too—”

“You dare ridicule a soul as pure as Lady Reirin’s, you sewer rat?!”

“Yes, ma’am! I’m a sewer rat!”

There was no understating the authority in Tousetsu’s tone—or rather, the intensity of her love for her Maiden. It was enough to make Reirin parrot back her insult in the heat of the moment.

What to do? Her loyalty is blinding her to her mistress’s predicament...

Given how rarely she showed emotion on her face, Reirin had taken Tousetsu for the levelheaded sort, but it seemed she was quite enamored of

her mistress. Or perhaps it was Reirin's frail constitution that led her to see the girl in such an idealized light.

"E-excuse me..."

"In accordance with the laws of the inner court, suspects like yourself are to undergo the Lion's Judgment. Your victim, Lady Reirin, is to stand witness. Yet, in her own words, she has no desire to watch something so distasteful as the spatter of your foul blood... How sensitive and compassionate she is."

"Are you sure that's the appropriate reaction...? I mean, uh, nothing!"

"Consider this Lady Reirin's mercy. You're free to swallow it."

While Reirin was still reeling from this heated display of loyalty, Tousetsu thrust a small pill before her. It didn't take much imagination to figure that it was poison.

"Um..."

"I've already spoken to the guards. The Lion's Judgment will begin within the hour. By the time this candle goes out, I implore you to reflect on your sins and bring your own life to an end."

Delivering that final line in her usual mild tone, Tousetsu removed the candle from its stand, handed it to Reirin between the gaps in the bars, and turned swiftly on her heel.

Having accepted the offered candle on reflex, Reirin furrowed her brow in bewilderment. "I'm to die for the crime of hurting myself?"

How ironic was that?

“Hee hee... Aha ha ha! Serves you right!”

That was when she heard a resounding burst of laughter.

“Huh?!”

Reirin lifted her head in surprise—but no, the voice had to have come from somewhere right beside her. She glanced around, almost disbelieving, and there in the flickering flame of the candle was none other than the smiling face of “Kou Reirin.”

“Surprised? This is the art of the flame mirage. Fire is the faithful servant of our Shu clan. With enough concentration, any flame can manifest the image of the practitioner.”

“The practitioner? Are you a cultivator who’s mastered the mystic arts? No, before that...” She’d asked out of sheer surprise, but as she wet her lips, Reirin reconsidered her question for the girl reflected in the flames. “Are you...Lady Shu Keigetsu?”

“Yes, that’s right. Though I’ve become ‘Kou Reirin’ now,” Keigetsu answered without a moment’s hesitation. She then twisted Reirin’s face in a smirk. *“And you’ve become ‘Shu Keigetsu,’ the big bad villainess who tried to murder her. How are you liking the Maiden Court’s dungeon? With all the rats and bugs crawling around, your average girl would lose her mind in a matter of hours.”*

“Why would you...?” Reirin murmured before she could stop herself.

The other girl responded with a snide raise of an eyebrow. *“To set things right.”*

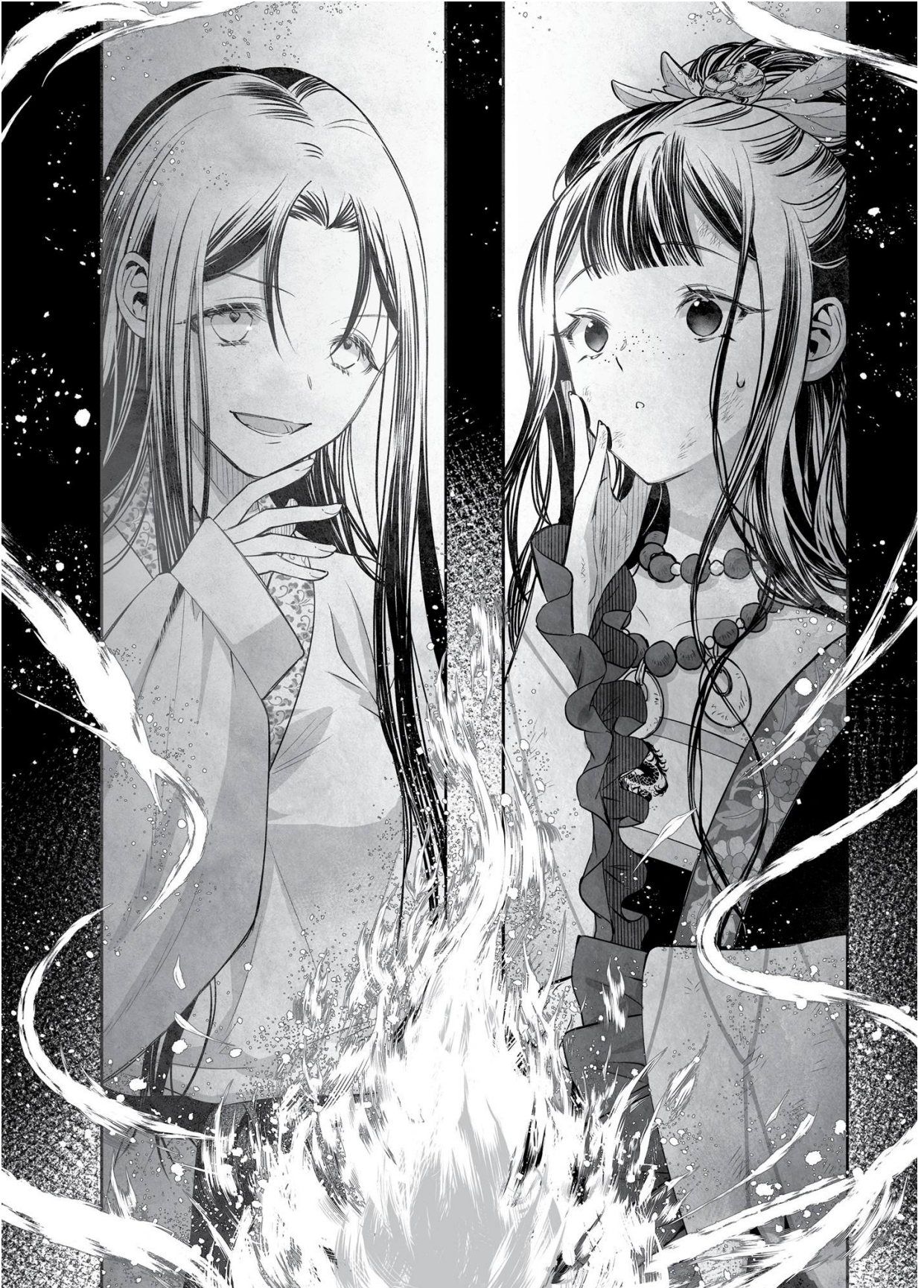
“To what?”

“You heard me. How is it fair for you to be blessed with everything? You were born the niece of the all-powerful empress, favored by His Highness, and beloved by the ladies of the court. And all the while, I suffer in—oh, I’m burning up! Everything hurts, for mercy’s sake!”

Keigetsu ran a hand through her hair, frustrated, then loosened the collar of her garment. From the sound of it, Reirin’s body was running a temperature.

“I have the kind but powerless Noble Consort Shu. Nasty court ladies. Looks nowhere near good enough to catch His Highness’s eye. I’m sick of it. But that’s when I came up with a wonderful solution.”

She disentangled her hand from her hair, a sharp glint flashing in her eyes. The smug smile tugging at her lips gave her the look of a cat staring down a mouse.



“We just had to trade lives. I’d have you set the stage for me, and the moment you were sitting on top of the world, I’d take your place. Then you’d get the perfect taste of all the misfortune I’ve suffered.” The girl gave an utterly delighted chuckle. *“You don’t know what it’s like to be despised. To be belittled, to be mistreated. You’ve always had someone to protect you—to love you. I won’t stand for it!”*

Perhaps worried that someone might overhear, Keigetsu followed that outburst by lowering her voice to a whisper. *“I want to see you absolutely miserable. I want to watch as people insult you, hurl stones at you, and refuse to believe a word you say. Oh, and by the way, I’ve cast a spell that prevents the body you’re in from communicating anything related to our switch. I’ve also set things up so that ‘Shu Keigetsu’ stole ‘Kou Reirin’s’ diary. You’ll never be able to prove who you really are.”*

Oh, so that’s what was going on earlier, Reirin thought, satisfied with the explanation.

It seemed Keigetsu was quite skilled in the Daoist arts, and her weak-kneed demeanor belied her true cunning. Reirin’s feverish body, on the other hand, couldn’t handle the magic quite as well, and she began to wobble on her feet.

“Oh, give me a break! The word ‘delicate’ makes it sound so nice, but ‘weak’ is all this body really is. A few bruises and you’re running a fever? I can’t believe this.”

“Um... Why don’t you lie down? It’d be a good idea to cool your forehead and the skin near your largest arteries. To be more specific, your neck, underarms, and—”

“Shut up! Do you understand the position you’re in?” Keigetsu yelled back, shooting down Reirin’s concerned piece of advice. “Guess what? You’re going to die soon. Here, I’ll let you in on a little something interesting: Your Lion’s Judgment is to be conducted by the merciless captain of the Eagle Eyes. You have no chance of survival. Even if you do take the poison I gave Tousetsu, any coward who resorts to suicide will have their body dragged to the ritual site and pelted with rocks. You’re going to die a miserable death, bathed in the scorn and ridicule of a crowd.”

She carefully punctuated each and every word, doing her best to drive the point home.

“Goodbye, Kou Reirin. Spend your final moments living in fear of Death’s footsteps, surrounded by filthy rats.”

With one last parting shot, Keigetsu puckered her lips and blew out the flame. In the same moment, the candle Reirin was gazing at was likewise extinguished.

Left alone to stare at the wisps of smoke rising from the candle, Reirin fell silent for some time. “This is terrible,” she murmured eventually.

Since that had been her first time seeing anyone wield the mystic arts, the whole encounter almost felt like a dream. Nevertheless, she knew she had landed herself in a great deal of trouble.

“What could I have done to make Lady Keigetsu despise me so?”

Tears pricked her eyes with the realization that she had never been met with such hostility before. The guilt was so overwhelming, she thought she might faint.

Oh...? She blinked in sudden surprise. But that means I'm still holding on to consciousness!

It dawned on her that *thinking* she might faint paradoxically meant that she had yet to do so. Her arms flew into motion, touching and examining the various parts of her body.

“My knees aren’t shaking... My arms aren’t numb... I’m not out of breath... My pulse is around sixty!”

Clamping her hands over her mouth, she gave a muffled cry of joy.

This is incredible! I always used to faint if I was even a little bit careless!

Few outside her clan knew the truth, but Reirin was not of a somewhat weak constitution; she was of an *abnormally* weak constitution. Ever since she was a child, all it took to make her fall deathly ill were the most trivial of reasons: she was too hot, she was too cold, she was tired, she had gone outside... Though owing to her own tireless efforts, she had managed to recover before her condition ever got too serious over the past few years.

Keigetsu had yet to realize this herself, but it wasn’t the fall from the pagoda that had caused “Kou Reirin’s” body to run a fever. Neglecting those tireless efforts had simply allowed her predisposition to falling ill once every three days to rear its ugly head.

“What a healthy body! Why, I’m so jealous!”

Reirin gulped. For a moment there, she had nearly forgotten her circumstances and considered herself lucky to have traded places with Keigetsu.

No, bad Reirin! That body was my parents' gift to me. It's my duty to live with it until the day I die.

Furrowing her brow, she clasped her hands together and nodded sagely at her own advice. Frankly, there was a part of her that still wanted to give in to the temptation.

The racket she was making stirred a rat in the corner to life with a squeak. Almost on instinct, she clicked her tongue to get its attention, then tickled it with the tip of her finger when it had scurried close enough. One aspect of her tireless efforts had made her quite adept at taming rodents.

Well now.

As Reirin gazed down at the happily scampering rat, her eyes grown accustomed to the dark, she pondered her situation with a solemn expression. Keigetsu had told her to tremble in fear of Death's footsteps, surrounded by rats.

But what part of that is supposed to pose a challenge?

For Reirin, who kept rats of her own for herbal experiments and who slipped into critical condition each time she got sick, that was business as usual.

"Oh, I spy a bug! I'd better catch it to give Mr. Rat something to eat."

Kou Reirin had a reputation as a fragile, delicate lady of high standing, one who wouldn't so much as hurt a fly. Keigetsu had been under the impression that tossing her into the dungeon would drive her mad in no time, but that had been a grave miscalculation.

Reirin was anything but delicate. Having survived an astronomical number of brushes with death, the girl had nerves of steel.

Chapter 2: Reirin Faces Execution

SHIN-U STARED UP at the sky, disgruntled, and then heaved another weary sigh as he took in its dazzling blue hues. It was a sunny day without a cloud in sight. The perfect weather for an execution.

“The Lion’s Judgment, eh?” he muttered darkly, stroking the ceremonial sword that hung from his hip. That was the name of the ritual he was about to perform. The suspect was thrown into the same cage as a lion; if the beast spared them, they were innocent, and if it ate them, they were dead. It was a truly brutal and arbitrary trial.

The practice could be traced back to the legend of a sage who had once led the Kingdom of Ei, whose noble soul had inspired a beast to spare his life, but the contemporary version called for riling up a starving lion before sending it into the cage. There was a zero percent chance of survival. In practice, it was no different from an execution.

An enormous cage had been set up in the courtyard at the end of the cloister, and there the court ladies and eunuchs had formed an audience. Their eyes sparkled as though they were awaiting a show. Their choice of humble black garb was nothing more than a measure to prevent the spatter of the defendant’s blood from staining their clothes.

Shin-u heaved yet another sigh.

If only I could kill her in a single stroke and be done with it.

The sentiment wasn't borne of mercy. He was simply loath to watch the inevitable sight of the woman shrieking, begging for her life, and dragging herself around the cage in disgrace. He'd stood witness to the Lion's Judgment several times before, and not even grown men could keep themselves from screaming. Knowing that a girl—and *Keigetsu*, no less—was bound to raise all hell, he dreaded the spectacle to come.

I know enough to understand what a pain Shu Keigetsu is.

Just thinking back on all the trouble she'd brought to the Eagle Eyes' office was enough to make him grimace. Though the infamous Maiden of the Shu clan loved to adopt a sweet tone and cozy up to those in power, such as Gyomei, Shin-u, or the four consorts, she always played the tyrant around the eunuchs and lower-ranked court ladies. Verbal abuse and insults were thrown around as a matter of course. On several occasions, she had accused her court ladies of invented wrongdoings in order to withhold their pay as "punishment," and she had bullied the eunuchs.

With her being a Maiden—one of the highest-ranked in the court—the Eagle Eyes could do little to keep her in check as long as she steered clear of more serious crimes like theft or murder. Now that she stood accused, the tempest of resentment that had long simmered in the Maiden Court would surge forth and descend upon her all at once. Normally, there would be time set aside for mercy offerings, where those who sympathized with the criminal were allowed to feed the beast—in other words, the more virtuous you were, the better your chances of escaping with your life—but nobody was going to do that for her.

Put simply, Shin-u's job for the day was to ask a hysterical woman a few questions as a formality, then retrieve whatever chunks of meat remained of her at the end of it.

“Captain of the Eagle Eyes” may sound like an impressive title, but in practice, I’m just another servant, he thought as he trudged over to the courtyard, his lips twisting in displeasure.

Being a prince with no claim to the throne was nothing but an inconvenience—both for himself and everyone else around him.

Shin-u knew full well why he had been handed such a bloody, tedious job. He was being tested. Could he devote himself to his role as a servant? Could he follow his orders and eliminate all enemies to the Imperial Court?

He was always being watched. Some looked at him with suspicion, wondering when he might turn traitor. Others feared him as a ruthless executioner. Most farcical of all were the women who gazed at him with unsightly lust, taken in by a beauty that ran only skin deep.

I’m sick of it.

Frankly, he found it all a hassle. His time at the inner court had taught him that the gorgeous compound housed nothing but a mass of malicious, self-interested, and egotistical desire. For that reason, Shin-u had never once cracked a smile since becoming the captain of the Eagle Eyes.

The moment he set foot in the arena, the gate in the back of the courtyard opened, and in came a giant lion the size of three grown men. Shin-u took the beast from its handlers and guided it carefully into the cage. With almost identical timing, Gyoumei, the empress, and the four consorts arrived on the scene and sat down upon the seats of honor.

All the Maidens except for Shu Keigetsu were seated one row behind them. In light of her fever, Kou Reirin had been given special permission to

spread a rug under a garden pavilion a short distance away and watch from there. She looked even more helpless and disoriented than usual.

After casting a concerned glance Reirin's way, Gyoumei calmly announced, "We shall hereby begin the Lion's Judgment of Shu Keigetsu."

Once he had read out the charges brought against the accused, he asked if anyone wished to present a mercy offering. The crowd responded with an immediate "no."

A dark cloud settled over the gentle features of her guardian, Noble Consort Shu, but at length, she gave a deep bow and said, "If she is innocent, she won't be eaten. If she is guilty of the crime, then what happens to her is no longer any concern of the Shu clan. Either way, a mercy offering won't be necessary."

In other words, she didn't need a criminal for a relative. The audience raised their eyebrows and said nothing to her halting but otherwise inoffensive response.

"Bring Shu Keigetsu here," Gyoumei commanded, raising a hand. That was the signal to open the other gate.

Shin-u had been prepared for the girl to show up kicking and screaming, but when he turned around, he had to arch an eyebrow in disbelief. Shu Keigetsu had come quietly. It would have been no surprise for a sheltered lady like herself to have gone mad the moment she was thrown into the dungeon, yet she walked straight ahead, a light in her eyes and her gaze unfaltering. Perhaps owing to her graceful gait, that ostentatious vermillion robe of hers looked almost a little sophisticated.

"Here I am."

The way she came before the cage and bowed to the dignitaries was no less novel. The audience blinked in bewilderment. Even the villainess of the Maiden Court would turn docile on the chopping block, it seemed.

“O wicked Shu Keigetsu. You pushed my butterfly—Kou Reirin, a soul as pure as a celestial maiden—from the Seventh Pagoda. Although no one witnessed the moment you shoved her, your own shout, Reirin’s testimony, and both the lead-up and aftermath are evidence enough of your intent to kill. Do you plead guilty to your crimes?” Gyoumei asked, a chill in his voice.

“No,” she responded without hesitation, bowing to the prince. But then, for reasons unclear to anyone else, she frowned and added in a mumble, “That is to say, several parts of your account aren’t quite correct... including the words you used to describe me...”

“What? Not only do you deny your wrongdoing, but you profess yourself *righteous*?” Displeased with her answer, Gyoumei’s scowl grew even darker.

Flustered, Shu Keigetsu lifted her head and gave an even more incomprehensible reply. “Oh, no, that’s not what I meant! Though I suppose it *would* sound that way...”

Evidently at a loss for words, she opened and closed her mouth a few times with a look of frustration. The crowd had come so close to seeing her in a new light, but now their gazes turned cold as they thought, *Oh, she hasn’t changed.*

“No matter,” said Gyoumei with a disappointed sigh and shake of his head. “The truth will come out in the Lion’s Judgment. If you are genuinely innocent, the beast will refuse to devour you. Or, if you’d prefer, Reirin has kindly requested that I allow you the sword of the Eagle Eyes’ captain. If you

get down on your knees and apologize, I shall permit you to take a blade through the heart in place of the trial.”

“Erm, both of those options seem rather extreme...”

Distress written across her face, Shu Keigetsu forewent proper etiquette and threw herself toward Gyoumei.

“I beseech you; hear me out, if only a little. If you are truly the one praised as our benevolent ruler, my kindhearted cousin—”

“Silence,” the prince interjected, his expression filled with rage. His voice trembled, all his characteristic poise abandoned. “There’s only one person in all of creation allowed to call me that, and that’s Reirin. I was told you stole her diary. Did you think you could win my favor by mimicking my darling cousin, you conniving she-devil?!”

“Yes, sir! I’m a she-devil!”

So fierce was his tirade that Shu Keigetsu automatically nodded in agreement.

Still unable to contain his rage, Gyoumei gave Shin-u the signal. “Put her in the cage.”

The Lion’s Judgment had begun. Shin-u shoved the Maiden into the pen from behind. It appeared she was too terrified to resist.

“Oh no... I can’t believe I made the same mistake twice in such a short amount of time. Their affection is just a little too overbearing...”

No, it wasn't fear. Pressing her hands to her forehead, she was merely reflecting on her blunder.

Having noticed the presence of an intruder, the lion growled and began its slow advance. When the girl continued to frown and mumble to herself in spite of the approaching beast, Shin-u was bemused enough to call out to her through the bars of the cage. "Hey. The Lion's Judgment is underway."

"Hm? Yes, so it would seem."

Though she lifted her head, her response was nonchalant as could be. Shin-u stared at her, wondering if she had finally lost her mind, but her eyes were perfectly focused. Yet still she let the predicament pass over her like a gentle spring breeze.

He had to ask one more time. "Do you understand your situation? You're locked in a cage with a starving beast."

"Yes... If it tears into me with those fangs, I suppose I'll die."

"You *suppose*? That's it?"



Was that all she had to say about it? Not that he'd been hoping for a better reaction, but it was unsettling to see her so calm.

What's going on? Was she always like this?

Even a master of the sword would be hard-pressed to keep his cool with such a savage beast closing in on him. Much like how a warlord who had survived countless brushes with death might calmly overlook the battlefield, or perhaps how a sage who had trekked through countless hells might attain a state of enlightenment, the woman before him did nothing but stand there, unfaltering.

“Does the thought of death not frighten you?”

“I'm used to it.”

“What?”

He shot her another glance, curious how a Maiden sheltered deep within the court could say something like that. The look in her eyes grew a little distant as she matter-of-factly replied, “Until the moment one dies, one is still alive. Likewise, until the moment I'm devoured, it has yet to happen. To start feeling the pain before I've even been bitten would be nothing but a waste of strength.”

Her argument sounded as logical as it did nonsensical.

The one thing Shin-u knew for sure was that she wasn't the least bit scared of this beast. Perhaps because her serenity did little to provoke its wrath, or perhaps because it regarded her tranquil bearing with caution, the lion did nothing but sniff at her sleeves, making no move to attack. Upon

seeing this, Shin-u bought the story in the legend for the first time; maybe a self-possessed sage *would* have escaped the beast unscathed.

The spectators broke into confused whispers at this unexpected turn of events.

“Why, I’ve never seen the lion leave someone alone!”

“Does this mean Shu Keigetsu is innocent?”

“I suppose it’s true that no one *saw* her do it.”

“But what else could have happened?”

Most rankled by the buzz of the crowd was Gyoumei, who seethed with righteous indignation. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. Captain, prod the beast with your sword.” He was commanding the guard to spur the lion into action.

“But, Your Highness, that would compromise the integrity of—”

“Captain. That was an order.” Gyoumei shot down Shin-u’s protest with finality. “That’s her punishment for mocking Reirin.”

As far as his half brother, Shin-u, was concerned, Gyoumei was no tyrant. On the contrary, he valued reason, cared for the weak, and was extolled as a great ruler-to-be. However, that was all the more reason he didn’t hesitate to punish those who would behave unreasonably or torment weak young girls without so much as an apology.

The crown prince’s orders were absolute. Shin-u glanced at the woman in the cage and saw that she remained as calm as ever. Then, without

another word, he poked the beast in the side with the tip of his sword.

Never in his wildest dreams had he thought this trial would make him feel guilt for Shu Keigetsu.

Grr... Grrraaah!

The hitherto docile lion roared. Shrieks erupted from the crowd as it flung itself against the inside of the cage over and over, drool spilling from its open jaws.

It pounced at the girl. She had managed to keep still until that moment, but as the beast attempted to sink its teeth into her sleeves, she scrambled to pull her arm out of its reach.

“Y-you mustn’t!”

Had fear won out at last? Shin-u automatically averted his gaze.

Nooo! That’s where I’m keeping the remains of Mr. Rat!

The truth behind Reirin’s sudden panic, however, was that the sleeve of her robe was hiding the rat she’d met in the dungeon. She’d been playing with the rodent right before she was taken from her cell, and then it had accidentally swallowed the poison from Tousetsu. She had completely forgotten that she’d dropped the poison in shock when she saw Keigetsu’s flame magic. Blaming herself for its death, she’d tucked its corpse away in her sleeve, planning to bury it as soon as the opportunity arose.

“C-calm down! I get it, it’s instinct for you to want this!”

You’re a relative of the cat, after all!

Backing away, Reirin made a desperate attempt to reason with the lion. “I understand that’s the natural order of things, but I haven’t had the time to move on! I mean, I’d like to atone in my own way!”

The crowd went wild at the sight of “Shu Keigetsu’s” sudden, marked distress. Reirin, meanwhile, was in too much of a tizzy to notice.

“Um, I realize this might sound like an excuse, but it’s for your own good! Eating this won’t do you any favors!”

Stripped of her shoes, she felt the chill of the steel bars against her heels. There was nowhere left to run.

Grraaaah!

“Once you’ve gathered your wits, you’ll see that the freshness and quality of this snack leave something to... Eek!”

Her attempts at diplomacy had failed; the starved, agitated beast sprang upon her. The tear of cloth echoed through the arena, followed by an even louder roar.

But when the same onlookers who had shut their eyes or averted their gazes at last shifted their attention back to the cage, their jaws dropped. The lion had swallowed the scraps it snatched up with a ferocious speed, only to slump to the ground a few moments later.

“What...?”

“Huh? The *lion* was the one to fall?”

While the audience around her was stunned into silence, the girl gasped and fell to her knees. “I tried to warn you! No...the responsibility is mine. I’m sorry.”

She reached out to pet the beast. When she was sure that it had breathed its last, her shoulders slumped in grief.

“Uh... Is the lion...dead?”

Before long, the crowd broke out into confused whispers.

“Does this mean the trial is over?”

“Surely it must? One of the parties is dead.”

“Then does that mean Shu Keigetsu was innocent?”

There was no precedent for the accused outliving the beast in the Lion’s Judgment. No one was sure how to judge the outcome in this scenario.

Eventually, Shin-u twisted the key in the lock and came into the cage. “Hey, Shu Keigetsu. Can you stand? I need to check if the lion is dead. Out of the way.”

Keeping the tip of his sword pressed to the beast’s throat, he conducted a brief examination. “Poison, huh?” he muttered at last, then turned his blade on the girl instead. “Did you set this up?”

“No. It was a tragic accident.”

“An accident? How?”

“The problem was Mr. Rat, you see...”

Even with the blade of the dreaded executioner thrust before her, “Shu Keigetsu” did not flinch. When the crestfallen girl told him the truth of the situation, Shin-u was stunned.

“You hid one of the dungeon rats in your sleeve? To *bury* it?”

“Yes. It lost its life due to my own carelessness.”

She’d responded as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but had she always been the sort to demonstrate such responsibility and compassion?

“I never imagined that the poison would linger in its remains... I sincerely regret that my actions have taken the lives of two different animals today.”

The girl’s meek confession was enough to make the corner of Shin-u’s lips twitch ever so slightly. “Heh...” For the first time in who knew how long, he felt the urge to laugh.

The court ladies found themselves captivated by the gorgeous captain’s never-before-seen smile, then turned their eyes to the heavens, fearing snow might start falling from the summer sky next.

Shin-u cleared his throat and swallowed his amusement. “If someone had fed the lion a mercy offering, it might have acted a little more rationally.”

Surely the irony wasn’t lost on some of the crowd. Between the women who had refused to placate the beast at their own relative’s execution and the

so-called criminal who had mourned a filthy rat, the heavens had shown mercy upon the latter.

The guard stepped out from the cage, then kneeled on the spot and pronounced, “Your Imperial Highness, Prince Gyoumei! The death of the beast marks the end of the Lion’s Judgment. If the accused is eaten, they are guilty; if they are spared, they are innocent. In accordance with the sacred rules of this ritual, I hereby declare Shu Keigetsu to be cleared of suspicion!”

A stir swept through the courtyard.

Gyoumei fell silent for several moments, his brow furrowing in thought.

At last he said, “Acknowledged.”

The life-or-death nature of the trial made its verdict absolute. Not even Gyoumei could overturn it.

“No...!”

“Forgive me, Reirin. I swear I’ll protect you, no matter what it takes.”

Gyoumei’s face twisted into a tortured frown when he saw the Maiden lying under the pavilion go white as a sheet. He then turned his scowl upon the other girl, who had taken a hesitant step out of her cage.

“Shu Keigetsu. In recognition of your innocence, I shall permit your continued stay in the Maiden Court. But make no mistake. The only charge you’ve been cleared of is that of shoving Reirin over the balustrade. By no means have I pardoned your insults against her. Do bear that in mind.”

“Oh? But if I’m not mistaken, wasn’t spurring the captain to action meant to be my punishment for mocking her?” she murmured in bemusement, placing a hand to her cheek.

Evidently, she’d overheard their exchange.

The prince’s eyes widened a bit at this surprising show of insight. “Yes, well,” he said, clearing his throat. “I shall not pardon them *moving forward*. If I catch you disrespecting Reirin in any way, or witness another one of your brazen attempts to displace her, know that I will have your head at once.”

“Displace her? Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean that it infuriates me to see a woman of your ilk imitate Reirin’s mannerisms. Know your place as a villainess and conduct yourself accordingly,” he all but spat.

The girl opened and closed her mouth a few more times, but in the end, she gave up and nodded. “A ‘villainess,’ hm? Very well. Though I am an inept villainess, I shall endeavor to live up to the title.”

The listless droop of her body was almost reminiscent of a flower drenched in the rain. On Shu Keigetsu, whose face so rarely wore anything but a coy smile or an arrogant sneer, the meekness of her bearing was all the more pronounced.

Gyoumei sighed, the wind taken from his sails. With the consent of the empress and the four consorts, he declared the rite adjourned.

Well, well. Looks like the “cleanup” is going to be pretty easy, after all, Shin-u thought. Though he maintained his ironclad poker face, it was with a

good deal of amusement that he watched the disappointed patrons leave, chattering among themselves all the while.

He shot a glance at the acquitted woman, but *she* didn't appear too pleased with the outcome. She stood rooted to the spot, looking as miserable as ever.

However, by the time the courtyard had almost emptied out, she at last slapped her cheeks and snapped herself out of her daze. "Come on, a girl's got to have backbone! I'll just have to do what I can. Let's do this with a bang!"

This was the situation that called for backbone, not the trial? Her choice of rallying cry was no less bizarre.

"First of all... Mr. Lion? Mr. Rat? I'm truly sorry for what happened here today. Please accept my condolences and rest in peace."

What's more, the first thing she had to do was pray for the souls of the beast and the rodent. Her every action was a mystery—and an entertaining one, at that.

"Shu Keigetsu." Before he knew it, he found himself calling out to her. "Were you always this sort of person?"

For reasons that escaped Shin-u, her eyes lit up at the question. "Oh! Do I seem different to you?!"

Leaning forward in excitement, she indulged in her frequent habit of opening and closing her mouth a few times, but eventually stopped and let her shoulders sag.

“I’m not the person I used to be. I’m afraid that’s all I can say about it.”

Had her execution motivated her to turn over a new leaf? If the average woman lost her mind in the dungeon, it followed that a near-death experience might inspire yet another to change her ways.

“Oh?” Shin-u shot back a noncommittal response.

Shu Keigetsu was haughty and talentless, an unappealing Maiden whose only skill lied in sucking up to her betters. And yet...

She’s an interesting one.

Gazing at this woman who, in the mass of malice, self-interest, and sycophancy known as the Maiden Court, had displayed not a single one of those sentiments, Shin-u gave a thoughtful stroke of his chin.

Chapter 3: Reirin Moves to Paradise

JUST AS REIRIN was pondering her next move now that the Lion's Judgment was behind her, a young woman with striking auburn hair showed up and called out her name. "Lady Keigetsu." The look on her face was devoid of emotion.

A plain, pale pink robe... She must be a retainer of the Shu clan.

Court ladies were to dress in the color of whichever of the five clans they served. The higher their rank, the darker the shade of their robe, which meant this surly-faced girl in a drab, muted red garment had to be a low-ranking court lady in charge of the cooking and laundry. She had likely come to usher "Shu Keigetsu" back to her room, concerned that the Maiden had yet to show any signs of leaving the courtyard.

Or so Reirin had thought.

"By the orders of the Noble Consort, I am to help you move into your new room. I hope to have it ready for you by nightfall. Let us make haste."

Reirin blinked. That wasn't what she had expected to hear. "My new room?"

"Innocent or not, Consort Shu said she cannot offer you the same warm hospitality after all the trouble you've made for the inner court."

From that, she gathered that either her room had been downgraded or she was about to be put into solitary confinement.

“Erm...”

Each palace was sectioned off to keep the other clans out. Reirin was briefly unsure whether she ought to set foot inside the Shu Palace, but in the end, she gave a hesitant nod of her head.

“I suppose not. I appreciate your assistance.”

Maidens spent the daylight hours honing their skills in the court, but come evening or days of rest, they were to stay in the chamber assigned to them in their respective palaces. In other words, she had to take up residence in *one* of the palaces if she wanted a place to sleep. Under the circumstances, showing her face around the Kou clan’s Palace of the Golden Qilin was likely to end in Tousetsu pelting her with poisoned dumplings and berating her as a sewer rat.

Perhaps I should start by explaining the situation to Noble Consort Shu.

Reirin’s polite response earned her an incredulous stare, but it didn’t take long for the court lady to shove those thoughts aside and begin leading the way out of the courtyard.

“Thank you very much. Um, may I ask your name?”

There was a short pause before she answered. “It’s Leelee.”

She was walking a few steps ahead, so all Reirin could see of her was her back. Even so, the low pitch of her voice—the tone of someone struggling

to keep her emotions in check—spoke to an ineffable rancor.

“For a year, I’ve stayed by your side and put up with serving you, and you can’t even remember who I am? I shouldn’t be surprised,” she added under her breath, like she couldn’t help herself.

Reirin was kicking herself on the inside. This was no low-ranking court lady but Keigetsu’s personal attendant—someone whose name she ought to have known. Still, Reirin found it curious that Leelee had been so quick to dismiss her blunder as a matter of course.

You could be a little more suspicious! Like, say, “You don’t remember me?! You must be a fake!” Don’t give up so fast!

As much as she wanted to grab the girl by the shoulders and give her an encouraging shake, she wasn’t in a position to so much as say the name “Shu Keigetsu.”

Hrk... Even if I can arrange a meeting with Noble Consort Shu, how am I to explain any of this to her?

Keigetsu hadn’t said she couldn’t say anything about their switch—she’d said she couldn’t *communicate* anything about it. Back in her cell, Reirin had tried to write the characters of her name on her palm, but her fingers would freeze up every time; thus, she had to assume that she couldn’t write anything pertaining to their switch either.

I can’t say anything, and I can’t write anything... What’s left? Butt charades, perhaps?

Reirin gave the idea some serious thought but ultimately decided against it. She couldn’t see anyone having the patience to watch her shake

her backside long enough to spell out her complicated situation. Besides, she had a feeling that Keigetsu's silencing spell would thwart even *that*.

The pair passed through the scarlet gates and continued down a path of dazzling white gravel. Glaring down at them from atop the entryway was a ferocious horse painted in a brilliant splash of color: the Vermillion Stallion. Befitting the rulers of the southern lands who had long revered the flame, the complex was resplendent in its entirety and rife with imposing imagery.

Immediately past the gates and under the largest of the eaved roofs was the chamber of the palace mistress, Noble Consort Shu. Leelee did not head that way, however, instead progressing silently down a crevice of a narrow path.

"Um, Leelee? Shouldn't we stop to greet Noble Consort Shu?"

"No. Consort Shu has instructed me to place you under immediate house arrest, lest you corrupt the court any further."

It was another way of saying she didn't want to see the face of a suspected criminal.

That's terrible. Here in the inner court, the consorts and their fledgling Maidens are supposed to be as close as a mother and child.

Reirin was shocked to hear what Keigetsu's guardian had said. No matter what charges were laid against *her*, for example, she was confident that Empress Kenshuu would at least be willing to hear her out. On the other hand, if she *did* prove to be guilty, the woman would go ahead and take the punishment into her own hands. Descendants of the Kou clan tended to be conscientious and treasure their strongest ties. If one of their own turned to

crime, they'd take responsibility if it meant killing them with their own two hands.

Perhaps Consort Shu was a more coldhearted person than I thought.

That was her first thought, but it didn't match the image that would come to anyone's mind upon hearing the woman's name—that of her gentle smile and the soft droop of her eyes. What's more, not long after Reirin had first come to the Maiden Court, she had witnessed the Noble Consort reach her hand into the trees of the courtyard and take great care to relocate an insect. She couldn't imagine the woman who had gazed upon a mere bug with such compassion to be so cruel.

Then...I suppose that speaks to how much of an outsider Lady Keigetsu is here in the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion.

The road ahead was going to be a treacherous one.

A handful of court ladies watched from the cloister as Reirin and Leelee crunched gravel beneath their feet. They gazed down upon the girls in disgust, hiding their faces behind their sleeves to conceal their sneers.

"Something stinks."

"You said it. It must be all the rats crawling around."

"Look, I spy two of them: a black one and a red one!"

No matter how much trouble she'd caused, they were going a little too far with their insults. These court ladies were dressed in cinnabar rust, a shade darker than Leelee's robe. Reirin was dismayed to be met with such blatant disdain by even the middle-ranked retainers.

Back in Reirin's home of the Palace of the Golden Qilin, even the highest-ranked court ladies clad in gamboge gold would engage her in friendly conversation. "Oh, Lady Reirin! It's been ten whole days since your last fever! I picked you some flowers to celebrate!" or "Please, Lady Reirin! The next time you faint, feel free to collapse on top of me! I have enough meat on my bones to break your fall!"

Hmm... It's so routine that I never paid it much mind, but now that I think about it, that's a little odd in its own right.

She hadn't noticed because she had nothing to compare it to, but in hindsight, she suspected those girls were a tad on the overprotective side. Particularly the latter.

I take pride in my mental fortitude, but I fear it doesn't come across to others. No... That simply means I have to prove my independence beyond a shadow of doubt! As a matter of fact, that's exactly what I'd like to do. A life of complete self-reliance—now that's the dream!

Whether Reirin cared for their pampering or not, a single cough was all it took to get the Kou Palace court ladies flocking to her and crying, "Oh no! This is an emergency!" While she was glad for their loyalty, deep down, she vaguely—no, *strongly*—wished that she could be a little more independent.

As adherents of the god of earth, the Kou clan had been single-handedly responsible for cultivating the kingdom's land since ancient times. Having slowly and steadily worked their way through the rugged terrain, on the whole, those of the family line were persistent, hardworking, and eager to serve. They were the type who would rather love than be loved.

Being a member of that clan, not to mention a mainline descendant through whom the blood ran particularly thick, Reirin was a hot-blooded

sort of girl. Unfortunately, her delicate looks, which were a rarity among the Kous, had put her firmly on the side of the “protected.”

As Reirin walked along, pondering the meaning of independence, all of a sudden the world around her grew darker and Leelee stopped in her tracks.

“This is your new room.”

When she saw where Leelee was pointing, Reirin’s eyes grew wide. “Here?”

There, half buried under a large tree, stood a dilapidated storehouse that could very well have been called a ruin. The roof had just barely managed to hang on, but the walls had rotted and their plaster had torn, allowing a glimpse of the decaying wooden pillars inside. Neither a proper path nor garden, its yard was overrun with moss and weeds, and the heavy scent of grass in the air was almost stifling.

“It used to be a storehouse for provisions. Now that it’s no longer in use, it’s nothing but a breeding ground for insects and fungi.”

Whether the sunlight or the humidity was to blame, the speed at which the weeds grew made the place so difficult to maintain that no one cared to use it for storage anymore. The wall that stretched behind the shed marked the border with the Ran clan’s Palace of the Indigo Fox. In short, this was the farthest fringe of the Shu Palace.

Exile. That was the most appropriate word to describe Reirin’s—no, “Shu Keigetsu’s” current predicament.

“This is where I’m meant to live?” As she glanced around at the weeds running rampant, Reirin’s voice cracked and trembled ever so slightly.

“*Here?* Truly?”

“Yeah. You heard me.” Leelee’s response came in a harsh tone.

“Leelee, what...?”

Reirin was taken aback, only for Leelee to whip around and pound her fist against the storehouse wall in rage.

“This is all *your* damn fault! We were consigned to this dump because you’re an arrogant tyrant of a woman who was stupid enough to raise a hand against His Highness’s butterfly!”

Her words were vulgar to the point that Reirin had never heard anyone speak this way before. Why, she almost sounded like a city dweller.

Discerning that the Maiden was more shocked by her vocabulary than what she was actually saying, Leelee lifted the corner of her mouth in a smirk. “Why so surprised? Haven’t you always belittled me as the daughter of a lowly dancer? *You’re* the one who said that no matter how hard I try to hide it, I could never erase the blood of my seductress mother. You and those blasted Shu court ladies insist on disparaging my best efforts, and now that I’m showing my true colors, you’re scared?! Give me a break!”

Her narrowed eyes were an almost amber color. Red hair and pale eyes. The speech of a working-class girl. Her status as a court lady meant she had to be a member of one of the five clans, but chances were good that she was the child of a Shu and an immigrant dancer.

Reirin frowned as she pieced together why this girl wore a pale pink robe—the color of the lowest of the low—despite working as a personal attendant.

Displeased with her interpretation of that reaction, the other girl punched the wall in another fit of anger. “Go ahead and sabotage yourself all you want, I don’t give a damn. But don’t drag me down with you! If I can just see the term of my service through, I’ll get a stipend... I’ve gotten this far telling myself that, enduring whatever came my way. And now I’m stuck looking after a criminal in this awful hovel?! You might as well have told me to drop dead!”

Along with her chambers, Noble Consort Shu must have taken the majority of court ladies from “Shu Keigetsu.” However, for all her charge’s flaws, leaving the Maiden without a single attendant would be seen as a neglect of her duties as consort. And so it was that Leelee, the most vulnerable of the court ladies, had been chosen as the unlucky victim.

She jabbed a finger at Reirin, an intense hue dancing in her still-young eyes. “Listen here! I’m not going to bother holding back anymore. I’ll tell you this now: I’m not planning to look after you. I still have the court ladies’ chambers to go back to. You’re the only one who’s going to live here. You can handle the weeding, the cleaning, and the cooking all on your own.”

“What?”

“For the record, I don’t think there’s a single court lady in this palace who would be willing to help you. After the hell you’ve put us through, I bet everyone’s jumping for joy to see how far you’ve fallen.”

Leelee exhaled a deep breath to pull herself together, then turned on her heel. “I’ll be on my way, then. Oh, right—and thanks to you killing that beast, the Maiden Court has been closed for seven days for a purification rite. You’re confined to this place for the duration. After the exorcism comes the Ghost Festival, but Consort Shu said you don’t have to bother attending. Do you get what that means? She wants you to stay here and keep your head

down. You've got nothing but time, so hey, sit back and make yourself at home."

She took one last parting shot and left. Reirin watched her tiny back disappear into the distance, then turned back to the storehouse.

"I'm to live here?" she eventually murmured. "In this wonderful place?!"

The hands she had reflexively clasped to her chest were quivering. Not in despair but in joy.

Indeed. This whole time, she had been overwhelmed by the "good fortune" that had fallen into her lap.

"A whole field of grass!"

Reirin broke into a run, plunging her outstretched hands into the thick green. It rustled through her fingers and felt coarse to the touch. What fun it was going to be to pluck! She hadn't expected she'd be granted an opportunity to put "Shu Keigetsu's" stamina to the test so soon.

"Rich soil!"

Next, she pushed the grass apart and touched the earth. As one could guess from the number of plants it sustained, the moist, damp soil had all the fertility of a mother.

"And most of all...freedom!"

Lastly, she cast a glance behind her. There was no longer a soul to be seen on the trail. All that remained was the dense greenery and a dwelling

that guaranteed complete privacy. She had been given a staggering abundance of free time, during which she was subject to no scrutiny whatsoever.

Gosh! Aaaah! Do I really get to stay here?! I can grow herbs, experiment, and sleep all I want! I get to live without anyone worrying about how much I'm eating, inspecting my complexion, or rushing to my side the moment I cough! I can't believe it!

The Maiden slapped her hands over her mouth and bounced up and down on the spot.

“Wait... There's no reason to keep my voice down now!” she shouted, pulling her hands away with the realization.

Reirin was a teenage girl. She went through the same emotional ups and downs as anyone else, but she was accustomed to keeping a lid on those feelings. Raising her voice would only make her court ladies worry, and she ran the risk of fainting if she got too worked up.

But now that she inhabited a healthy body and a secluded environment?

“I don't have to hold back anymore...”

Reirin heaved a happy sigh. She was overjoyed to be able to spend her time however she wanted—and, most importantly of all, to not upset anyone else in doing so.

“Oh, this won't do! Lady Keigetsu switched our bodies because she hates me. To take such pleasure in the circumstances would ruin all her plans.”

At her core, Reirin couldn't stand letting people down. She gave a solemn shake of her head, the thought snapping her out of her reverie. But not a moment later, she put a hand to her cheek in rapture, dazzled by the untamed nature before her.

“Still... Wow. This garden is all mine... Hee hee hee!”

The Kou clan was the bloodline of earth. They were a people who flourished in adversity, proud to stand on their own two feet. Though she kept telling herself this wasn't the time or place, Reirin couldn't see the landscape before her as anything but a glittering chest of treasure.

Shin-u frowned. The trail grew dimmer and dimmer the farther he went.

This is quite the gloomy place to find in the palace of the Shu clan, those devotees of the burning flame.

As he looked out over the yard, which grew more unkempt the more he distanced himself from Noble Consort Shu's chambers, his eyes narrowed. He was currently performing an audit of the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion alongside his most trusted eunuch, Bunkou.

The Lion's Judgment was an impartial trial, and its verdict was absolute. Now that Shu Keigetsu had been deemed innocent, she was to receive the same treatment as any other Maiden; to mete out vigilante justice

would be out of the question. As the man in charge of enforcing discipline in the inner court, Shin-u had paid the palace a visit to ensure she hadn't fallen victim to any unwarranted sanctions.

"You shouldn't have anything to worry about. Noble Consort Shu has a reputation for being the kindest and most graceful of the four consorts," his companion said. "The fact that she took Shu Keigetsu as her Maiden in the first place says it all! So what do you say, Captain? How about we stop flaunting our Eagle's crests to encroach on a consort's palace?"

By no means were the eunuchs and the consorts always on good terms. One minute they would form an alliance, the next they would jump on the slightest of mistakes to sabotage one another. Among those four consorts, Consort Shu was one of the moderates. Bunkou's whining was for fear of picking a fight with one of the only higher-ups who played nice with his kind.

"That 'grace' might translate to weak leadership. Whether she agrees with their actions or not, there's a chance her court ladies have taken matters into their own hands."

"We can cross that bridge when we come to it! Since when were you this passionate about your job, Captain? Hurry up and go back to your old misanthropic, apathetic, and cutthroat self!"

"Oho. So *that's* what you think of me?"

"See? See that way you're looking at me like a piece of trash? That's exactly what I'm talking about! Now turn that attitude on your duties, I'm begging you!"

Shin-u shot Bunkou an icy glare, but the petite eunuch only put on a show of tears; he didn't take a word of it back. Bunkou may have been a

jokester who liked to take the easy way out, but he also happened to be clever and capable. Shin-u dismissed his antics with a sigh, turning back to the road ahead.

Gaps began to form in the gravel, and soon weeds threatened to overrun the path entirely. As he proceeded down the almost impenetrably narrow trail, trapped by wild grass on either side, at last an exceptionally dense cluster of trees and a storehouse with its plaster peeling away burst into view.

“They really chased a Maiden off to a place like *this*?”

“The court ladies said as much when we flashed them our crests, so it has to be true. Hmm... Either it’s a ploy to put her in such dire circumstances that she wins back the sympathy of the court, or it’s the court ladies acting on their known hatred of Shu Keigetsu—that is, the girls saw their prey was weak and bared their fangs all at once.”

“Whatever the case, this is overkill.”

There was more light than in her dungeon cell, but the building was all but crumbling. When he noticed an insect wriggling over the moist soil near his shoe, Shin-u reflexively crushed it under his foot.

Wild grass and bugs. Judging by the revolting color of the walls, there was probably some sort of mold growing too. It was certainly no place for a noblewoman to live.

Near the storehouse, a girl—one of the court ladies, Shin-u assumed—was plucking weeds with her back turned to the visitors, presumably in preparation for Shu Keigetsu’s arrival. From the looks of it, she was the only attendant around. The sight of her sitting alone in the grass, occasionally

wiping her forehead as beads of sweat trickled down her slim back, was enough to make even the notoriously cold-blooded Shin-u frown.

“Shu Keigetsu isn’t a criminal. And no law-abiding person should have to live somewhere like this.”

“Hrm.” Bunkou regarded Shin-u’s show of pity with a quirk of his lips and a shrug of his shoulders. “You’re quite sympathetic to Shu Keigetsu’s plight, Captain. But really, what did you expect?”

“Excuse me?”

“The only thing *I* feel watching this is irritation.” There was a chill in Bunkou’s foxlike slits of eyes. “Shu Keigetsu may have been acquitted of pushing Lady Reirin from the pagoda, but that doesn’t excuse the rest of her misdeeds. She’s a foolish, haughty woman who never hesitates to mistreat her lessers. We eunuchs must never raise a hand against a Maiden, and I can’t tell you how many times she’s abused that absurd law to torment my colleagues, framing them for crimes or doling out punishments,” he spat, then pointed to the girl weeding the garden.

“Even now, she’s forcing that girl to pay the price for her own stupidity. She was supposed to be sentenced to house arrest, and where is she? Probably back in her old room, throwing a fit and refusing to leave. I’d be willing to bet on that.”

Compared to Shin-u, who had only been working there for six months and held the position of captain of the Eagle Eyes, the long-serving common eunuch had considerably more grievances against Shu Keigetsu.

However, his last few words of harsh advice would soon disappear on the tip of his tongue.

“Just leave her be. So what if she’s getting pushed around? She brought it on herself. If you go looking for her, odds are she’ll resort to her usual sweet talk and you’ll never be able to get rid of—”

“My, if it isn’t the captain! And Master Bunkou too?”

The girl who had been plucking grass turned around, bowing to the pair with a smile.

“It’s a pleasure to see you,” she said. “How may I help you today?”

Both Shin-u and Bunkou went wide-eyed when they saw her face.

“Shu Keigetsu?!”

“Huh? No...” Upon hearing her name, she opened and closed her mouth a few times, then gave a noncommittal nod. “I mean, ah, yes...?”

Her face was lightly freckled, and her eyes turned up at the corners. The scarf tied over her head like a peasant notwithstanding, she looked like “Shu Keigetsu” from every angle. The pair couldn’t hide their shock at the revelation.

“What...are you doing here?” Bunkou asked.

“Hm? Weeding, as you can see.”

“Weeding?” She’d said it so nonchalantly that he couldn’t help but parrot the word.

When she noticed the dubious looks on the guards’ faces, she threw up her hands and rushed to make excuses. “I was told I’d be living here, so I

thought I'd do some maintenance to make it a more comfortable home!"

"What happened to your attendant?" Shin-u asked in a low voice.

"Erm... She's out running an errand," she replied, averting her gaze ever so slightly. Just as he'd suspected, it was safe to say her court ladies had all abandoned her.

"Shu Keigetsu. Do you have something you'd like to tell me?"

"Huh?"

The Eagle Eyes were the enforcers of the inner court. If Shu Keigetsu had indeed been unjustly penalized, *she* was now in a position to bring a case against the Shu clan. Shin-u prompted her to speak up, but for reasons that escaped him, all she did was press a hand to her cheek in a fluster.

"S-something I'd like to tell you? Well, I suppose there is...but I'd hate to waste this garden, and there's so much weeding to be done... I know! It won't be long before nightfall, so why don't we leave that for another day?"

"It's the middle of the afternoon."

"Oh... Um, I'd hate to bother the two of you when you're so busy, that's what I meant! J-just look at how I'm dressed! I'd rather save our chat for a later date, when I can offer you both a cup of tea!"

"Tea?!"

Even Bunkou was speechless. The captain of the Eagle Eyes was one thing, but the only Maiden who would ever be caught serving tea to one of the eunuchs was Kou Reirin, the girl hailed as a celestial maiden in human

form. He had never dreamed he'd hear those words from the Maiden Court's notorious villainess, Shu Keigetsu.

“So you see, I'd appreciate it if you could give me another day...or perhaps a few months...no, a few days to get back to you! Would that be all right?”

“Sure.”

Shin-u was pretty sure he'd heard her slip a different unit of time in there, but the pleading look on her face compelled him to nod his head nonetheless.

From an outsider's perspective, she was in a horrible situation—exiled to a ruin of a house and forsaken by her retainers—but if she didn't want help, the captain had no reason to act.

“Well then! I'm sure you two have lots to do, so I apologize for keeping you so long. I'll leave you to—”

“Hey.” Shin-u interrupted the girl's attempt to rush the conversation to an end.

She blinked. “Yes?”

Shin-u and Bunkou exchanged glances. Shu Keigetsu was known for sucking up to anyone in power and taking every opportunity to be her own most vocal advocate. For *her* to send the captain of Eagle Eyes packing after he'd gone out of his way to visit her was beyond staggering.

“Uh... Ahem! Is there anything we can get for you?”

“What?” She tilted her head to one side in surprise, her fair cheeks smeared in mud. “Oh, I don’t know. Asking for your help would take all the fun out of it.”

“The *fun*?”

Met with a skeptical frown, she gave a firm shake of her head. “Apologies, I misspoke. I meant to say that I couldn’t bear to trouble you so.”

The guards traded looks again; there was yet another noble sentiment that had no business coming from Shu Keigetsu’s mouth.

“However... If I may be so bold as to take you up on your kind offer...”

At last, she shyly ventured a request. The moment she broke out the puppy-dog eyes, Bunkou shot Shin-u a look as if to say, *See, I told you so*. Of course, her demure behavior had all been an act. Now that she’d whittled down their defenses, no doubt she was planning to ask for court ladies, money, or perhaps a good word on her behalf to Noble Consort Shu.

“Could I ask for some salt?”

“Salt?”

“Yes. I should be fortunate enough to procure rainwater and potatoes on my own, but I’m afraid I can’t distill salt overnight.”

Now it was Shin-u’s turn to be rendered speechless. Just what was this epitome of tyranny and laziness standing before him planning to do?

“Even criminals in exile are afforded the basic necessities of salt, oil, kindling, and water,” Bunkou mumbled in reply. “I can’t imagine that an

innocent woman, let alone a Maiden, wouldn't be entitled to the same."

The girl's hands flew to her mouth in surprise. "What?! Is it really as simple as that?"

Even an exile's living conditions counted as "simple," by her standards. Bunkou turned his head and whispered to Shin-u, "Are we *sure* this is Shu Keigetsu?"

"I've been wondering that all morning," the captain readily agreed. Then, the look in his eyes softened a touch. "Doesn't her serene, modest demeanor almost remind you of Kou Reirin?"

"How could you suggest that with a straight face?! His Highness's butterfly—the delicate, graceful Kou Reirin—would never think to do something so uncultured as salt-making!"

Shin-u had managed to cut right to the heart of the matter, but Bunkou's immense fondness for Reirin led him to dismiss the idea out of hand. When it came down to it, neither could Shin-u imagine the fragile, mild-mannered butterfly being quite this forward, so he backed down without a fight.

"I guess not. She did tell me she wasn't the person she used to be. If I had to assume, either she lost her mind down in the dungeon, or she decided to turn over a new leaf."

"Our dungeon must possess powers untold," the eunuch muttered, casting a timorous glance toward the headscarf-wearing woman.

Shin-u couldn't help but curl his lip to see his wisecracking subordinate so thoroughly disarmed.

Whenever I'm around this version of Shu Keigetsu, I never cease to be entertained. I wonder why?

For once, he managed to get in a shot at his chatterbox of a sidekick. “Well, Bunkou? You heard our gardening Maiden. As the loser of our bet, I leave the task of fetching her salt, oil, water, and kindling to you.”

Leelee was furious.

Damn it. Damn it! Damn it all!

Her anger was justified. After all, she'd spent the last hour bowing and scraping just to get a single basket of food.

“Please, O benevolent matron! I can handle all the cooking myself. I won't ask you to do more than fill this basket with enough food for me and Lady Keigetsu! That's a mere two mouths to feed!”

“Two? Come now, Leelee. We're talking about that disgrace to the Shu name who landed herself in the Lion's Judgment. Maiden or not, I wouldn't count her as a 'mouth to feed.' One share is all I have to give you. But a retainer wouldn't dream of eating while her mistress goes hungry, now would she? Then the only solution is to withhold your rations altogether.”

“Only solution,” my ass!

For an hour now, the elderly court lady in charge of serving the meals, known as the culinary matron, had shrugged off Leelee's pleas and refused her even a scrap of food. As a victim of Shu Keigetsu's bullying and verbal abuse, the woman was yet another name on the list of people who had it in for the Maiden.

Unfortunately, she also happened to dislike Leelee, who had the blood of a foreign dancer running through her veins. It was clear from the glint of disdain in her eyes that when it came down to it, she had as little desire to feed the redhead as she did Keigetsu herself.

Blast it! I knew this would happen the moment they sent me off with that woman! Keeping her head bowed, Leelee clenched her teeth.

The harassment had begun on her very first day working in the Maiden Court. She *should* have received the cinnabar rust robe of a middle-ranked court lady, but the uniform tossed her way had been pale pink in color. That wasn't all—it had been accompanied by insults.

“Higher-ranking court ladies are expected to deal with bureaucrats outside the inner court every now and then. How could we represent the Shu clan with the daughter of a dancer who would bed a man on sight, not to mention a foreigner with a tenuous grasp of our tongue?”

My mother was no harlot! She was a bona fide dancer, a master of her art!

Leelee's mother had been a member of a traveling troupe that found their way to the Kingdom of Ei, the most prosperous nation on the continent. She excelled at the Sogdian Whirl, and the gorgeous sight of her dancing like a butterfly through the air had won her the heart of a man from the Shu clan.

However, a foreigner would never be allowed to marry into one of the five clans, who prized their pedigrees above all else; instead, she had been afforded an estate in the downtown area as his mistress. Dissatisfied nevertheless, his legal wife had tormented her until she was driven to an early grave.

Though Leelee's father had mourned her death, his wife had refused to let him adopt Leelee into the main family, and as a result, she had been sent to the Maiden Court to serve as one of the Shu clan's court ladies.

Her estate in the city had been taken from her. If she served her full three-year term, however, she would be provided food, shelter, and pay for the duration. For the sake of her own survival, Leelee had made up her mind to go work at the Maiden Court.

And how had that worked out for her?

The Shu clan was full of intense personalities. Though Noble Consort Shu was known for her grace, that virtue also manifested as spinelessness, and she did nothing to condemn the bullying rampant in the palace. The Maiden was arrogant, and her court ladies were bossy, so the girls were constantly looking for easy prey to keep the target off their own backs. In the end, Leelee became their victim.

I'd never sell my chastity! I don't even know how to seduce a man! I'm a proud citizen of Ei and a full-fledged court lady!

Hard worker that she was, Leelee had spared no effort to prepare for her service. With the physical prowess she'd inherited from her mother, she had learned the proper ways to carry herself in no time, and she'd read the books her father had given her to familiarize herself with the Five Classics.

And yet, one look at Leelee's red hair and overdeveloped breasts for her age was all it had taken for the women of the Shu Palace to deride her as a girl whose only talent lay in seducing men.

I hate it...

Leelee knew she was surrounded by enemies. The place was crawling with nothing but scum who loved to pick on the weak and mock anyone who deviated from the norm.

But what matters right now is that I get fed.

Having led a frugal life in the city, Leelee knew full well that sustenance was more important than her pride. Despite the shots she'd taken at Keigetsu, the truth was that not a single court lady in the palace would be willing to share food or a roof with her. If she couldn't get these rations, the one to starve for it wouldn't be Keigetsu the Maiden—it would be Leelee herself.

Alas, her pleas had fallen on deaf ears. After all that, the culinary matron said, "I have to start the preparations for dinner," and left. Leelee went so far as to cling to her skirt, but the woman violently shook her off.

"Damn it!" Leelee muttered to herself, left alone in the cloister.

She couldn't count on any charity from the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion. Her only option was to visit one of the other palaces and beg for their mercy. Taking its proximity and the character of its residents into account, the Palace of the Golden Qilin was her preferred place to start, but she doubted that anyone from the Kou clan would offer aid to a Shu court lady under the circumstances. That left the Ran clan's Palace of the Indigo Fox to the east.

In order to get to another clan's palace, one had to pass through the Maiden Court at their center. Leelee took off in that direction, brainstorming how to sneak into residences that were essentially off-limits to the other clans.

Just as the roof of the Maiden Court had come into view, someone called out to her from behind. "You there."

When she turned around, she saw a woman in an ivory silk robe.

Ivory silk... She's a high-ranking court lady of the Kin clan! What does she want with me?

Leelee couldn't tell who she was with her face hidden behind her round fan, but having deduced the woman's rank from the color of her uniform, she knelt down on the spot.

"How may I help you, honored Ivory Silk?"

In the event one didn't know a court lady's name, it was custom to refer to the color they wore as if it were their formal title.

The ivory-clad woman flashed a smirk from behind her fan. "Night is soon to fall, so I shall come straight to the point. O pitiful Pale Pink, would you care to become a retainer of the Kin clan?"

"What?"

That offer was the last thing she'd been expecting to hear.

Leelee was too shocked to speak. Inferring the reason for her silence, the other woman started in on her explanation. "I've heard whispers of the

punishment dealt to Shu Keigetsu. She's dragged you down with her, has she not? It's not as though you *chose* to be born the daughter of a dancer... You poor thing. My Maiden, the wise Lady Kin Seika, is heartbroken for you."

As angered as she was to hear this woman disparage her mother's profession, Leelee wanted to know what her proposal entailed. When she said nothing in response, the Kin woman smoothly went on, "Thus, we shall grant you a silver ermine robe on one condition. You have no particular allegiance to the Shu clan, correct?"

"Silver ermine?!" That was the color worn by middle-ranked Kin court ladies. Leelee's eyes widened at this once-in-a-lifetime deal. However, first and foremost concerned with the catch, she carefully broached the question: "May I ask the condition?"

"It's quite simple, really. All you have to do is torment your mistress, Shu Keigetsu."

"What?"

Leelee furrowed her brow, taken by surprise yet again. Why would a member of another clan be so eager to avenge Kou Reirin?

When she saw the dubious look on the redhead's face, the ivory-clad court lady sniffed in disdain for her slow-witted conversation partner. "You see," she said in a voice sweet as honey, "Lady Kou Reirin is the prince's butterfly. Even a child could see how much His Highness favors her. Only the most thoughtless of fools would lash out in a fit of jealousy the way your mistress did. The surest way into the prince's good graces is quite the opposite: to bend the knee and swear fealty to her."

In other words, by cracking down on Shu Keigetsu, the Kin clan would set themselves up as Reirin's benefactors.

As the character for "gold" in their name suggested, the Kin clan had been Ei's sole manufacturer of gold coin since ancient times, and in doing so had established themselves as a cornerstone of the kingdom's economy. Befitting a group of merchants at heart, the majority preferred to conduct themselves in an intelligent and pragmatic manner. Though any woman would pine for the smart, strong, and masculine Gyoumei, it was no wonder that the Maiden of the Kin clan had made the calculated decision to set her sights on the second seat instead.

"Not only are we forbidden to enter another clan's palace, but the Maiden Court is closed for the purification rite for the next seven days. For the time being, we must leave it to one of her own clan to put Shu Keigetsu in her place." The woman in ivory silk giggled behind her fan. "But when it comes out that *we* were the ones to orchestrate her suffering, imagine how chagrined the women of the Shu clan will be—and the rest of the clans, knowing that we beat them to the punch."

"If we go too far in punishing her, won't we get in trouble with the Eagle Eyes?"

"It's a little late to be saying that after *your* people chased her off to a ruin. Worry not. A small sum of money is all it takes to make the enforcers look the other way." Her tone was confident.

The woman pulled her ornamental hairpin free and thrust it before Leelee. Pearls lined a base made of silver. With thought to the clan's signature element, it was the perfect design for a Kin woman.

“I am Gayou of the Kin clan. Starting tomorrow, I shall give you a reward each time you meet me here and report on your dealings with Shu Keigetsu. After seven days, you will be granted your silver ermine robe.”

Leelee stared down at the hairpin, still mulling this offer over. Seeing this, the woman said, “Perhaps you’d prefer this.” She then took a small burlap sack from her sleeve.

Inside was almost two cups of rice. It was a high-end product, polished to enough of a shine to give the ivory silk robe a run for its money.

The woman gave a scathing laugh when she saw Leelee gulp, then slipped her hairpin into the bag and pressed the whole package into the girl’s hand.

“I’ll prepare double the amount for tomorrow. Interested?”

“Yes.” There was a slight hesitation, but in the end, Leelee accepted her offer.

The woman smiled, satisfied, and turned swiftly on her heel.

As she watched Gayou disappear into the shadows of the Maiden Court, Leelee tightened her grip on the small bag in her hand.

I’m not doing anything wrong.

This was a matter of survival.

Besides, most of the Shu clan was happy to torment Shu Keigetsu without her asking. Leelee had already renounced her duties as an attendant. All she had to do was mention that to another clan’s court lady once per day,

like making a round of small talk. Just that, and she could escape the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion and get her hands on a silver ermine robe.

Leelee took a deep breath to clear her mind, then turned back the way she had come. The sun would be setting soon. She had to cook the rice before then.

Knowing how to start a fire puts me in a better position than most. I bet a certain someone is crying her eyes out as we speak, drowning in weeds and bugs.

Her lips twisted into a smirk as she considered the irony of it all. Come to think of it, the Maiden had once thrown her out into the garden for the simple reason that she didn't like the look on her face.

This was Keigetsu's just deserts. *Once I've cooked the rice*, Leelee decided, *I'll eat it right in front of her face*. If the girl rubbed her forehead in the dirt and apologized, she *might* be generous enough to let her have a bite.

"Heh heh... I'm going to make her pay for the hell she's put me through."

It was with this mindset that she bravely ventured back to the storehouse where Keigetsu awaited her.

"Oh, hello, Leelee! You came back!"

However, all her plans fell apart the second she stepped onto the grounds. The very woman who was supposed to be despairing amid weeds and a rundown shack had called out to her, pulling off her headscarf with a smile.

“Huh?”

“Great timing! I just finished frying the potatoes. I stir-fried some rapeseed shoots while I was at it! Come, let’s eat while it’s hot!”

“Huh?!”

How on earth had Shu Keigetsu, who by all accounts should have been on the floor bawling, cooked such a lavish meal?

“Oh! And look at this! I’m halfway done fixing up the garden!”

What’s more, she had weeded her way through half the heretofore unruly yard. Not only that—she had moved the stray branches aside, sorted them according to their thickness, and formed the soil into ridges here and there.

The woman standing before Leelee puffed up with pride, grabbed her court lady by the hand, and led her over to the rows of ridges.

“It was a mess of all sorts of greens and fruits, so I replanted them by type. From left to right, we have the potatoes, the chives, the gourds, and the rapeseed plants—”

“H-hold on!” Leelee shook herself free of the Maiden’s grip. “Slow down! What’s going on here?!”

“Huh?”

“How did you get potatoes and gourds from this overgrown wasteland?! What, did you use the mystic arts?!”

The girl only giggled, amused at the suggestion. “Leelee, you silly! *I* don’t know how to use magic.”

Leelee had never heard that voice used for anything but squalling or berating others; she was taken aback to hear it make such a dainty laugh, one that exuded elegance.

“It was a wonderful stroke of luck, that’s all. This used to be a storehouse, correct? The food left abandoned here sprouted with the help of the sunlight and humidity, unbeknownst to everyone else.”

“What?!”

“The tenacity of life never ceases to amaze... This place serves as the border with the Ran clan, whose element is wood. Perhaps it’s rife with a qi that nurtures plants. This really is some sort of paradise.”

The girl nodded at her own words, awed, and then bent down to give the soil a loving pat, heedless of how it dirtied the hem of her clothes.

Leelee was stunned. “You can’t be serious. Everyone knows this place is overrun with bugs and horrifying fungi!”

“Fungi! I forgot to mention that! The smut fungus has done such magnificent work here!”

Her face lit up, and she ran over to one of the dampest, muddiest spots she could find. When she came back, she was holding a stalk of grass with an unusually large stem in her hand.

“Take a look at this! The wild rice was infested with smut! It’s still edible, *and* it can be used for eyebrow paint. Ooh, I know! Why don’t I go

ahead and stir fry these too?”

Leelee didn't know this, but infecting the seedlings of certain grasses with smut fungus turned them into a vegetable with the texture of a bamboo shoot. Though she hailed from the city and knew how to fend for herself, she'd never tried her hand at growing vegetables before.

“Wh...wh...wha...”

“Oh, how blessed I am for all these opportunities to put my book learning into practice! So *this* is the reward of a good challenge... Praise be to my never-ending energy!”

The girl stared down at her own arms in rapt fascination, those eyes always alight with cajolery now sparkling with joy.

Abruptly snapping back to her senses, she shouted, “The potatoes!” and whirled to face Leelee again. “Come, our food's going to get cold! Let's start with the fried potatoes. I've always dreamed of stuffing myself with a dish loaded with oil and sprinkled with more salt than common sense should allow, undeterred by the threat of heartburn! Go on, Leelee! Join me in making this dream come true!”

The Maiden held out a hand, brimming with confidence, but Leelee frankly had no idea how to react.

“How did you even *get* salt and oil?”

“A very generous Eagle Eye brought me everything I needed, including cookware. I hadn't been planning to ask for salt, actually. I figured that if the need arose, I could season the food with tears to give it a saltier taste. But I

did want to sprinkle a generous helping, so I was right to take him up on his offer!”

Seasoning her cooking with her own tears? Leelee was having so much trouble following her bizarre train of thought that she wanted to scream. She couldn’t believe that the girl standing before her was *the* Shu Keigetsu.

What’s wrong with her? She’s like a completely different person.

Had she been possessed by a vengeful ghost, or had she gone insane? Leelee couldn’t imagine an evil apparition this animated, so it was probably the latter. She must have lost her mind when she was locked up in the dungeon; that’d be enough to drive any woman over the edge in a matter of hours.

“You *are* Shu Keigetsu, right?” She checked to be sure. “If you’re up to something, go on and spit it out now.”

For some reason, the other girl awkwardly averted her gaze.

“O Great Ancestor,” she murmured under her breath. “Today, I relied on the help of others to indulge my own selfish desire to partake in fried potatoes. For this, I ask forgiveness.”

“What? I can’t hear—”

“After the night of the Double Sevens Festival, I became a different person. That’s all I can say about it for now.”

Leelee attempted to press the issue, but the other girl popped a fried potato into the redhead’s open mouth.

“That’s it, Leelee! Open wide!”

“Mmph!”

The bite-sized chunk of freshly fried potato was piping hot, and it practically melted in her mouth when she tore through its skin with her teeth. The liberal helping of salt had blended so well with the taste of the potato and the oil that Leelee’s eyes grew wide in spite of herself.

“Mmm! Th-this is amazing! It’s even better than I expected!” No sooner had the Maiden popped a potato into her own mouth than she flailed in delight, her hands pressed to her cheeks. “This is bliss... How wonderful it is to breathe in the oil’s aroma without getting sick to my stomach! I can eat as much as my heart desires! No, I can gorge on them! I can gorge on these fried potatoes!”

She seemed quite pleased with her creation.

Leelee stared dumbfounded as the girl nodded to herself over and over, her cheeks flushed and her eyes misty.

What the hell happened to her?

She hadn’t the faintest clue what had become of Shu Keigetsu. There was only one thing she knew for sure.

Is it even possible to drive this woman into despair?

The “simple” mission that woman in ivory silk had given her was going to be a lot more difficult than she’d thought.

“Next up is the rapeseed! Come on, let’s do this with a bang!”

The rice Leelee had brought to show off had long since cooled, left abandoned in a corner of the well-groomed yard.

Chapter 4:

Keigetsu Learns the Truth

AROUND THE SAME TIME, Kou Reirin—no, Keigetsu in Reirin’s form—heaved a beleaguered sigh. Two nights had passed, and still her fever had yet to subside. Frustrated, she sat up and leaned against a stack of pillows beside her bed. She could sense the court ladies over in the next room turn in her direction, alerted by the sound of her stirring.

“Is there anything we can do for you, Lady Reirin?”

They were high-ranking court ladies of the Kou clan, those permitted to clad themselves in gamboge gold. Keigetsu’s face relaxed into a smile when she heard their voices, deferential but filled with concern.

“No, I’ll be all right. Don’t fret over me,” she said meekly.

After a beat, the court ladies nudged open the sliding door.

“Your fortitude is one of your greatest virtues, of course, but we’d be saddened to be of so little help to you. Please don’t hesitate to tell us if there’s even the slightest of changes in your condition,” one attendant pleaded with her.

“You all worry too much! I’m fine, really. At ease.”

It was all Keigetsu could do to hold down her laughter.

Oh, I'm doing great!

How wonderful it felt to be fussed over and pampered. Her fever was running high and her joints were creaking, but she was enjoying her circumstances enough to sit up and indulge in conversation.

This is what I've always wanted!

Delirious with fever, she looked out over her room in satisfaction. As the residence of the empress, the Palace of the Golden Qilin was extra spacious. Most of the furnishings were a touch on the rustic side, perhaps a symptom of the Kou clan's love of simplicity, but it was clear at a glance that everything was kept in tip-top condition.

A mild incense had been lit to soothe her soul. The fire burned low and far from her bed so as not to disturb her sleep. Her loyal court ladies showered her with concern, never losing the respect in their gazes. The place was overflowing with compassion for "Kou Reirin."

With this much love and care, even a sewer rat could turn into a delicate, graceful butterfly.

Keigetsu slumped her head against a pillow, an ironic smile etching its way onto her face.

She knew what people said about her in all the Maiden Court gossip. She was the talentless, treacherous Lady Rat. But as far as Keigetsu was concerned, it all came down to a matter of environment.

I never stood a chance from the start! How could the lowest-ranking daughter of the Shu clan, who had nothing going for her but a little knack

for the mystic arts, ever hope to compete for His Highness's favor in the Maiden Court?

Keigetsu wasn't born to become a Maiden. She was nothing more than the daughter of the most miserable outcast of the Shu clan and a slender gentleman who happened to be a failed cultivator of the Dao. She had been meant to live a quiet life in the small countryside estate afforded to her, far removed from the five clans' power struggle.

The course of her life had changed only a year ago—when her parents committed suicide in the face of their mounting debt. With no one to turn to, she had been taken in as a maidservant to the main family, and by some twist of fate, it was there that she was discovered by Noble Consort Shu during one of her visits home and appointed as her fledgling Maiden.

“My, you poor thing! To have lost both parents at such a young age!”

Amid the clan known for its many fiery personalities, Shu Gabi had a reputation as a mild-mannered, compassionate woman, enough so to have caught the eye of the elegance-loving Emperor Genyou and earned the seat of the Noble Consort. She was also the only one of the emperor's wives aside from Empress Kenshuu to have given him a son, although it had been a stillbirth.

She had chosen the Maiden to become her successor on the basis of neither aptitude nor profit but out of sympathy. In practice, that decision of hers had boosted her own reputation and made Keigetsu into the woman of the hour.

But looking back, that was where Keigetsu's good fortune had run out.

Just thinking back on those days makes me furious! The disdainful looks from my court ladies. The sneers of the other Maidens. Consort Shu is nice enough, but all she does is wring her hands.

Keigetsu chewed on her thumb in frustration.

There was no way someone who had moved to the capital only months ago would be able to read the scriptures with ease, or recite poetry, or know how to dance! Yet all anyone did was mock me!

Given that she had received no formal training to become a Maiden, the Shu court ladies and other Maidens had belittled her at every turn. They had mocked her for making too much noise when she walked, or talked behind her back about how ineloquent she was. As a consequence, Keigetsu had chosen to keep only court ladies who were even less educated and sophisticated than she was by her side.

The only one who hadn't laughed at her was the Maiden of the Kou clan—Kou Reirin. But that was exactly why Keigetsu hated her.

She was beautiful, intelligent, and even blessed in the personality department—the perfect woman. It was enough to make Keigetsu puke.

I can't stand her "I'm above it all" attitude! All she does is stand by and watch!

The way Keigetsu saw it, the whole reason Kou Reirin could be the prince's butterfly was that she'd come into the world with the deck stacked in her favor. She had been blessed with the ultimate status as the empress's niece, good looks, and blood ties to the prince.

What's more—perhaps owing to their earth qi, if one were to invoke the five elements—those of the Kou clan were known to be an unpretentious and devoted sort. Given the tough constitutions and caring natures of the rest of the family, it only made sense that a fragile beauty like Reirin would be showered with love from the moment she was born. The incessant stream of letters and gifts she received from her older brothers, who were off fighting in another kingdom, spoke to how much the whole family adored her.

And it was the privilege of experiencing love that had made her a good person.

She could cultivate her skills because she had people warmly watching over her, not rushing or disparaging her. Even I could excel in an environment like this! It's easy to say a few gracious words when everyone treats me with this much love and care!

Keigetsu gave a pleased snort as she thought back to earlier that afternoon, when Gyoumei had gone out of his way to visit her.

The crown prince was a master of both the pen and the sword, a charming man as vivacious as the sun. Yet for all his integrity, he was as cold as ice toward those he had deemed objectionable, and so Keigetsu had always gotten short shrift from him. Today, however, he'd shown her a sweet smile from start to finish.

"I'm sorry for any worry I caused you during the Lion's Judgment."

"I see your fever's still running high. Here, lean on me."

At times he sounded apologetic, at others concerned. Keigetsu couldn't count how many times her heart had fluttered in her chest as he whispered those words close enough for his lips to brush her ear.

