Like A Lady

by Tsuki no Kimi (Tsukinokimi), Tsukinokimi

Summary

It is year 12 of the reign of Emperor Shōwa, and Rima Mashiro's entire world revolves tightly around the petty squabbles in the girls' boarding school in the mountains around Kobe. But when she uncovers her sworn nemesis' best-kept secret, she cannot stop the unravelling of the events that stem from it— both outside the school, and within it. Pacific War AU
The Tokyo Station train platform was full of girls and women as far as my eye could see, clustered in circles and lines like nesting birds. Bundled in coats and capes and haori ¹, they were surrounded by kissing mothers, adoring grandmothers, and much-spoiled little brothers hiding in the pleats of their skirts. It was a familiar scene, and it hadn't changed but for the children's heights and the adult's weariness. Peaceful, almost.

My own mother hadn't come to see me off. She didn't have time to, between helping Grandmother with the family business and taking care of her sister's children. How could I begrudge her that? I was a big girl now, considered old at sixteen, and it was a miracle I was being sent off to school at all. I had decided not to question why I wasn't being kept at home to help out. My own family had varying and conflicting ideas about what was to be done with my education, ideas that I would have preferred to stuff into a lacquer box and hurl into the Sea of Japan.

So rebellious, a voice in my head said, nastily. *When did you get so rebellious?*

I ignored the voice, for I had just heard my favourite sound; someone across the train platform squealed “E-eehhh?!” quite loudly, and I knew precisely who. I whirled around, hat almost unseated from my head, and squinted into the crowd.

There she was, the elusive girl; Hinamori Amu, trying to look as cool as ever, had dropped her suitcase. Various handkerchiefs had skidded out onto the ground, and Yuiki Yaya was leaping around, desperately trying to catch them all. Barely concealing a smirk, I picked my way through the people.

“Aaaa! How clumsy you are, Hinamori-san!” I trilled in a monotone, putting on my best high falsetto and speaking directly into her ear. “How unladylike— dropping your suitcase? Do you expect to drop your husband's tobacco when you are married? Will you even catch a man with those clumsy arms of yours, you bourgeois girl?”
Amu jumped and yelped again, spluttering and grabbing for her suitcase handle. I was imitating our headmistress, Fujisaki-sensei, a woman with a sweet, gentle voice and a penchant for stabbing insults. We were fond of calling her The Dragon behind her back, much to everyone's (un)amusement. Yaya, standing behind Amu, burst out into laughter, and ran to hug me.

“Hi, Yaya,” I whispered, returning the hug with one arm, but the shrill whistle of the steam engine drowned out my faint voice. Together, the three of us boarded the train with our luggage, clasping our hats to our heads, chattering all at once.

“Look at them,” Yaya sighed. “They're so shiny.”

The school trains were beautiful, even I had to grudgingly admit. State of the art models from Germany, plated in gleaming mahogany; they still filled me with an embarrassing childish wonder after four years. Their compartments were already packed with the murmur of girl's voices and the clatter of Oxford soles on wood flooring. I tugged on Yaya's sleeve. “Let's find a compartment,” I murmured, insistently, both hers and Amu's arms in a grip.

Amu, being the tallest, led the way through the clusters of girls. Many called out in greeting as she pushed through. Amu was popular; no matter how much she denied it, people were drawn towards her. Despite an aloof exterior covering up a core of shy, adolescent awkwardness, she had a sort of charisma. Far from an ideal beauty, she nevertheless had a nice sort of face. She pulled men and women alike.

I lacked her gift of attracting female companionship, being what a sensei called a woman with a glacial temperament and what Yamabuki Sāya called a frigid bitch. I could only be grateful Amu didn't care about my 'glacial temperament'. I had transferred halfway through third form an aloof, introverted merchant's daughter with little regard for anyone. The following year, I exited a confident, almost-functioning human being thanks to Hinamori Amu — or so I'd like to think. Thus, I jealously guarded Amu like a woman guards a string of pearls, fancying her mine in a horrible sort of way.

Pushing that thought away, I tuned back in to the conversation just as we were pushing into a compartment. Yaya was wildly recounting a possibly-made-up story, and, as Amu loaded up our bags on the luggage racks, I saw my friend pause.

That can't be good.

I felt a chill of foreboding as she peered over my shoulder, confirmed when Amu smiled gently. “Oh! There's Nadeshiko-chan! I need to...” She broke off, staring at me. I could feel that my own face had gone from a faint smile to downright stony.

Nadeshiko-chan! Wonderful Nadeshiko-chan. Perfect Nadeshiko-chan. Lovely Nadeshiko-chan, daughter of the Dragon, reigning autocrat of Seiyo Girl's Academy. Amu must have read my expression, because she looked almost hurt. “You know?” Amu wrinkled her nose, making her look like a chipmunk that had choked on an apple core. “When did you start hating Nadeshiko-chan? She's so nice!”

I tried to keep my face impassive, stuffing my hands in my coat pockets. “Nice? Yes, of course.” Nadeshiko was nice, and tigers were friendly, highly sociable creatures that would soon be running for office. “That's fine, Amu. Go on and give your petty salutations.”

She stayed where she was, biting her lip; I could tell she didn't appreciate my sass, but I was far too stubborn to rescind it. Yaya laughed, oblivious to the tension. “Rima, you're just jealous, because Nade-chan staked her claim on Amu-chi firs- OW!”

Yaya cried out, hopping back like an offended sparrow; I had stomped on her foot, hard. Yaya had
a horrible habit of stating hard truths and then laughing them off. At times, I liked it, but not now. Jealousy was unseemly, and I didn't want to hear that I was jealous of someone I had no chance of measuring up to. It wasn't that Nadeshiko's family was petty nobility, nor that she was a blooming carnation of Japanese wifely ideals; it was simply that-- that–

Amu pressed a hand to her mouth, eyes wide. “You're jealous, Rima?”

Of her social ability. Of the way she always got what she wanted, of her knack for gathering girls around her in female understanding. Revolting. I was by no standards a tomboy, but next to her, I felt like one; short for my age, knees grubby, I had a vulgar sense of humour unbefitting my station and a fondness for wisecracking that made my teachers despair for my future. Nadeshiko's idea of comedy was stupidly clever little bits of hiragana wordplay. She was stupid. Stupidhead. I loathed her female ability, right down to the perfect ruler-straight part on the top of her head and tousled aubergine-black fringe.

“I don't see much to be jealous of,” I lied. Tossing one of my unruly braids over my shoulder, I edged into the train compartment, pretending that Amu's gawky noodle frog face did not exist. My eyes were occupied, watching so closely for the telltale sakura hairpins and silky ponytail of the Dragon's Daughter that I backed right into the window, smacking my head. Rubbing it ruefully, I heard a peal of laughter: my blood froze.

“Rima-sama is as poised as ever,” Nadeshiko's light, gentle voice carried easily through the compartment over Amu's shoulder. Like a monster, she came into view; her ponytail was as irritatingly bouncy as ever, legs long and face bright. Like a dumb moon. I wanted to pull that silky ponytail out with every fibre of my being.

“Nadeshiko!” Amu turned around, eyes shining; Nadeshiko's eyes visibly softened in her presence. Her soft spot was Amu; I felt an odd, dull ache in my chest at the thought of it. Watching them together was like voluntarily stabbing myself with thumbscrews. With extreme difficulty, I pulled my eyes away, just as Fujisaki turned her attention to me, with a tinkling laugh.

“Is your head quite alright, Rima-chan? That was quite a smacking noise! Almost like a gourd against glass– what a strong skull you have. It is truly admirable.”

I didn't quite know what to say to this, but I knew exactly what she was implying; an unspoken melon-head and thick-skulled rang in the air. As always, I knew little of what to say in the presence of Nadeshiko, who waited for my clumsy moments like a vulture waits for a carcass to ravage. Amu's laugh was the only thing that spurred me to speak, a sulky little voice.

“What a blessing, then, that we aren't all eggheads like you, Fujisaki-san.”

I heard someone make the tiniest of exhale-laughs through their nose across from me, but I was oblivious. Nadeshiko's smile only widened, and she pulled on Amu's arm. Angry with myself, I pointedly engaged myself in conversation with Yaya. I heard Amu's delighted voice, and fading footsteps. She had left with Nadeshiko. Best friends are best friends, after all.

A sneak attack. That's always how she got me, watching my vigilant eye until I got distracted and then diving in for the kill like a hyena. Sun Tzu would glow with pride at the likes of Nadeshiko; her insults were crafted with such care and subtlety that only I could understand their true intent! It was to the point where I wondered if I was losing my mind.

Yes; surely I was reading too much into it. Could the Rima-sama is as poised as ever be nothing more than a light tease? I wasn't familiar with the way most girls made jokes... perhaps I was simply thinking the worst of her? Or perhaps that's what she wanted me to think. Exhausted, I sunk
further into the train seat. I felt Yaya's hand pat my back softly, and then, a slow drawl across from me:

“You should shape up, with an attitude like that. Girls like her will eat you alive.”

I looked up, just as the train began to move with a sickening lurch. Sprawled across from me, one slim leg crossed over the other, was the girl that had spoke. I knew who she was, of course. Hoshina Utau, a year older than I, was nonetheless well-known for her background. Her mother hailed from a family of well-known Tokyo financiers; Hoshina Souko had recently remarried to the head of a large electric company. This was evidently a sore topic for Hoshina, for when asked about it the prior semester, she had verbally lashed several girls to tears. (It was very impressive.)

Hoshina and Amu seemed to be friends that mutually respected each other, of course, but me? I met her eyes interestingly, and decided against any slights on her mother's integrity. “Hello, Hoshina-san,” I said, flatly, as clouds of smoke drifted outside from the engine. Yaya added a frantic, shy little finger wiggle and an eager, 'hello!'

“No need to hello me,” she replied, point blank, and nodded at the door outside. Truly not giving any damns. “I don't know Fujisaki-san very well, but I've seen enough. You're threatening her. Either stop poking the dragon between the eyes, or shape up and grow a spine.”

It was hard not to be offended with the harsh way she spoke; I couldn't help but lean back a bit, with a distasteful look. “Who said I was poking her between the eyes?”

“Well,” she looked up, looking mildly surprised. “I suppose I did. Although it's probably your mere existence that is poking her between the eyes, if you know what I mean...”

“Ah, I understand,” I said, sarcastically. "I'll simply stop existing.”

“Rima-tan...” began Yaya, in her Rima-please-be-nice-to-my-idols voice, and I fell silent. Utau shook her head, staring thoughtfully out the window. “I'm just illuminating it for you,” she said huffily, ponytails moving with every bump and jostle of the train. “She's trying to get a rise out of you, and I recommend you don't give her one.”

She stared even harder out the window, indicating the conversation was over. The train car fell silent.

Amu returned some time later, pleasantly Nadeshikoless. With an inquiring look at Hoshina, and an even more inquiring look at me, she took a cautious seat. I gave her nothing but a cold nod, but it was difficult to stay angry at her; I gave into Yaya's pleading stares quite quickly.

After that, I nearly enjoyed myself. We whiled away the train ride by eating our packed lunches and playing shiritori\(^2\) ad nauseum. It was a Nadeshiko sort of game, the exact clever wordplay nonsense I wished to be rid of. By the time Yaya had repetitively lost with -n words and I had resorted to making up fake English, the train was well out of Tokyo prefecture and I was heartily out of the game. Copying Hoshina, I took to staring out the window. The scenery of Hyōgo whizzed by quicker than I could glimpse, nothing more than dazzling gold snatches of wheat and the unending cold azure of the sky.

When we got off the train, it was a frenzy of luggage and shrieks; Manami had misplaced something, Yamamoto was shouting, and Amu was short a handkerchief. Our teachers looked like they were about to cry amid the rather poetic black-and-white sea of upset Japanese schoolgirls currently flooding them at all sides; they looked like drowning men. I could not find any room in
my heart to feel pity for any of them, especially Sanjou-sensei, who had notoriously whacked me with a bamboo pole and written home last year after I set off various firecrackers behind the outhouses. Good. Let her suffer.

Seiyo was outright rural; the roads were not paved like they were in Tokyo. Rather, the path was dirt, and it was not long until our socks and shoes were dusty from the clouds being kicked up. Many of us were sticky and tired, and had come much farther than the Tokyo station; Yamamoto had come from as far as Nagoya. When we reached the cluster of buildings that housed our precious classrooms, I couldn't help but think it was all a great deal of walking for nothing. Seiyo was indistinguishable from the houses in the town except in size and vague Western influence; it was not an imposing structure in the least, sitting low to the ground. The dormitory building behind it greatly contrasted the school in style; it was the spitting image of a Western house from the newspapers, a whitewashed box with tiny windows and a sorry excuse for a veranda.

There was little need for school administration, as there weren't many of us; perhaps ninety girls at most, split into three classes, more or less. The teachers acted more like resigned sheepdogs than commanders, jostling us into the dormitory building, this way and that.

Our numbers seemed bigger this year. By the time we were hustled into the dormitory buildings to deposit our bags, I was quite sure that the first-year class was equal to our co-existing students— a curious thing.

I gripped Yaya's sleeve, indicating that we should go find our room. Yaya had been my roommate since I was eleven, and that was the way it had always been; I was about to dive for a likely-looking door when I felt a taloned hand on my shoulder.

"Ma-shi-ro!"

My surname was delivered with such an apoplectic shriek that it would have been hard not to turn around; as it was, I clearly looked a bit shell-shocked, as I heard a smattering of laughter.

"You've been," my emotionally volatile etiquette teacher almost spat, steering me by the shoulder away from the door like a keel in a storm, "Reassigned rooms due to overcrowding. You are now in the first room in the east hall. Kindly relocate yourself, please!"

"The east hall?!” I couldn’t help but exclaim, feeling deeply and personally affronted. "‘ut the sun will be in my eyes in the morning."

My etiquette teacher inhaled so sharply that I was surprised she didn’t snort a few children up her nostrils. What a blatant display of rudeness.

"I'm SORRY, Mashiro, for a moment I forgot that the world revolved around you."

I stared into her slightly-bulging eyes, about to say 'That's quite alright! It happens,’ but I prudently decided against it. Instead, I scuttled away like a frightened beetle. I knew better than to cross Kichigai-sensei at the start of the year. My instinct was proven right, yet again, as I heard her voice in the distance. ‘Hinamori! Can you tell me precisely when I said it was ever becoming on a woman to stare off into space like a vacant slack-jawed boor?’

As I turned the corner swiftly, ever off-task, I wondered if the teachers weren't all a little too hard on Amu. Many of us were high-born, or at least possessing foreign diplomat fathers; Amu was surprisingly ordinary. She was downright homogeneous working-class Japanese. No wonder she was so nervous all the time; she must wonder why she was educated in a place which she clearly did not belong.
I wondered, too, but I daren’t ask. After all, I was well-off myself but not entirely without my dirty reasons; perhaps it was the same for her. Having firmly made up my mind about this, I turned the corner once more, slowing to a tentative walk.

First room in the east hall... I must have stepped foot here at least once or twice, but my mind had little recollection of it. The wooden walls felt all too alien to me, despite being within the same building. The west hall had been ablaze with light, bright gold and vivid rose; in contrast, the cold east wing was muted blues and cool shadows, facing away from the sun. A lady from the court novels would have whispered something breathless and clever, like “so this is how Chang’e feels, alone on the moon! How pitifully lonely!” but I'm sorry to say that my only thought was several unprintable words and a sudden chill. It was cold. Fucking cold.

Wasting no time with my unwieldy travel bag, I fumbled with the confusing doorknob. I loathed these doorknobs, and wondered why they existed. They were an oddity, even for the age. In more traditional girl's schools, the dormitory building was a simple room lined with tatami mats. This bolstered sisterhood between girls; futons would be laid out in a grid, girls confined to the huge room to sleep, relying on each other's exuded body heat. Not unlike a flock of penguins. Rather than this, Seiyo had surprised me with a Western-style dormitory building, separated two-by-two: cold, small cell-like rooms with small, cell-like boxy doors. With fiddly-diddly brass adornments, such as... twisty doorknobs. I had always wondered why they insisted us on such foreign customs. More than once, the idea had crossed my mind that they did not want sisterhood at all; they wanted segregation. But that was paranoia and nonsense. What did they have to gain?

My roommate seemed to be absent. I threw my bag onto one of the low-built beds in an unladylike fashion, and swished to the window to peer outside. Not entirely night-time yet; the sloping hills and tiny trees stood out sharply against the deep and rapidly-darkening blue. It made me think of dinner, and I was about to go find Amu and Yaya, when—

“Mashiro,” a voice rang, with sudden déjà-vu. I turned around, expecting my psychotic etiquette teacher to have returned with more things to screech about— only to find myself staring into the narrowed sepia-brown eyes of Fujisaki Nadeshiko herself instead. Arms crossed, feet boyishly apart, she did not look pleased. Numb shock gave way to indignation. What was she doing in here— and looking so snappy, at that?

I tried to take a step back, forgetting that I was against a wall, and promptly smacked the back of my head on the window, again. Struggling to remain stoic in the face of a bitch-in-uniform, I tenderly touched the back of my head and tried to pretend it was a cute bump rather than an unholy glass-whack.

Uncharacteristically, she disregarded this lapse in my feminine graces, choosing to almost glare at me instead. How strangely she was acting. She had on her Concerned Upperclassmen Voice. “What are you doing in here? This room is off-limits to other students. You should be staying in the west hall, if my suspicions are correct. Kindly—”

She was so unseated that it was almost enjoyable. “I was ‘relocated,’” I replied. “This is my dormitory. If you've got a problem, you may take it up with Kichigai-sensei.”

“If you have a problem.” She tossed her ponytail.

I stared at her, completely dumbfounded. It took a moment for me to realize that rather than reply to me properly, she had just corrected my grammar. About to give her a rather polite suggestion as to where she could stick her grammar corrections instead, I never had the chance; she turned on her boot heel and swished out of the room, like an exciting butterfly moving on to better things. Good.
I was alone.

Even so, Nadeshiko's behaviour troubled me. I had never expected her to be so strangely terse and to-the-point in private; more worrying was the implication that she only made a spectacle of my embarrassment when other people were watching. Why was that? It was downright insulting in and of itself that she regarded me as a punching bag in front of Amu, but gave me human rights in private. What a bitch! Wait! This was her plan! She wanted me to think this! Fine– she wanted politeness? I could be polite. I would be utterly kind to her. So there.

I fumed with my inconsolable kindness on the bed. When the door opened again, not too long after, there stood Nadeshiko. She looked a great deal more calm and back to her normal self. She smiled at me, very unkindly. “You're still here, Rima-chan?”

Don't call me that. *Bitch.*

I nodded.

“Very well. It seems that you were telling the truth.” Why would I lie to you? *Bitch.* “Sensei has, indeed, confirmed that you have changed rooms, due to overcrowding this year. They're clearing out the west hall for the first-years. So, I suppose–”

She tried to smile, but her crocodilian heart proved this feat extremely difficult. Or maybe I was simply reading into an innocent smile, but that was impossible– Nadeshiko wasn't innocent.

“– I suppose that makes us roommates.”

What.

What was she, stupid? She couldn't be my roommate. I'd die. Also, she would eat my skin clean off in the middle of the night. I could not divulge these affirmations to her face, so instead I replied, quite wittily, “No, it doesn't.”

How devastatingly beautiful that smile was. Like she was already imagining what my skin would taste like. *My skin, when she ate it clean off that night!*

“Now, now, there's no need to look so utterly horrified, Rima-chan,” she patted my shoulder in a maternal sort of way. Evidently, the horror I was feeling was showing on my face. “I feel just the same as you. This will be a temporary arrangement, until I can arrange otherwise. Three days, at most.”

Of course. I had forgotten that Nadeshiko was the daughter of the headmistress, that she wielded real power. I was a fool. Of course she'd fix this in a jiffy, and I had been an idiot to think anything else.

In that moment, something strange happened; outside adversity united the two of us for the first time in our lives. It was over something as petty as being sorted into the same room, but it made me feel like we were on the same side. How strange, to feel united with Nadeshiko!

It was enough to make me rethink my eagerness to get out of this roommate arrangement. When I started thinking about it, how would Nadeshiko fix this– really? She'd likely switch me back into Yaya's room, of course. But she had also confirmed that the dormitories were overcrowded this year. With the dormitory building in such a crowded state, Nadeshiko could not get away with being a single boarder; she would likely have to take a new roommate. Should she be given the choice to choose, she'd certainly pick Amu.
No.

“No?” Nadeshiko's perfectly arched eyebrows furrowed. “No?”

I put a hand delicately over my mouth, with the horrible realization that I had spoken out loud. How would I convince Nadeshiko to keep rooming with me? It was certainly not a palatable thought, but it was a thousand times more palatable than the idea of her and Amu cozying it up together and then proceeding to elope into the sunset to have several children. I decided that it would be best to play to Nadeshiko's insufferable competitiveness rather than anything else.

“Well, I mean, you can do whatever you wish,” I said very slowly, turning away from her and opening the wardrobe door in a rather dreamlike state. “It's just a little ironic that you're afraid of me. I wouldn't have expected such cowardice out of you. *Nadeshiko-chan.*”

There was a very pleasing silence, during which I coolly began hanging up my clothes in what I imagined to be a very calm and collected manner. I could see Nadeshiko's face reflected in the mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door, but it was illegible; if anything, she looked downright thoughtful.

“I never claimed to be brave,” she replied, in the same thoughtful voice. I had a growing suspicion this was a challenge to one of her wordy banter games, so I mentally checked out halfway through her sentence and continued to navel-gaze instead.

Was I truly doing the right thing? Would my all-encompassing affection for Amu outshine the distaste I had for Nadeshiko? So far, her rationality impressed me; for all the cruelty in public, she was very rational to my face. I remembered Nadeshiko's warm eyes on the train, and Amu's happy voice. The mere thought of it drove me to my decision. Yes, this was the right thing. I was doing a Good Thing. I turned around, secure in my do-gooder convictions, only to find Nadeshiko frowning at me.

“... Are you listening, Rima-chan?”

“No,” I replied, shutting the wardrobe door.

“I said, *very well,*” she smoothed down the front of her skirt, giving me a rather resigned look. "If you have your heart set on it so terribly, I don't see why not."

I was surprised that my simple tactic had succeeded so easily. Was Nadeshiko that easy to manipulate, or was I playing into her hands? Wait. This is what she wanted me to think. NO.

“However, I have a few restrictions.” She tossed her head, smiling; oh, no. *Oh no, no, no, no.* Nothing good could make Nadeshiko smile like that. I had made a losing gamble.

“As you know, I'm a rather prestigious student; I keep a rather strict schedule, and I'd rather you didn't mess it up, Rima-chan. Lights are out at nine-thirty, I need twenty minutes in the bathroom in the morning, and as for when I'm studying... well, absolute silence, really.”

No, no, no. Bollocks. *Absolute silence?* Besides, who takes twenty minutes in the bathroom in the morning? I didn't even want to think about why that would even be necessary! Did her body clock run like a German train?!

For Amu. I must do this to save Amu from being forced to room with Nadeshiko, and being stolen forever by the best-friend-thieving dog. I set my jaw, meeting Nadeshiko's eyes.

“That's fine, Nadeshiko-san.”
She seemed close to asking if I was sure, but she didn't say anything. I had reason to think she was trying to deter me from rooming with her on purpose, despite her outward agreement. Why would that be? She was an odd girl. Perhaps I could get some dirt on her. With this grudgingly optimistic thought in mind, I murmured something about dinner, and left the room.

I told the story much differently to Amu and Yaya. Being laconic by nature, with little time for anything beyond an anecdote, I glossed over many of the finer points.

In fact, there were no finer points to speak of. I told the entire story like this:

“Ol' Psycho stuck me in a room with Fujisaki-san. Her face when she found out was hilarious.”

By the end of the first sentence, both their mouths were open incredulously, like they were auditioning for the National Frog Choir. I attempted to replicate the face Nadeshiko first made when she walked into the room, but there was no laughter from either of them.

Frustrated, I switched to imitating their open-mouthed Frog Choir faces instead. Still nothing.

“What is it?” I demanded, flopping back into my seat. We were sitting at the end of the long bench where school meals were served, the table only half-full with students. Presumably, the other half of them were still unpacking. I was picking at the pickled plum in my rice bowl distractedly, and Yaya had been eyeing it hungrily, like a dog. I picked the plum up with my chopsticks and waved it in front of her face, before swallowing it in one swift motion.

This seemed to jerk Yaya out of her reverie. With a look at Amu, she said in a very gossipy voice, “Well, everyone knows that Nade-chan's never had to take roommates. She always gets a room to herself.”

“What?” I questioned back, in a hushed voice. "Why?"

“I've heard it's because she's got a conjoined twin attached to her side, all shrunken-up, you know, so nobody is allowed to see her change—”

Yaya's yarn spurred Amu out of inertia; she seemed to decide that if anyone was to be gossiping about her precious Nade-Nade, it should be her. “Th-that can't be it, Yaya!” Defensively. “She's the headmistress's daughter, isn't she? That means she probably gets a nicer single room, that's all.”

I made an X with my arms. "Nix on that. The room's the same as the all the other ones.”

Well... except for the attached full washroom. Amu and Yaya must have seen the hesitation on my face, so I added, slowly. “Well, except we have our own bathroom.”

“A washroom with a bath? That's so lucky, Rima-tan! No wonder you wanted to keep it!” Yaya looked so impressed by my cunning that I latched onto the ready-made excuse. Nobody need know that I was actually rooming with Nadeshiko to protect Amu, obviously.

“Well, of course," Smugly, I nodded. “I'd put up with two Nadeshikos to have my own bathroom.”

“That'll be so nice,” said Yaya, enviously, and Amu nodded in hesitant agreement. I felt like she wasn't entirely won over, so, in a hurry to change the subject, I turned back to Yaya.

“You think that's why she's got her own bathroom? So that nobody has to see her shrunken twin when she bathes?”
“Stop talking about that!” Amu yelped.

I forgot about Nadeshiko’s imposed nine-thirty curfew, until I caught sight of Yamamoto’s watch. The minute hand was ticking dangerously close to true south. *Shit.*

I had stayed with Yaya and Amu until it was dark, chatting with the droves of girls who had come to say hello; they had spoken with bright faces about the places they had gone over the spring break. One had a father stationed in Northern China; another had travelled as far as France, a country so distant that it might as well have been on the moon. I had never stepped foot outside Japan—my family, tied as they were to the cotton industry, could not very well up and go on vacation— but it was the first time I had ever thought of my country as *small.* It was a little island, really.

It was in this way that I had lost track of time, leaving the school building in quite a hurry. The cold, dark embrace of the East Hall was as unpleasant as ever. Despite being bundled up in my winter uniform, the chill had a way of seeping through the cloth. I was grateful to get safely into my new bedroom, shutting the door behind me with some careful fumbling.

It was pitch black, with a single cool blue window wavering in my line of vision. I was worried this meant that Nadeshiko was already in bed, waiting for me with her evil Lizard Eyes, but then I spotted the faint golden line on the floor.

Just in the bathroom, then. Good. I could get into my nightgown, crawl under the covers, and pretend I had been there the entire time, like a Good Roommate. Turning up one of the oil lamps, I casually began pulling my uniform shirt over my head.

As I undressed, I kept one eye focused on the bright light under the door. We may have both been women with nothing to hide, but I was certainly not ready to give her more ammunition for insults; knowing Nadeshiko, she would have found a way to make me feel bad about my naked body, something about pudgy stomachs or weird-coloured pigmentation. I wouldn't put it past her.

My worries were in vain. I changed without incident and in the dead silence of semi-darkness. In fact, there was almost *too* much silence; there was not a sound from the other side of that door. No footsteps, no changing shadows. What, precisely, was she *doing* in there?

Inexplicably, Yaya's voice rose to the front of my mind: *'... because she's got a conjoined twin attached to her side—'*

I stifled a snort. That was most certainly not it. I was not the type to worry or be paranoid, but maybe there had been an accident. Had she had been an accident? Patience thoroughly worn thin, I twisted it roughly. As the doorknob turned, I felt resistance, as if someone was gripping it from the other side— but that was impossible! Why...
I pushed against the door with my shoulder, feeling myself terribly brawny, and stuck my foot in the doorframe. Forcing my body through with a fleeting feeling of triumph, I immediately knew I had made a terrible mistake.

Nadeshiko was not lying unconscious on the floor. She was, however, flattened against the wall behind the door in terror, uniform skirt clutched to her chest, hair down and spilling over her shoulder. Even dishevelled, she looked devastatingly beautiful; I wondered why the thought inexplicably crossed my mind, except for that perhaps I found some kind of beauty in vulnerability.

Vulnerable she certainly was; she appeared halfway through getting dressed. Even as I pulled my eyes away by reflex, I couldn't help but see that she was built more athletically than me, with shoulders that stuck out and a defined breastbone. It was not becoming on any lady to ogle up another, and certainly not in this situation; yet, maddeningly, I couldn't help but stare at the outline of her chest with a strange sort of fascination I hadn't felt before, down to her stomach and below her navel where black hairs trailed down to below her-

My curiosity well and sated, I shrieked no louder than a field mouse, stumbling back for the third time that day and banging my head on the mirror behind me. Much too late, I clapped a hand over my eyes, out of some belated respect for my own female dignity. No matter how hard I covered my eyes, I had a horrible feeling that I had already seen enough.

When I wanted dirt on Nadeshiko, I had imagined something harmless—funny, even—something like having a deep-seated crush on Harold Lloyd, something stupid like that. Not this. *Never this.*

Fujisaki Nadeshiko, ladylike darling of the school, was undeniably a boy.

Chapter End Notes

1. *Haori* (羽織): A hip- or thigh-length kimono jacket, worn over kimono.
2. *Shiritori* (しりとり): A Japanese word game in which the players are required to say a word which begins with the final kana of the previous word.
3. *Chang'e* (嫦娥): A goddess from Chinese mythology, who swallowed an entire immortality pill and floated away to the moon to spend the rest of her days.
She was a boy.

The realization shocked me, but not as much as I would have expected. In a bizarre way, it almost made sense, as if a puzzle piece was fitting into place. The mask-like smile, the strong legs, she always gets a room to herself... The obviousness of it, the hints I had not gotten, irritated me deeply for some reason.

Of course, his face was guilty, as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn't– it was odd, to see such a vulnerable expression on the face of someone usually so composed. Nadeshiko would not have shown such weak emotions to me; I don't think she would have shown them to anybody at all.

This was not the face of Nadeshiko, then, only the face of a terrified boy. It forced me to conclude that the Fujisaki Nadeshiko we all knew did not exist, no more real than a Noh mask.

A mask worn for what sake? Why bother?

I peeked through my fingers, only to catch him staring back at me. I promptly disappeared behind my fingers again. Don't look. Don't look!

"Rima."

My name rolled off his tongue like the rumble of wind before a storm, and an electric tremor ran up my spine. Her voice had always been a naturally low, but passably effeminate and breathy; it was now apparent that her "naturally low" voice had been in a higher register all along. I clapped my other hand over my face with a wail.

"Mashiro-san," Nadeshiko's voice sounded a little exasperated now. As he spoke, I slid down the wall into a crouching position, face still buried in my hands. He raised his voice over the sound of my back screeching down the wall. "While I would be lying if I said your eyes on my midsection
weren't flattering, you appear quite strained. Perhaps you should leave the room for your own sake."

I kept my hands over my face, and did not budge an inch.

I heard Nadeshiko sigh. "Very well, then."

I heard the rustle of a skirt being folded; I opened my eye a crack, watching through my eyelashes. I had the sneaking suspicion that he knew I was peeking—his shoulders rolled back proudly as he pulled on a jinbei, upper arms noticeably strong, midriff toned. It must have been a lonely existence, having no girls to show off your abs to. What a twat.

Then again, I was the one looking. I had no brothers, nor men in the house save for a two-year-old nephew; the male body was a mystery to me. Perhaps I had no right to criticize him for showing off if I was the one so fascinated by such a lewd thing. But it was scientific interest. Who could blame me?

"Alright," he said, in a soft voice, and I heard him straighten up. "I'm done."

The idea that Nadeshiko could speak to me in such a soft, cautious voice was almost laughable. Then again, the power balance between the two of us was beginning to tip; did Nadeshiko truly have the upper hand, now? I was slowly getting over the shock of Nadeshiko being male, realizing the implications, the things I could do. I did not want to enjoy the idea of manipulating Nadeshiko; but after the hell she had put me through, I was tempted.

A single word, and the school would know: he would be expelled, entire family shamed, Fujisaki Nadeshiko out of my hair. And all this was only the tip of the iceberg, just the beginning; in the hands of someone truly cruel, one could extort and blackmail at their leisure. Most temptingly, I could twist the truth to Amu; make him morally reprehensible in her eyes because of this deceit. His entire family shamed. A strange chill settled over me – I did not want that, could not want that.

I lifted my head from my hands; my own face felt quite strange, unlike my own. Clearly, it must have looked that way, too, because the boy Nadeshiko took a cautious step back.

I stared at him.

He took another step back. My heart had already won out over malice, as it often did. I was not capable of tarnishing an entire family's reputation over a bitter schoolgirl's grudge. He didn't have to know that, though.

"You're a boy," I said. My voice could be toneless at the worst of times.

"I am," he replied quietly. I couldn't have expected anything more. He made no offer of an explanation or apology; he simply stood there, leaning against the foot of his own bed, staring with bright eyes.

I had thought Nadeshiko conventionally beautiful, but transferring her features to a male face was difficult. In a unisex garment, hair down, I couldn't tell if he was handsome, beautiful, both or neither. Yet, he seemed to walk a blurred line between the genders, one I had not seen anyone breach. *He was a boy.* What would I do with this information?

Perhaps this was simply another Nadeshiko game; whatever I did would communicate something about my character. I was damned if I did, damned if I didn't. So be it; I would withdraw.

"I'm going to sleep," I murmured, turning around.
That did the trick. I heard the bed creak. "Mashiro-san, wait--"

It gave me a thrill to hear Nadeshiko making pleas to my retreating back. I turned over my shoulder, eyes bleary. "It's ten o'clock already– a half hour past your curfew. And I'm tired."

It wasn't a lie; this new knowledge exhausted me. Too much unpleasant information already, and lessons hadn't even started... my stomach churned at the anticipation of the needlework and rhetoric that would follow tomorrow.

Without waiting for a response, I took the glass cylinder off the oil lamp, blowing it out softly. The room went black.

Sleep did not come easily, mind too busy whirling with the thoughts of cross-dressers and cross-stitch. I lost count of the times I turned over and drifted off into a shallow, unpleasant doze only for a half-baked nightmare to jerk me awake; my legs were too hot, then too cold, and the entire time, Nadeshiko's face, dancing through my brain.

I was sleeping a few feet away from a boy. *Why*?! My mother would have a brain aneurysm if she knew! After spending fourteen odd-years keeping me away from men of ill repute, *this* had to happen... It wasn't as if I was afraid of men, but I was wary. They weren't like women; they were dangerous, obsessed with body parts. Men leered at me on the streets. I rolled over, staring at the dark shape across the room. Was Nadeshiko like that, too?

By the time I finally fell into an uneasy sleep, it seemed only five minutes later that a hot, red-white brightness pressed down on my eyelids, pulling me from slumber. Try as I might to ignore it, it was stubborn; I could not, for the life of me, fall back asleep.

I groaned. My own bathroom was *not* worth the sun in my eyes.

Eyes still shut, I folded the covers back, stumbling over to my uniform, folded neatly at the foot of my bed. After banging my shins on my bedframe, I opened my eyes. Nadeshiko was gone; bed impeccably folded, hospital-cornered, one could bounce a quarter off it. *Show-off.*

This, however, suited me just fine; I could change in peace, nobody any the wiser. Considering the events of last night, I was in as good a mood as I could have hoped for; Nadeshiko had made themselves scarce, I had gotten *some* sleep, and at least I could immerse myself in a day of distraction.

My good-ish mood evaporated as I opened the door to a deserted hallway. It was not a good omen; morning usually meant a frantic flurry of girls, the tossing of hairbrushes and ribbons across rooms, socked feet thudding on wood. Instead, the outer hall was utterly quiet; I could have heard of a pin drop.

And that meant I was late. *Hell*! I broke into a run. What was first thing, today? Music with Sanjo-sensei. Fuck. Remembering that runs were *neither attractive nor ladylike,* I slowed to a half-run, a sort of jogging hobble. It only succeeded in making me look like a donkey with a broken leg.

Not to be deterred in my ladylike running quest, I donkey limped across the lawn and up the stairs to the schoolhouse. I was very impressed with my grace and coordination right up until I opened the door and Sanjo-sensei snapped, "Mashiro, what the hell are you *doing*?"

There was a flurry of frantic giggling. I slid the classroom door shut behind me, hastily slowing to a walk towards my desk. Late for class on the first day, and no breakfast– my day promptly soared from Reasonably Well, All Things Considered to Utterly Pants like a graceful crane crash-landing
into a swamp.

I never had a chance to reach my desk. The door open again no sooner than I had shut it, and Sanjo-sensei put down her notes slowly, an extremely irritated look on her face. "One girl is already tardy," her voice rang out, thick with sarcasm. "Pray tell, what natural disaster occurred to keep so many of you from class?"

"Please, sensei. The headmistress wishes to speak with Mashiro-san."

The irritated look wilted slightly in the face of Nadeshiko, adored even by teachers. I felt my heart sink further in my chest cavity, settling somewhere around the bottom of my ribcage where it growled softly. It was a minute before I realized it was hunger, not sadness. Breakfast had been over before I woke up.

"I'm sorry, Nadeshiko-chan, but I cannot neglect my education," I replied, sweetly. Bleeding hell! I knew I shouldn't have just gone to bed last night without so much of an indication of what I would do the following morning. Clearly, Nadeshiko thought I was going to squeal and had come here to pull me out of class before I could tell everyone what a complete and utter man he was! "Singing is very important to me, and I must work harder at it, therefore, I cannot leave class..."

This clearly didn't fly over well with Sanjo-sensei, who glared at me, glasses flashing. "I expect you back in ten minutes, Mashiro."

"... Really need to focus hard on my vocal cords this term..."

"Mashiro."

"... Yes, sensei," I said meekly, and ducked under Nadeshiko's arm with a sulky air. Perhaps he let me oversleep, knowing that it would be easier to kidnap me if I was sleep deprived and late for class. Dammit, how could I have been so stupid? I let my guard down!

But when Nadeshiko had slid the door shut behind me, the two of us locked in the quiet sunny hallway, he didn't exactly look very well himself. He had faint bruises under his eyes, and it suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't heard any deep and even breaths from the other bed.

"You're not in trouble," Nadeshiko said warily, as way of explanation, and I bristled a little bit. "Why would I be?"

He did not reply; I suppose he didn't have to. I followed him resentfully, mind whirling. The headmistress... Fujisaki-sensei, the Dragon. I hadn't met her, although she gave a speech at the start of each term that was often quite dull and involved quite a bit of flowery language rubbish that I never listened to. She was also notoriously terrifying, despite having a gentle face. What did she want with me? Was I going to be expelled? I may not have been thrilled with my position at Seiyo Girl's Academy, but my friends were here, and it was a thousand times more preferable than returning home to omiai and cotton machines.

Perhaps I could run while Nadeshiko's back was turned. My half-hearted escape plan was immediately thwarted, however, because at that moment he turned his head over his shoulder and tried to smile.

I stared back. We were in a seemingly older, slightly built-up part of the school that I had never seen before, despite attending classes here for so long. This must be Fujisaki-sensei's office, but what did she need an office for? Spying on girls learning how to sew?
Nadeshiko slid open the screen door and stood to the side, waiting. Did he think he was a gentleman, now? What a twat. I walked through, giving him the suspicious side-eye. Why are you doing this?

"Wait here."

His ponytail swished out of view behind another screen. I was left alone in the reception room with Fujisaki-sensei's secretary. Even though it was small and plain, it was arguably more luxurious than our classrooms: there was a flower arrangement on a side table in front of a calligraphy scroll, and the secretary's black lacquer desk had certainly not come cheap. The only indication of modern influences was the soft clack-clack-clack of the secretary typing on her typewriter and the muffled, distant sound of enka music on a record player. I could have been staring at the replication of a well-off Heian period lady's receiving room. Typical rich bastard Fujisakis.

I took a resigned seat in one of the chairs, feet barely touching the floor. I saw the secretary look up at me, curiously (did she think I was a delinquent?) but I stubbornly stared at the flower arrangement instead.

While I had been vigorously tutored in ikebana until I never wanted to see another flower again, I lacked an eye for harmony and style. This one was heika — I thought, anyway. Possibly. My knowledge was purely technical; the branch hung over the vase, which meant it was a cascading style... I guess? The longer I stared at it, the sleepier I felt. It was a nice shape: a tall, pretty vase with its arching branches, willow and wisteria. Fujisaki-sensei had nice taste in dumb flowers. I closed my eyes, enjoying how nice it felt to rest my eyelids.

"I made that."

I jerked awake with a sickening lurch. Nadeshiko was standing there, looking rather smug; it took me a second to realize he was looking at the flower arrangement. What a prissy, obnoxious thing. Just like him.

"Nice heika. I really like the part where you stuck flowers in a vase."

He smiled humorously, as if he was about to make a very clever hiragana wordplay joke. "Thank you. It's actually a nageire." What kind of pun was that? Choke on a hosepipe, Fujisaki.

Before I could say as much, he nodded at the door beyond, with an unreadable expression. "She's ready for you. Do try to keep a civil tongue in your head, if it's not too difficult for you."

What gave him the idea that I struggled with speaking politely?! Shows how much he knew. I gave him a look, opening the screen before he had a chance to do it for me.

The headmistress's office was an exact replica of the reception area, except it was bigger, grander, and emptier. It must have had something to do with aesthetics. The desk was centred on its own raised platform, and I spotted the record player that had been playing the enka music on a nearby shelf.

My attention then turned to the two cushions set out in front of Fujisaki-sensei, with a sinking, no, I knew what this meant.

Thanks for making me sit seiza, Fujisaki-sensei, god forbid you buy some normal chairs. I grew up in a relatively Western home, and every time I laid eyes on a cushion, I could practically feel my
knees screaming. Seiyo had never sufficiently gotten me used to sitting still with my legs underneath me.

While Nadeshiko could sit as upright and graceful on a cushion as a peony does in dirt, I noticed that he instead opted to walk around his mother's desk and stand comfortably behind her seat, half in shadow. As for the headmistress, I could not tell you what she looked like; I was too busy staring at the floor. I did hear her speak, however.

"You may sit down, Mashiro-san."

I awkwardly dropped to my knees as if I was a block of cement dropped from great heights — not like a bird settling into its nest, as Kichigai-sensei would like. I heard Nadeshiko barely repress a snort from his vantage point in the Shadow Realm, and I shot him a glare.

Reluctantly, I turned my gaze to Fujisaki-sensei. Many people said she was the spitting image of Nadeshiko; I had always privately disagreed. Her face was sharp, with cheekbones that could probably commit homicide. Nadeshiko's facial malice was that of warm butter and sugar; this woman made no pretense of softness, a cold-eyed war machine in a kimono. She was the Yamato of the Yamato Nadeshiko; the unbreakable core of steel to Nadeshiko's gentle exterior.

I couldn't tell if her smile was genuine or sarcastic, and this terrified me. Even with her strict face, she was beautiful in an intimidating sort of way, and could not have been a day over thirty-five. There were rumours, resurrected every few years by a schoolgirl with romantic notions, that Fujisaki-sensei had once been a celebrated geiko in Gion. An accomplished dancer (so the stories went), she performed in the finest teahouses of Kyoto and overseas, causing quite a stir when she abruptly retired at the peak of her career to marry an equally eminent kabuki performer. I wasn't sure how much of this tale was a lie, but an accomplished dancer she must be: every one of the trophies behind her desk was for some sort of dance.

"Tea?" Fujisaki-sensei's eyes flashed, and she held up the teapot.

Oh no, don't give me the opportunity to mess up on drinking tea, Fujisaki-sensei, I mentally begged.

Pause. I glanced automatically to Nadeshiko for help. As unhappy as the prospect might be, he seemed my only ally in the room. After all, he had made an effort to speak to me when it would have been easy to pretend I didn't exist; I hoped he intended to help me navigate this dark world of veiled tradition in which I was hopelessly lost.

He gave me the tiniest nod. It could have been either acknowledgement or advice. I went with the latter, out of both politeness and starvation.

"Of course," I murmured, awkwardly, accepting the tea. "Thank you."

I hoped it wasn't poisoned. Nadeshiko shifted in the shadows and met my eyes, gesturing frantically.

I paused, staring at him. He was making a circular motion. I must have looked like a fool, staring slightly past Fujisaki-sensei's shoulder with a vacant look on my face. I suddenly understood what his hands were doing— tea ceremony. Crap. Very slowly, I began to rest my teacup on my right palm.

Left! Left! Nadeshiko mouthed, pointing to his left hand; I exhaled sharply, switched rapidly to my left palm, and spun the cup far too little before taking a rather large sip. I could clearly tell
Nadeshiko had thought my cup turning a shoddy thing, from the way he slightly wrinkled his nose.

Fujisaki-sensei waited before speaking. Her voice was steady, her words spoken as if every one was deliberate and important.

"Nagihiko has just informed me that you discovered his identity last night, Mashiro-san. Is this true?"

I glanced up from my cup, bewildered. Who the hell was Nagihiko?

It was a moment before I realized that surely no mother would name their son Nadeshiko; that was practically asking people to shove him into lockers. Nagihiko... his real name was Nagihiko? It felt almost too personal, something obscene I should not use.

I glanced at Nag...eshko, but he was no longer looking at me; he was absorbed in the dancing trophies.

"Yes," I replied, quietly. I prayed that Nageshiko (?) had not gone into specifics about how, exactly, I had figured this out – for some crazy reason, I didn't think his mother would be too impressed with the fact that I had stared at him shirtless for far longer than necessary.

"I see," Fujisaki-sensei raised her own cup to her lips in a beautiful vertical motion, arm sweeping up with gusto. It was painfully entrancing to watch her put it back down again.

"Firstly, I must beg your forgiveness. For a young lady such as yourself, I'm sure such a thing was quite a shock. If necessary, you may assure your family that no dishonour was done; this incident will not leave the confidence of the three of us."

I was hardly worried about being damaged goods, and had little intention of telling my mother as much. It would only give her something else to worry about.

"Secondly, I understand that this is a huge secret to keep. But I believe you will find it takes little effort. Nagihiko is fully adept at making his own excuses; you will have to do little." Telling anybody Nagihiko's secret was not an option, from the final tone in her voice; I had expected as much, and indicated it with nothing but a nod.

"I feel..." Here, she hesitated, and I saw Nagihiko shift slightly. "... I personally feel that because of what you have witnessed... you are owed an explanation. You must have surely asked yourself why we would do such a thing, despite keeping it to yourself. Yet, I hesitate, for our traditions can at times seem backward – almost barbaric – to outsiders."

Now she truly had my interest; she was a good storyteller, something even I could appreciate. Perhaps the stories of her being an entertainer weren't such poppycock after all. I nodded and settled down on my already-numb legs in preparation for a long story.

"Well, rest assured, being sorted into Nagihiko's room was an administrative mistake."

(Ha. I knew it. Typical incompetent Kichigai-sensei.)

"Nagihiko has always roomed by himself, for obvious reasons. The teachers that know about the true reason are a select few... perhaps an error, on my part. The shortsightedness of a mother's protection.

"Our family specializes in female-style buyō." Seeing my baffled look at the sudden topic change, she smiled gently. "Nichibu, Mashiro-san. Traditional Japanese dance. We only dance female roles,
in the style reserved for women. It makes sense, does it not? Nobody can appreciate a woman's beauty and grace more than a man."

I begged to differ.

"But a woman is a complicated thing, as you know. It takes many years to understand. This is why males in the Fujisaki line are raised as women, from the time they begin their dancing training to their stage debut. In order to play females realistically, we give our sons female names and garments. In doing so, they learn the mindset of the opposite gender more than any regular man could; it shows in their art, at how convincing we are at our craft. Do you know what monomane is?"

I surprised myself by, indeed, knowing what monomane was. I was expecting it to be a long, theatre-related word that I did not understand. Monomane was a term used in comedy shows, for people that could humorously imitate famous figures; this definition, however, did not seem to fit with what Fujisaki-sensei was asking.

"Mimicry," I replied nervously, feeling as though this couldn't be the right answer.

"Simplistically, yes. For us, it has a deeper meaning; it is the intent of an artist to convey the character they are playing on the stage. It is transcending the character, becoming the person."

Privately, I thought this explanation a load of hogwash, and being raised as female smothering. Heeding the warning to keep a civil tongue in my head, I kept my mouth shut and nodded.

"Nagihiko, like everyone else in our family, is destined for such a life. Oh yes," she added, seeing the mildly surprised look on my face, over the rim of my cup. "He will inherit this school, one day— but first, he will master all forms of traditional Japanese dance, as is customary in our family. Until then, he will live as a girl."

There was something forceful in the way she said it that took me aback; surely to play a role, nobody need be this strident. There was desperation in her voice, real emotion. Suspicious, I wondered if I wanted to know why, or ignore such an uncomfortable thing, as was tempting.

Nagihiko appeared not to have noticed, despite his apparent excessive interest in his mother's certificates. His mother followed my gaze, as if becoming aware for the first time that her son was there. The way she spoke as though Nagihiko wasn't in the room made me very uncomfortable, to the point where I was grateful when she turned around, sweetly:

"Nagihiko, dear– I'll have Shion show Mashiro-san out. Thank you for bringing her here; you may return to your classes."

Nagihiko gave me a reluctant stare, as though he didn't wish to leave me alone in the room with his mother. Who could blame him? The woman was, as eloquent as she was, still a bit frightening.

With little choice, he exited the room, throwing me a dubious look over his shoulder. Fujisaki-sensei waited until his footsteps had faded, before refilling my cup in silence. I silently continued slurping tea like a whale shark.

"Seiyo Girl's Academy was my father-in-law's idea." Fujisaki-sensei raised her head, staring at the ceiling over her head with something resembling fondness. Great; now I was getting a history lesson on my own school. Once a teacher, always a teacher. My stomach growled.

"Before the Meiji administration, this was a dancing school. But after the war, nobody had time for beauty and dancing... there were factories to run, iron to mine. So we opened our school for all
girls who wished to learn. Some people scoffed at us. They said that a woman had no place in a school, that they should keep to their homes and learn domestic arts from their mothers. I disagree."

She looked back at me, smiling. I didn't know if I was supposed to smile back or not, so I kept my face poker-straight. Distracted, stomach yawning with hunger, I wondered when lunchtime was.

"To be a good wife, a woman must be educated on many topics. After all, what kind of man is interested in a simple-minded woman whose only thoughts are of cooking and children? Wise, worldly women raise strong sons. A boy learns more from his mother at the breast than he does in all his years of school. The fates of men are held and shaped in our hands, Mashiro-san."

Why was she telling me this? I could not speak for the children, but my only thoughts were definitely of cooking. Cooking pot stickers. *Pork-stuffed pot stickers... yum.* God, why did I miss breakfast?

"This is why we educate women; so that they may educate sons for our country. But it is also more than ideal for Nadeshiko's education: what better place to learn how to be a woman than alongside other women, learning the skills he will need to portray them?"

Although my face was blank, I understood what Fujisaki-sensei was saying all too well. Nagihiko was destined to become a woman on a stage, a glamorous painted face in a kimono, and I was destined to become a woman in a kitchen, a *good wife* and a *wise mother*. I felt something dark stir inside me. This couldn't be fair.

I swallowed, hard. "I see."

"Which leaves you, of course, Mashiro-san."

Me? Please. I wanted no part in this.

"I am left with a bit of a dilemma," she swilled the tea in her cup, staring down at it. I had no tea left. Oops. "On one hand, for you to stay in Nagihiko's room is unthinkably inappropriate for a well-bred lady."

"Yes." Yes, this is true.

"On the other hand, we are very overcrowded this year, what with the influx of new students. Space is sought-after enough already, and Nagihiko's single-boarder status has aroused enough rumours of favouritism already among students and teachers alike. It will not do to cause a ruckus by transferring you out now: people *will* talk."

Oh, no, I didn't like where this was going.

"This aside, it would make a good learning opportunity for Nadeshiko, to ensure he is not isolated after classes. I raised him better than to be untoward. And, anyway..." There was a shrewd expression on her face; one that pried farther than it had a right to. I shrunk on the spot, back hunching over. My knees screamed with the pain of holding seiza.

"... It *is* true that you are not the most well-bred of ladies... Mashiro-san. Due to your unfortunate circumstances, you are somewhat more expendable."

She knew. How she had found out, I did not know, but I supposed it wouldn't be hard to figure out if one dug deep enough. It confirmed and deepened the dislike I had been cultivating for her throughout her speech. I wouldn't trust her with a bucket of water if my knickers were on fire.
Self-consciously, I said, quietly, "I do not mind remaining where I am, sensei."

My thoughts were full of nothing but Amu, as they always were; but this time, there was a little bit of Nadeshiko there, as well. No, not Nadeshiko— it was Nagihiko. He was not as cruel as he pretended to be, and he had helped me out today. I hardly felt friendly toward him, but at the very least, I had defrosted to the point of not minding if we shared a living space. There were worse roommates to have than Fujisaki Nagihiko; I would manage, especially when, according to Fujisaki-sensei, I had little choice. I might as well agree on my own terms.

"I will not mind," I said, a little louder. "If I can ask of you a favour, Fujisaki-sensei."

She regarded me with bright eyes, faint smile playing around her mouth. She looked like a panther before it eats its food. "Oh? Whatever could you have to ask of me, Mashiro-san?"

I hesitated. Not much, admittedly; but I was determined to get something out of this deal. Fujisaki-sensei held up a gentle hand, and I went silent at once.

"I understand, Mashiro-san, that it would be naïve of me to expect you to keep such a huge secret for nothing. I will let you think about what you want, and you may ask me after I've seen how things go. Clearly," and she spoke with a laugh in her voice, with a nod at me. "You enjoy comedy, which can be arranged— or if your parents wish to send you to university, or for you to marry into higher society. It all depends on where your family wishes you to go."

Clearly, for all of Fujisaki-sensei's airs, she at least dabbled in comedy shows enough to have understood my definition of *monomane*. I suppose Fujisakis had to study all kinds of performance. Still, the idea of Fujisaki-sensei sitting beautifully with her lovely kimonos watching people slap each other with paper fans was a very amusing mental image. I had to stifle the urge to smile and pressed my lips together; it looked as if I had swallowed a lemon.

That aside, I had little interest in university. It was a man's world, for people with academic promise; I held little of that, and it would be a waste of money for zero payoff. And marrying up? Giving me a well-bred husband would be like giving gold coins to a cat.

I knew which one I would choose, and which one my family would want me to choose. Thank goodness Fujisaki-sensei had just given me several months to think it over, because I knew that whatever I picked wouldn't please everyone.

I bowed low on the cushion towards her; I had lost all feeling in my legs from kneeling, so the sudden rush of blood gave me pins and needles. "Thank you very much," I said, dispassionately.

"You may return to class, Mashiro-san. It is... just past nine o'clock in the morning, so you are currently doing embroidery."

Embroidery. *Curses.* I nodded in understanding, and walked out of the sparse office, backwards.

The young secretary, Shion, left me at the door of my classroom, where I walked in with a resigned air. I knew Yaya would be dying to ask me why darling Nadeshiko, of all people, had pulled me out of music – and I had to think up some kind of excuse, and *fast*.

A tiny, elderly woman who was going slightly deaf taught embroidery; I was not concerned with being verbally dragged through the dirt, as I would be with Sanjo-sensei. Indeed, the woman gave me little more than a nod as I slid the door closed behind me.

Yaya noticed me immediately, and stage whispered in a voice loud enough to be heard by the entire classroom. "Rima-tan! Come sit with us!"
The four desks, mine included, were pushed together in a row. Yaya was at the end against the wall, closest to the window; next to her was Amu, desperately trying to salvage a mess of thread—and next to Amu, a waterfall of black hair glinting plum in the filtered sunlight. Bollocks. The only open seat was next to Nagihiko, and I could tell by the way his eyes glinted at me from across the classroom that he had set it up this way on purpose. I had no choice but to sit down at my desk on the end of the row, seething. What was he planning now?

"Here, Rima," Amu passed me my embroidery hoop, smiling obliviously. "Are you okay? Fujisaki-sensei wasn't too mean, was she?"

I stared at her. I then turned my gaze, accusingly at Nagihiko. I should have known that he would come up with a cover story before I could. Knowing him, it wouldn't be anything terribly flattering.

"She was okay, considering," I said vaguely, taking my embroidery hoop and re-threading my needle with a mournful air. Nagihiko saved me from speaking — a mixed blessing.

"You needn't worry about how you're doing in dancing classes, Rima-chan! We're all here to help you."

Dammit! Is that what my cover story is, Fujisaki? The fact that I have two left feet? I should have guessed as much. I shot him a glare. He beamed in unison with Amu and Yaya, all smiling quite eagerly.

"Of course, Rima. I-I'm not very good myself, of course, but I can give you a couple pointers!" What a lie. Amu had zero form, but she had what Fujisaki-sensei glowingly called a "radiant heart". Amu was almost as much a teacher's pet as Nadeshiko. Unlike Nadeshiko, she had absolutely no idea how it had happened. Helpless to deny it in the face of further suspicion, I made a noncommittal "hmmm" noise, and continued stubbornly stitching my yellow rose. Nagihiko skilfully switched the conversation to something appropriately ladylike, cherry blossom viewing or something, and I embroidered in silence while they chattered.

After a while, Amu and Yaya got distracted with talk of something-or-other about other schools, and Nagihiko joined my Silent Sewing Vigil. He had already made an exemplary scene with trailing wisteria branches on the surface of a pond. Typical nature junk; the teachers ate it up.

Watching his hands lovingly stitch the ripples on the water, I could hardly believe he was a boy. Everything, from his leg crossed girlishly over the other, to the delicate way he grasped the needle, was uncannily feminine. Even knowing he was a boy, I was still somewhat fooled.

Before I could pretend I hadn't been staring at him, he turned to me, curtain of hair forming a barrier between him and Amu and Yaya; in a low voice, he continued stitching. "What did my mother talk to you about?"

I stared back at him, motives suddenly clear. He had set the desks up this way to interrogate me on what Fujisaki-sensei had said after he left. While Nagihiko was still the lesser of two evils, I wasn't exactly willing to tell him that his mother and I had a quid pro quo about his transvestism.

"Well, my mother has been terribly concerned about how badly I am performing in dancing lessons, you see, Fujisaki-san." I raised my eyebrows at him, in a singsong voice. "So worried that she wrote the headmistress. Fujisaki-sensei told me I should work harder, and she's quite right, of course."

Nagihiko smiled softly back, although his eyes betrayed a hint of irritation. He truly had unfounded
faith in his wheedling ability if he thought he could just flat-out ask me and expect an honest answer.

"Mashiro-san," he began to fill in the wisteria leaves, a soft, cloudy green colour. "My mother is very skilled at commissioning a hut and then demanding a castle."

I goggled at him, forgetting to be aloof in the light of his bizarre metaphors. "What does that even mean?"

"It means," he turned to look at me. The purple wisteria on his canvas stretched towards the water like reaching hands. "That if you made an agreement with her, you might end up with more than what you bargained for."

Chapter End Notes

1. **Noh (能):** A type of Japanese theatre. Rima is referring to their use of terrifying, white smiling masks that give me the creeps.
2. **Omiai (見合い):** A marriage meeting.
3. **Enka (演歌):** A Japanese musical genre that gained popularity during the 20th century. It's a cross between Western classical music and traditional Japanese instruments.
4. **Ikebana (生け花):** Flower arrangement.
5. **Heika (瓶花):** A type of flower arrangement in which flowers are placed in a tall vase, emphasizing horizontal lines.
6. **Nageire (投げ入れ):** Another type of flower arrangement, from the verb "nage" literally meaning "thrown in". Thus, Nagihiko is making a sly jab at the fact that Rima's subtle insult was technically a compliment.
7. **Seiza (正座):** The traditional, formal way of sitting in Japan, which involves kneeling with one's back straight and butt resting on the heels of your feet.
Alliance of White and Mauve

Chapter by Tsukinokimi

CHAPTER 3

About a month or so into the ridiculous sham that my school year was shaping up to be, I slowly began to learn to tolerate Nagihiko. Were it not for my pride, I might have admitted that he was not as bad as I had originally thought, that perhaps I had misjudged him. I suppose the human mind can get used to the oddest of things — even cohabiting with a calculating lizard.

Despite this, I found it difficult to let go of my grudges, and not without good reason. Behind closed doors, Nagihiko was quite tolerable. While unrestrainedly stupid and overly-friendly, he was also polite, bordering on meek. At school, however, he was still the obnoxious cow I hated: the Nadeshiko that was still Amu's best friend, still slighting, still insufferable. We treated each other with as cool indifference as ever in the social sphere, which was the way I liked it. His kindness in private meant nothing to me. Nothing.

It wasn't difficult to avoid him; he was constantly absent from our dormitory. I had anticipated putting up with him twenty-four-seven, but between sleeping and the time he spent god-knows-where, we only had a few hours to share in each other's space.

Nagihiko woke up at six in the morning. Why someone would want to do such a thing was beyond me; Nagihiko never told me why, and I never asked. I was a light sleeper, and the combination of the sun in my eyes and Nagihiko's footsteps (light as they were) was often enough to wake me up.

The first time he inadvertently woke me – sometime during the first week of school – I sat up properly, rubbing my eyes. Nagihiko was pulling his hair into a ponytail over by the wall, and he gave me a very maternal glance over his shoulder. "Shhh," he had said, very gently. "It's only six in the morning. Go back to sleep."

I did. The memory still embarrassed me every time I thought about it. What a twat.

Anyhow, I would go back to sleep, only to wake up properly around seven-thirty. The room would be empty, Nagihiko would be off god-knows-where, so I would put on my uniform in solitude. Yaya and Amu would meet me in the West Hall for breakfast. Then it would be classes, where the poised Nadeshiko would be already sitting at her desk, smug and beautiful. How?!
Even more indignantly, after lessons, he would make himself scarce again and vanish off the face of the planet. At first, I assumed he was returning to our dormitory to study. This theory was disproven when I checked our room one afternoon: it was empty. Wherever Nagihiko went, it was not anywhere I knew.

More worringly, he often returned as late as eight in the evening. I used to wonder why Amu never ate breakfast or dinner with Nadeshiko. Now I had the answer: because he was always missing from the eating hall. Peculiar. I wondered if he was running an illegal drug trafficking operation from the cellar, or something.

But I had my own problems to worry about. Into the third week of April, I began to get antsy. My monthly was rapidly approaching. While notoriously short, it was life disrupting to the point that I wasn't entirely sure I could put on a brave face. When Yaya was my roommate, she had referred to it as seppuku with a silly grin on her face: swift and painful, bloody. How would I be able to hide ritual disembowelment from a male roommate? Only superstitious old fisherman still believed the menstrual cycle to be unclean, but the stigma was there nonetheless. School had drilled into my head that it was disgusting, to be concealed from men at all costs. Nagihiko was perceptive — frighteningly so — and, easily embarrassed, I was not looking forward to awkwardly dodging any questions he might toss at me.

I comforted myself with the thought that even if he did notice, I could simply say I was ill. With this thought in mind, I fell asleep, on the last Wednesday of the month, with a somewhat lightened conscience.

When the sun rose the next morning, directly into my eyes, I found myself woken up by a familiar dull, stabbing pain in my lower abdomen. I could hear the creak of Nagihiko's footsteps on the wood flooring.

Still six in the morning, then. I groaned, rolling over, and tried to go back to sleep with my knees pulled to my chest and my pillow over my ears. It was like attempting to sleep through getting my liver chopped. Very reluctantly, I pulled back my covers, resigning myself to a morning of pain, drinking peach pit tea, and generally trying not to die.

Exactly as anticipated, Nagihiko turned around as I pulled my dressing gown on. "You're awake early," he commented mildly. Already dressed in a patterned furisode, his uniform was under his arm. Why was he in a formal kimono so early in the morning? Moreover, he looked ready to leave, with his hand on the doorknob. Good riddance. I was too in pain to care where he went.

I stood up out of bed, wobbling slightly on the spot; although I tried to look impassive, I kept a hand resolutely clamped to my stomach. His perfect, willow leaf eyebrows flew up in concern.

Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. Nagihiko would make dealing with my period exponentially more difficult; I was not in the mood to hide my discomfort. Nooo! Leave! Begone from this place, Fujisaki!

"Mashiro-san, are you all right? Sit back down. You look ill."

I gazed at him, rather blearily; I was about to shake my head, but hastily turned it into a nod instead. His misplaced concern touched me, but this was really not necessary.

"I'll be fine, Fujisaki-san, don't worry," I said, trying to draw myself up haughtily. Instead, what came out was something along the lines of "I bloop floop, Fujisack, diddly womp."

This very profound statement did not seem to comfort him; on the contrary, his eyes widened.
"Should I ask sensei to call for the doctor? Really, Mashiro-san, you look quite pale. Almost anaemic, really. I don't think you'll be able to attend class in this state."

As he spoke, I couldn't help but chuckle, rather darkly. Anaemic. If only he knew. I shook my head, and reached for the wardrobe handle, grimacing. "I'm just feeling a bit poorly," I said, in more of a whisper this time. This appeared to satisfy him; that is, until he broke the silence.

"...Is it your scarlet day?"

This spontaneous question threw me off immensely. I had a horrible inkling I knew exactly what he was implying, but I gave him a squinty look instead, as though I hadn't the faintest idea what he was asking.


"No," I lied.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No," I lied again. Nagihiko's cheeks had turned a bit pink.

"O-oh. Well, I, ah... am not entirely familiar with this particular field, of course, nor do I pretend to be. But if I can be of assistance, let me know."

Why was he offering to help me? The entire thing obviously flustered him, which it should, because he was a boy. This was not his territory. He needn't give me charity. I gave him a suspicious glare over my shoulder.

Nagihiko shrugged back at me innocently, a bit of a smirk playing around his mouth. "I may be a man, but I am supposed to immerse myself in the female form. Perhaps you should tell me more about your woman's pains so that I can express them in interpretive dance, or something."

His jocular tone was unnerving, but the mental image of Nagihiko doing an impassioned nichibu rendition of the cramping fetal position brought a strange, pressed smile to my mouth. It was funny.

He smiled back at me, encouraged. Clasping an arm to his stomach, he sank to his knees dramatically. Reaching out a single trembling hand, he hammed in his Nadeshiko voice. "Woe betides me! My womb is aflame with the fury of Ame-no-Uzume!"

I would not laugh, no matter how tragically accurate or funny it was. I pressed my mouth into a firm line, and Nagihiko got to his feet, winking. "See you in English, Mashiro-san. I'm running late."

Late for what, a marriage meeting? I couldn't think of anything else one would be doing in clothes as fine as that. I entertained myself for the rest of the morning with images of rich suitors sitting oblivious to the gender of the finely-dressed woman across from them.

True to his word, I saw him sitting in the English classroom after breakfast, a princess in his throne. "Good morning, everyone," he cooed in dulcet tones, tossing his ponytail over his shoulder. A book full of unfamiliar Roman letters was open in front of him, and he was steadily filling in the blanks with his pencil.

"Morning, Nade-chan!" Yaya enthused, throwing her arms around his thin neck. Amu gave a teeny wave, cheerily. "You're still working in your exercise book, huh, Nadeshiko? But we haven't been
taught English in years, now." She laughed awkwardly, with a face full of guilt. "H-how diligent of you... aha...ha..."

I didn't blame her. Her English had always been abysmal, and when it was removed off the curriculum, I must say that we didn't mourn it too much. Leave it to Nadeshiko-chan to continue to self-study English far after the subject was cancelled.

"Why was English even removed?" I asked Amu, a little crossly. I took a seat next to Yaya, the farthest seat I could wrangle from Nagihiko.

"You just wish we were still taught English because you were the best in our class, Rima-chan!" Yaya remarked unhappily. "I remember Mister Foreigner kept trying to convert you, he was so in love with you and wanted you to marry him--"

"That did not happen," I interrupted flatly, although it must be said that our English teacher was a youngish Presbyterian missionary who had given me a Bible at some point. Amu appeared to be still struggling with my question, but it was Nagihiko who answered me, in a very even, measured voice. "English was dropped from our curriculum because of educational reforms from the Japanese government. Western languages and literature were banned because the government feared socialist influence."

I made a sour face. Socialist influences? Yaya also appeared somewhat ill at ease, and pouted childishly. "But then, you're still doing your practices, Nade-chan!"

"Of course." He smoothed down the page, with a smile. "Just because the subject has been officially cancelled does not mean it is entirely useless. We're supposed to use this time for self-study, English or otherwise."

Amu stared at him with a horrified face, as if he had crushed her heart and shattered her dreams. Nagihiko beamed back, in lilting English. "You are sad, Mrs Hinamori. What colour is your bicycle?"

"I am not sad!" she replied back in indignant Japanese, and Yaya made an attempt at foreign languages. "Eggplant!"

Nagihiko, not to be deterred in his quest for academic perfection, drilled both of them in verb conjugations before moving on to a vocabulary list. I watched in silence, enjoying the fact that I wasn't getting picked on for English practice. Pain still stabbing my lower body, I tried to pull at the waistband of my skirt without anybody noticing. Ouch. Ouch.

"Here," I heard Nagihiko say exasperatedly, shoving the book into Yaya's stomach so hard that she gave a little "oof!" (I sympathized with her stomach pain to the extreme.) "You practice with Amu-chan, and ask her for directions. I'll go practice with Mashiro-san."

Like hell you were, Fujisaki. Angry thoughts in vain, he moved his chair directly next to mine, so that our thighs were touching under our skirts. I moved over to the far edge of my chair, in cheery English. "Hello, Mr Fujisaki! Please get away from me. Goodbye."

"Miss Fujisaki, Mashiro-san." He rapidly switched to Japanese, a sign that even he was exasperated with this Study Charade. "An amateur's mistake, I'm sure. Swallow this."

"Excuse me?" I spluttered, before realizing that he was dropping a small, white pill into one of my skirt pleats. Suddenly, all my inside jokes about bootleg operations and drug cartels didn't seem so laughable. Was he trying to sell me drugs? I held up the pill suspiciously. "What is this?"
"Asechirusarichirusan," he replied, promptly.

"What." A suspicious crease appeared between my eyebrows, and Nagihiko seemed to sense that he was on thin ice. He hastily amended the word in a whisper. "It's aspirin. Western medicine painkiller. Just swallow it."

My frozen heart was difficult to touch, but the fact that he had bothered to do something about it at all was both hilarious and nice-ish, two things that boded well with me. All the same... I had too many male admirers as is, and I refused to entertain the notion that Nagihiko could be one of them. Upon attracting the attention of Amu and Yaya's curious eyes, I crammed the aspirin into my mouth and Nagihiko hastily switched back to loud English. "I like dogs. What is your favourite colour?"

I choked out "Lavender!" halfway through swallowing. Amu and Yaya both stared at me with some concern whilst my eyes watered.

Out of nowhere, Nagihiko let out a screech of mirth, bursting into a sudden fit of wild, maniacal laughter. Seeing Princess Nadeshiko in hysterics for the first time in her life was enough to divert the attention of the entire class and send Yaya into giggles. Of course, to distract everyone had been his intention; I would have admired him for it, but was reminded that his neck would be equally on the line if he was caught handling shady Western medication. All eyes away from me, I was able to gulp the aspirin and catch my breath.

"Fujisaki, do you care to share with the rest of us what is so incredibly funny?" a voice barked.
Sanjou-sensei strode into the room like a warlord surveying her troops, heels clacking on the floor. Nagihiko's laughter died, and then very prettily: "Please excuse me, Sanjō-sensei. I was only laughing because Mashiro-san said something amusing."

I shot him a glare. Oh, he was blaming this on me, was he? I took it all back– he was not nice, not a bit. Everyone was back to staring at me, and Sanjō raised an eyebrow grimly. "Of course," she said, rolling her eyes. "Why is it always you, Mashiro? Please share this insightful witticism with the class."

This was it. This was my moment. The Gods of Comedy had sent me an improvisation test in the form of nasty Fujisaki, their messenger, and I now had to come up with a funny gag on the spot. Stalling for time, I tried to be humble. "Witticism? You flatter me, sensei." Perhaps I could tell Sanjō-sensei that I made a crack about Fujisaki-sensei's lipstick resembling the blood of children, but that was a bit too distasteful for my current company. My only resort (much to my delight) would be to insult Nagihiko's appearance.

"I was merely pointing out that Nadeshiko-chan's beautiful eyebrows bear uncanny resemblance to daikon radishes," I said serenely. That'll teach him to compare my head to a gourd. Eat shit, Fujisaki.

Nagihiko smiled, but his eyes flashed, and I saw him touch his left eyebrow self-consciously out of the corner of my eye. Sanjō-sensei clearly didn't think comparing eyebrows to vegetation was half as funny as I did; her eyelid simply twitched, as if she was too sober for this. "Very well. Mashiro — keep your eyebrow judgements to yourself, yours aren't exactly much to marvel at, either. Fujisaki, your etiquette teacher would tell you that it's unseemly to show your teeth and bray like a donkey when you find something the least bit funny."

"Hee-haw," I whispered under my breath. I felt Nagihiko's pointy elbow jab my general womb area, and I crumpled over in my seat. Bitch.
Sanjō continued to talk, undeterred by my hunchbacked form and the over-eager smiling face of Nagihiko. She was peering at a piece of paper, which indicated that we were about to get a poetic manufactured speech straight from the hands of the headmistress or Kichigai-sensei. We could see Sanjō visibly struggling to translate the speech into words not written by a flower fairy. "As you know, it's springtime– and, er, if you have eyes, you would have seen the cherry blossoms outside."

Collectively, we all inhaled a breath of anticipation. Class outside?

"As you also probably know, cherry blossoms… ah, what does this say… symbolize the ephemeral frailty of life… for Heaven's sake— and are an oft-studied subject in art."

Outside? Class outside? Outside?

"Since this is technically a free study period for studying," and at this, she flapped the paper, and glared at me and Nagihiko. I blinked back, regretting nothing. I sank my ship to kill his captain, as the phrase goes. "It's been decided that instead, we should all take our lunches outside and sketch the–"

"Class outside!" Yaya whispered like a steamship unloading several blocks of cement.

"– Yuiki-san, kindly shut your saccharine sockhole – and sketch the cherry blossoms before the flowers fall off the trees. There will be other people there for flower-viewing parties, and I expect you all to set an example for the younger girls and keep your frolicking to a minimum."

Frolicking, schmolicking. Flower-viewing parties were notoriously noisy and drunken in their own right; if a few girls decided to frolic, I heartily doubted that anyone would complain, least of all Sanjō-sensei.

She held up a hand, and we all stopped dead, halfway through sitting up. "But first, I believe that you all have Home Economics at the moment," she added, without a flicker of a smile.

We groaned.

Normally, I hated cooking class. It was yet another opportunity for Nadeshiko to tenderly grasp Amu's arms and teach her how to whisk. Ever since I discovered Nagihiko's gender, my feelings towards this had gone from irritation to downright fury. What kind of gentleman just wipes his grubby hands all over my best friend like that, anyway? Fujisaki, that's who!

I was never very gifted in the culinary arts, myself. That's not to say I was terrible. I was no worse than Amu, who had a tendency to over-boil everything, nor Watarai Misaki, who had a tendency to set everything on fire (even in the absence of matches or a stove). I was just rather mediocre, and for a perfectionist like myself, it was irritating. Also, the teacher was a fascist in an apron.

Cooking class that day seemed reasonably tolerable; maybe even fun. We were making rows of coloured dango for that afternoon, which was an unusual deviation from the usual boring dinner dishes. I chalked it up to even the teachers feeling unmotivated to teach; the weather had warmed up over the month of March, going from near-winter to cool sunshine that tempted even a shut-in like me to open the doors.

"Okay, okay, children!" Kohagi-sensei said in her squeaky mouse voice, folding her hands together and beaming. "Everyone, please form groups of three!"

I lunged for Yaya. Yaya lunged for Amu, and Amu predictably lunged for her precious Nadeshiko. Nagihiko stood there and giggled behind his hand, as if the entire thing was terribly amusing. It most certainly wasn't, especially when Kohagi turned on us, round eyes glinting with the wrath of a
thousand bees. "Oh, dear! There are four people here!" she buzzed, hands fluttering with umbrage.

I opened my mouth, prepared to take Yaya and go find another group— but that would be a concession of defeat to Nagihiko, who still had Amu on his arm with a faint smile. Yet, I couldn't just grab onto Amu's arm myself like the overprotective mother I was.

No; I would have to be sneaky.

"I want to be in a group with you, Nadeshiko-chaaaaan!" I wailed, flapping my way towards Nagihiko's other arm like a drowning duck. I clung onto his sleeve and gave him the malevolent side-eye. He wasn't about to defile Amu's maidenly body on my watch.

In contrast, he looked somewhat flattered. I fought the urge to tell Nagihiko the truth — that it was all a fancy ruse to obstruct his friend-stealing — but instead clutched tighter. Yaya and Amu both turned around to stare at me on Nagihiko's arm, as if I had suddenly announced that I was the Minister of Agriculture.

"R-Rima!" Amu squawked like a pink chicken, flapping her arms. "You're sure? I-If we all want to be a team, I guess that's okay… I'm really sorry, Yaya! We'll be in a group together next time!"

Yaya didn't look too put out about it; on the contrary, she was giving me a rather sly look that I didn't like the look of at all. I hoped that she figured out the truth, instead of one of the horrifying alternatives; Yaya suspecting me of harbouring romantic feelings for Nadeshiko-chan was possibly more than I could bear. Especially because she couldn't keep a secret.

"Boo, meanies!" she wailed. "I'm going to go cook with Utan!"

Indeed she did. The moment Yaya turned around, she bumped into the infamous woman herself, face sinking into her ample chest. Hoshina, as unflappable as ever, looked embarrassed but poised. "Straighten up and get over to the other stove, Yuiki. This isn't a circus."

She gave us a fleeting disdainful look over her shoulder, as if we were blackballing Yaya from a three-man oligarchy, or something.

I relinquished his arm immediately, zooming towards Amu. "We have to mix the rice flour, first," I said, very helpfully.

Amu and Nagihiko were rather unnerved by my sudden gung-ho attitude about cooking with my pals. Eventually Amu, being a gullible idiot, stopped giving me strange looks and started smiling and enjoying herself. She must have thought that I was fostering bonds of friendship with Nadeshiko under the pressure of rooming together.

Nagihiko, on the other hand, guessed all-too-well what my real objective was from the way I wedged myself comfortably between the two of them. To his credit, he didn't say a word; in fact, if anything, he was acting a bit too nice.

"Here, you're not stirring it right," he gently interceded, putting his hand on the wooden spatula with which I was ferociously stirring the rice flour-and-water concoction. I allowed him to do so, because it was better than him making moon-eyes at Amu. "You stir by crushing it down, not simply going in a circle. Here, try it."

His tone was so soothingly maternal that I did so without little fuss. The rice flour began to mix much better, much to my annoyance, and Amu clapped her hands in delight. "Woah, keep it up, Rima! At this rate we'll be done before everyone else!"
Grudgingly, I let myself feel a bit of pride. Okay, so Fujisaki wasn't entirely awful at cooking; I should have expected it, given his proficiency in every other feminine craft offered by this damn school. It was a happy, glowing three minutes before I realized that Amu and Nagihiko both had their hands on my shoulders proudly, and they were grinning at each other over my head.

Damn it to hell! I was acting like their surrogate child! *I had brought them together in holy matrimony!* Clearing my throat very loudly, I shoved the bowl away and pointedly glared at Nagihiko. *Keep your smiles to yourself, flower boy.*

Nagihiko continued grinning and radiating smugness, like some kind of Smug Sun. "Oh, Rima-chan!" he said in singsong voice, licking his finger and rubbing at a spot on my cheek. "You've got rice flour on you."

"Please refrain from transmitting salivary diseases onto my face, Nadeshiko-san!" I tried to singsong right back — but being tone-deaf, I sounded more like a warbler attempting to throat sing. Amu choked out a laugh, and hastily covered it up with a coughing fit.

"Ah, you two…" As I rubbed Nagihiko's spit off my cheek, Amu spoke wistfully in the voice she reserved for inspirational monologues about friendship. "There's three of us, isn't there? So we can each work on a type of dango, now that we're through stirring."

It would indeed be efficient for each of us to work on a different type. Eager to do as little work as possible, I pulled the bowl towards me protectively. "I want white." The white ones were unflavoured, and boiled first; it meant I would be done quickly, and free to laze around. Or keep an eye on Nagihiko's wandering hands. Either one.

"Amu-chan?" Nagihiko politely turned towards Amu, who fumbled about for several seconds. Evidently, she had been off in dreamland. "I-I'll take pink!"

The dough was split into three. I took my portion and began rolling it into balls with the reckless abandon of someone who wishes to get a task done quickly. I felt Nagihiko's disapproving eyes on the side of my face; thankfully, I had plenty of practice mentally blocking his reproachful law-abiding stare.

"Here, Amu-chan, you're rolling them a bit misshapen." Nagihiko's hand reached across my body to attempt to fix Amu's dismal cooking skills. Thank goodness I was standing there to get in their way, like a roadblock.

"E-eh- really?" Amu blinked down at the table, and I felt a twinge of annoyance.

"Mmm-hmm," patiently, "You should be making them smaller, and flattening them with the palm of your hand, like this—"

"You sure know a lot about balls, Nadeshiko-chan," I said loudly. He tossed his ponytail so that it slapped me in the face. *Trollop.* I was heartily tempted to pull it, but I instead reluctantly walked over to the pot to drop my dough in, glaring disdainfully at them all the while. Why must he be so… handsy?

True to my own assessment, I was left with free time to stare and glower at the backs of Nagihiko and Amu's heads. Amu seemed to be heartily aware of my cold stare. Perhaps that's why she was distinctly more clumsy than usual; her hands trembled as she mixed. Nagihiko, in contrast, seemed far too at ease under my gaze. The fool might be able to thaw out the Siberian tundra if given the means and patience, and such a thought unsettled me more than it ought have.
After that, the dango were skewered in order – green, white, pink – and packed into boxes. Pairing up with Nagihiko had been unusually prudent of me, earning me an approving nod from Kohagi-sensei. Sanjo and Kichigai-sensei appeared at the door shortly after, the latter of which was trembling with emotion in a shawl.


It was all she needed to say; I snatched my hat from the hooks at the front, cramming it onto my thick hair. Amu proceeded to get crushed in the ensuing shuffle, much to her shouting distress.

We moved in an unorganized blob, like a wandering murder of crows. It took Sanjō's flashing eyes to sort us into straight lines, two-by-two, arms linked. The younger girls were giddy, dragging ahead; I, for my part, remained in the back, hands folded primly. It would not do me any good to run. Running was not ladylike. Yaya, too, hung about in the back, pestered Sanjō-sensei with questions, much to everyone's amusement.

"Sensei, how old are you?" she hounded, jumping at her side.

"You do not ask a lady's age. However, you may ask her earthly branch. I was born in the year of the Horse."

Yaya paused at this, chin crinkling in frustration; it forced her to do sums, and she never had much aptitude with the abacus. I mentally calculated, saving Yaya the trouble. Sanjō-sensei was either eighteen or thirty: either prospect was horrifying. Yaya impatiently ploughed onwards. "But why aren't you married, Sensei?" A pause, and then, realizing her rudeness, she spun it into a rather sly flattery scheme. "Only because you're so pretty. Why do you spend your time teaching us girls?"

"I almost was." Sanjō-sensei pushed up her little round glasses, lenses flashing; talk of marriage was enough to get the attention of several other girls. She cleared her throat, raising her voice. "Before the gods punished me for straying out of line when my teacher told me to stay in a group, and now I'm doomed to a life of widowhood."

That was all we got out of her. No matter how much Yaya begged her for the story, and Nagihiko's bright eyes hovered, she stayed tight-lipped and sour-faced. Eventually giving up, I reluctantly followed Yaya to the front, where Nagihiko and Amu were walking arm-in-arm like elderly men out for a walk in the park.

"Can you believe Sanjo-sensei isn't married?" Yaya hissed in Nagihiko's ear, scandalized. Nagihiko just smiled.

"I can," I volunteered, helpfully. Amu's nose crinkled a bit in a smile, as if she was inclined to agree, and I considered it a triumph that I had almost made her laugh.

"Well, you know," Nagihiko began, lightly. "Not everyone is interested in marriage. Some women prefer chastity... or the company of other women."

He tittered behind his sleeve knowingly. In spite of myself, I stared at him with interested eyes. It appeared to whoosh over Yaya's head. Amu, on the other hand, went scarlet. "Nadeshiko!" she hissed, in a scandalized tone. "N-N-N."

"Ehhh...? There's no need to play coy, you know, Amu-chan." Our group was gradually drifting away from the rest of our classmates; Nagihiko had casually turned the corner and walked us up another street, as though the village belonged to him. Now that I thought about it, the village really might belong to him; it did not seem beyond imagination that the Fujisakis were mean feudal lords
who held dominion over the entire prefecture. I couldn't help but be entranced by Nagihiko's mesmerizing hair-flicking. "Do you mean to say that you don't, as a matter of fact, prefer the company of women? Who do you prefer the company of, then?"

"That's hardly...!" she began, in the familiar tone she used when she was trying to stall a question. Thankfully, in that moment, she was saved: a blissful distraction came in the form of a man intercepting us on the road. Despite the fact that he was dressed like any other errand boy from Tokyo, in trousers and suspenders, he carried an odd air of haughtiness unbefitting of his station.

The silence, save for birds tweeting, was excessively awkward. "Hello!" Yaya said obliviously, twiddling her thumbs and rocking back on her ankles like a proud uncle as a way of greeting. In response, he barely inclined his head, short-spoken and laconic.

"... The miss on the left," in a monotone, nodding at Amu, procuring something from his pocket. "Is this yours?"

I narrowed my eyes; it was plainly a sheaf of linen, not silk, embroidered at the corners with red. Amu gasped, raising a hand to point to her own handkerchief in shock. "Th-that's mine, yes! " she replied, flustered. "But how...?"

He seemed unwilling to reply, which only aroused Nagihiko's suspicions, judging from the wrinkle in his brow. I, on the other hand, fancied it very plausible that someone would trace a hankie with inane strawberry embroidery back to Amu like a head to its body.

Despite misgivings, Nagihiko was swift in explanation, filling Amu's embarrassed silence with chatter. "Ah, how silly. You must have dropped it at the village train station! In all the chaos it would be quite easy to misplace." He bowed cursorily, taking it from his hand daintily. "Amu-chan should take better care of her things. Thank you very much for all your trouble, sir."

"Sure," he replied, robotically. It would have been natural for a man of good breeding to bow to us before going on his way – or at least wish us a good-day – but he did neither. Instead, he wordlessly touched the brim of his hat, still staring at Amu, and vanished into an alleyway as if he was melting into the wall itself.

It was odd, to see such a man so far from Tokyo. I wondered if Nagihiko thought the same thing, and turned to ask. Before I could, Yaya started giggling.

"Hm?" Nagihiko enquired, baffled.

"He was quite, you know... good-looking, wasn't he?" Yaya giggled into her sleeve. I made a noncommittal noise in my throat; Nagihiko laughed fakely. Then, as one being, we turned to stare at Amu.

"Wh-what?" She demanded defensively, stuffing the handkerchief up her sleeve like it was incriminating evidence. "So what if he's good-looking, Yaya? Don't just ogle people up like they're pieces of beef-!"

I myself suspected that she was grateful for the subject change as we approached the rows of cherry blossom trees, growing by the river's edge. We rejoined the group just in time to hear Sanjo-sensei say, "... there you are, girls. Take an ink pot each, please, and I'll call you back in an hour."

Easels tucked under our arms, brushes and ink in our hands, we dissipated into the hills to settle down and draw. I already had a game plan; I planned to pick the shabbiest, tiniest looking tree I could find in order to conserve ink (and effort). In several minutes, I had stumbled upon the prime
candidate. It was clearly not more than ten or fifteen years old and a pitifully crippled monstrosity; perhaps it had been nibbled by deer, or by disease. At first I felt quite sorry for it.

The longer I stared, the more funny the tree seemed to be. Stunted though it was, one of its branches bent back in on itself in a rather arrogant motion, and the smattering of cherry blossoms looked more like flyaway hair than anything. With the faintest of smiles, I painted a very crooked and imperfect line with a halting brush, and began painting.

I enjoyed the silence and the space to be alone, but I was also wistful of the flower-viewing parties, hovering on the sides of my vision. The raucous shouts of people's fathers and splashes of children in the river made me nostalgic for something I had never had. By the time an hour had gone by, I was friends with the Midget Tree, and very much resentful at being called back for lunch—a first, for an area in which I lacked interest. Surprisingly, Sanjō-sensei had set up what looked like a picnic under a willow tree by the river, and I wondered if she wasn't as much of a stick-in-the-mud as she pretended to be. Much to nobody's surprise, Amu and Nagihiko were already comparing progress on their easels, and lumping compliments on each other like pigs with mud.

"I can't believe we were drawing the same tree," Amu exclaimed mournfully. "How did you manage to capture all of the bark in one stroke like that— as expected from Fujisaki-san, I guess…"

"You musn't be discouraged like that, Amu-chan," he encouraged back, in his fluttery falsetto. Nagihiko's painting was more unfinished looking, with barely any lines on the page. I could see that every stroke had been deliberately thought out like a tactician's on a map of the battlefield. Amu had decided to start with the flowers rather than the branches, to interesting effect. It was messier and more complete, that's for certain. Even in painting Amu was as scatterbrained and torn between things as ever.

"Rima-chan, what kind of tree is that supposed to be?" Yaya said loudly, before laughing like a hyena. With a scowl, I hid my easel under my arm. "You wouldn't understand, Yaya," I said, in my most haughty voice only reserved for eta. "You don't have an artist's eye."

Nagihiko leaned to the side, narrowing his eyes at my easel. "I see what you mean, Rima-chan—"

"Don't call me that," I said, but he talked over me like I hadn't said a word. "One of my painting masters in Italy once told me that some artists are naturally drawn to things that remind them of themselves."

A crease appeared between my eyebrows, and, without a word, I turned on my heel and walked away from them. Over my shoulder, I heard Amu tentatively ask, "Nadeshiko, wasn't that a bit harsh?" His reply was lost to the underlying chatter.

Me stomping away from Nadeshiko looked impressive in theory, but there was nobody else who would let me sit with them. Then I spotted two bobbing pigtails off in the distance, and was saved. The ever-tall and huffy looking Hoshina-san seemed to tolerate me sitting next to her relatively well. I counted on her not to acknowledge my presence, and she did not; she only appeared even more engrossed in her sake cup.

… Her sake cup.

"I wasn't aware that girls were permitted to drink, Hoshina-san," I couldn't resist from commenting, eyeing it up dubiously.

Hoshina seemed to merely relish in my disapproval, swishing the fermented rice swill around even
more. I caught the faint whiff of something sharp and burning, like the smell of a chemical cleaning agent. "Don't place the blame on me," she replied very aloofly. "Sanjō-sensei is the one who brought it in the first place."

I turned around. Sure enough, Sanjō was drinking directly from the bottle like a woman with nothing left. Beside her, Kichigai-sensei was also throwing back considerable alcohol, surrounded by a gaggle of begging girls.

"Please, sensei!" one cried. "Just a bit! You've brought so much, look—"

"Oh, for heaven's sakes," she snapped, but finally relented under the gaze of pleading eyes. I did not trust that it would taste good enough to warrant a glass; ever presumptuous, I turned to Hoshina-san. "May I try some?"

She looked at me, eyebrow raised, quizzical. "You'd better not drink it all, you know," she told me as she passed the still-lukewarm cup to me. Delighted at this show of female comradeship, I tried to take a tiny, ladylike sip. The smell overpowered everything—burning and acidic, I felt like my nose hairs were being seared off. My eyebrows pulled together, my mouth tightened, and I hastily passed it back. To my surprise, Hoshina-san gave a short exhale indicative of laughter. "Tastes different, eh?"

"A bit, yes." I bit a dango off a skewer, to somehow cover up the burning taste in my mouth. Not one for chatter, she simply shrugged in reply, as if to say, that's what you get for asking, you fool. And then—"Let's see that painting Fujisaki-san was snickering about."

I gave her a look like a kicked cat. With a rather pitiless stare back, she cocked her head to the side. "If you're truly that sensitive to criticism, how can you call yourself an artist? If people really have a genuine qualm with what you've painted, you should listen. But never turn down an opportunity for objective analysis."

"You just want to see if I look like the tree."

"Obviously."

I could hardly argue with this no-nonsense attitude. With a sulky look, I unveiled my work in progress. Perhaps I had been unnecessarily harsh on Hoshina, who was proving to be reasonable in her tactlessness. She may not have had Nadeshiko's diplomacy, but she was not an unappreciated ally.

For a long while, she did not speak; her almond-shaped eyes, with their thick black eyelashes, were staring at the paper. After an uncomfortably long duration, she sat back. "Well, I can see what Fujisaki-san means. But Mashiro, really, you're a slacker. It's artistic, to be sure, but weren't you just trying to conserve effort?"

I chose not to reply, and instead stared at her indignantly. "Do you think it's terribly clever to insult me by saying my growth is stunted?"

"Not at all. Fujisaki-san wasn't insulting you. She was just being petty."

This was a new concept, and I took a moment to mull it over. The most bizarre opportunity was being offered to me— the possibility that Nadeshiko was not out to get me. It was so foreign that I couldn’t resist. "May you elaborate, please?" I asked stiffly. Hoshina-san took another sip.

"You're a bit dull, aren't you? It was a compliment disguised by an insult." I opened my mouth to retort, but the ever-laconic Hoshina held up a huffy hand. "The tree you painted… what did you
think of it, really?"

Normally I would hold back, but in my determination to find out Nagihiko's motives, I laid myself bare. "At first I thought it was rather pitiable, but I warmed up to it."

"How so?"

"Well," I replied, slightly flustered, "Small, damaged things are always a little endearing."

"And that, Mashiro-san, is your answer." Hoshina polished off her sake, in a superior tone. "Have a bit of discernment. Has it ever occurred to you that people are cruel to people they wish to befriend?"

No, it had not occurred to me, but only because it was the stupidest thing I had ever heard. I didn't give a damn if Nagihiko found me endearing, especially if it came from a place of pity. Hoshina-san seemed to see this doubt reflected in my eyes. "Listen," she added, leaning forward. "When young village boys want to get the attention of a particular girl, they bully her and throw rocks. Fujisaki-san's been getting under your skin for years. Perhaps she simply has the mind of an idiotic, immature bo—"

"Why, Hoshina-san!" a familiar chiming of bells rang out, and Nagihiko descended on us like menacing clouds on a sunny day. "I've never heard you talk so much in one sitting— or Rima-chan, for that matter! I suppose that placing two people of few words in each other's company creates an adverse effect."

Even Amu, standing behind her, seemed rather taken aback by Nadeshiko's need to intervene in the conversation. With new illumination, however, I found it nearly laughable. This childish streak in the perfect Nadeshiko persona gave me private satisfaction. I did not believe that Nagihiko wished to befriend me. However, I did believe that he could harbour jealousy over Hoshina being a potential rival of mine. In fact, the more I mulled it over, the more it made sense for Nagihiko to feel threatened. Hoshina-san was a striking beauty, older by a year, and the only woman in the entire school who could outdo Nadeshiko in song. In addition, the Hoshinas were exactly the type of nouveau-riche, self-made men that the tradition-based Fujisaki dynasty would abhor.

My affection for Hoshina quadrupled.

"Haaaaah? What are you even saying, Fujisaki-san?" Hoshina nickered in a dangerously girly voice. Amu jumped in, hastily. "She's not saying anything, Utau, we just came over to say hello—"

"Then please," she said, sardonically. "Sit down, by all means, and wait for me to finish."

"Should you really be drinking?" Amu cut in, but Hoshina raised her voice to talk over her. "Like I was saying, Mashiro-san: an idiotic, immature village boy. Remember."

Amu shot me a questioning look. Nagihiko's face remained as sunny as ever. I kept my lips closed throughout the rest of lunch.

With reluctance, I returned to my little tree that afternoon with the shrewd face of a businessman who wishes to close a deal quickly. I would paint this heinous tree, roll it up, give it to the art instructor and be done with this entire mess. It seemed that Fujisaki Nagihiko had different ideas for me, however; he was already underneath the tree, waiting for me with an excessively placid smile.

"Good afternoon, Rima-chan."
"Don't call me that."

His smile seemed to falter; determinedly ignoring the look in his eyes, I sat down and picked up my paints. His next sentence was determinedly calm. "It's a lovely day out, isn't it? I hope you don't mind if I sit here; I've already finished."

"I do, but that won't stop you." Impatiently, I glanced. I had enough of Nadeshiko's mind games, and now that I had a direct line to him, I thought I could speak frankly. "There is nobody else here, Fujisaki-san. Don't waste time putting on your act."

For a minute, I thought I had caused his Noh mask to slip. Nagihiko's upturned mouth pressed into an angry line, and his dark eyes flashed. In several moments, however, the mask was back in place and his mouth was a smiling crescent. "Everybody is always putting on an act, Rima-chan. You are, I am, Amu is. People are quick to assume that a costume change is someone's true self."

I was not prepared for such a philosophical revelation. Looking him up and down haughtily, I returned my attention to my parchment and drew an unconvincing tree knot. Reluctantly, the words slipped out. "'All the world's a stage.'"

"... And all the men and women merely players," Nagihiko finished, grinning. "Quoting Shakespeare? Tsk, tsk. The emperor would be ashamed of your British sympathies."

I did not smile. Where was he going with this? My tree stretched out towards Nagihiko with pleading hands, and my brush fell over the edge of the parchment.

"You know, I think all people are fundamentally the same. What we call 'personalities'.. I think they're simply different acts, cycled at whim, developed from a young age to cope in social situations." Nagihiko appeared to enjoying his own philosophizing far too much. "There's no shame in it. 'Nadeshiko' is just as real as your ice queen charade."

I flinched, and then glowered. "Forgive me, Fujisaki-san, for I cannot follow your trail of thought."

"Mashiro-san, it's unbecoming for you to play dumb to make a point." He tilted his head to the side, tugging his ponytail tighter.

I swallowed, and it tasted bitter. "... Excuse me, then. Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I fear you."

My brush went still, and I stared into the sockets of the Noh mask with wide, panicked eyes. Something stirred behind them, an all-encompassing sadness. "Is it that hard to imagine?" Nagihiko enquired, with a laugh. "I'm not the only one intimidated by you, you know."

My mind was racing, eyes blank. He feared me? All this time, Nadeshiko had cowered in fear of a short, powerless, middle-class girl with no prospects and a shaky future? The irony was almost physically painful. Nagihiko was a fool. "You're a fool," I scoffed, wasting no time in tearing a strip off him. "Why would you think such a thing?"

"Because you're far too insightful for your own good," he retorted, and now there was little trace of pleasantry; it had melted away into raw accusation. "Amu-chan might not notice you, Mashiro-san, but I can see you silently observing everything under your nose and filing it away. You can smell manipulation out faster than a bloodhound. I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you."

"What's this feeling?" I whispered sarcastically, staring off at the mountains. "Why, Fujisaki, I do believe my heart is melting."
"You know what I am, how I am currently living." For some reason, Nagihiko's usage of *what* rather than *who* bothered me more than it should have– it was an odd word choice for a man who picked his words deliberately. "My mother told me that if anybody discovered my identity while I was playing the role of Nadeshiko, it would be nobody's fault but my own, and proof that I was not disciplined or skilled enough to inherit the family name. I was hardly about to let my family prospects be spoiled by some upstart classmate who peered too closely, so I pushed you away."

"With snide remarks and schoolgirl bullying," The bitterness rose in my voice, despite all efforts. I expected him to be meek and apologetic. Instead, his voice became very earnest. "Yes. It was the only way I knew how. I didn't have very many friends my age growing up, and the intricacies of interaction confuse me. …It's easy to forget that you aren't my enemy anymore, and I beg your pardon on that front."

Curses, he could beg forgiveness without an iota of shame; my general attitude had always been that I shouldn't apologize if it could be avoided, yet he did it without hesitation. He continued on. "Back then, I hoped that you would avoid me after being insulted enough. Instead, it simply drew us together by virtue of having the same friends. But now you know, Mashiro-san. And I feel – well–"

"You... feel?" I asked slowly, as though an iguana was proclaiming its fondness for macro-economics.

"I feel... free." He exhaled the word as if it was holy, and his eyes widened maddeningly. My heartstrings couldn't help but tug with pity at this miserable boy in a skirt, trapped in an obi-shaped prison. "I'm grateful that you're on my side."

"Am I, now?"

"With little choice in the matter, of course." His tone had turned businesslike, and I relaxed slightly. Nagihiko speaking of emotions was not something I was ready to see; it felt vulgar, like seeing an inappropriate poster on a wall. "I would not dare presume friendship, but you would be a very valuable ally to me, if you consent to it."

"An... ally?" I repeated, bemused. "Really, Fujisaki-san, do you plan to conscript an army and invade a neighbouring prefecture any time soon?"

"Even in peacetime, an ally is a good thing to have. You're a clever girl. We can help each other out." He leaned forward, tone loving like a mother's caress. "You could use my assistance, Mashiro-san. We both know it. What's more, you would no longer force Amu to pick between her friends."

He was dangling the carrot in front of my nose, but I wasn't so foolish to fall prey to a simple thing so quickly. Shrewdly, I asked, "That's all well and good, but what is it that you're wanting out of me, Fujisaki-san?"

"Nadeshiko."

"Nadeshiko," I conceded, with no honorific to speak of. My tone was condescending. "What do I have to offer you?"

He tucked his hair behind his ear, with a rather surprised look. "Why, Mashiro-san, I should have thought that obvious. I want your cooperation."

I narrowed my eyes. "Cooperation? What are you planning?" The aspirin drug cartel, the talk of
military allies: it was all coming together in a glorious mental image of Nagihiko the shady merchant kingpin, smuggling opium across the seven seas. Oh, my God. He wanted me to smuggle drugs.

Nagihiko smiled his best Drug Smuggling smile. "I'm always planning something, Mashiro-chan. A good lady always is. But I'm speaking in the general sense of the word. I'm asking," he added, voice softer, "To be tolerated. My mother has your loyalty by force, but I'm asking for it by choice."

My mouth went a bit dry. It suddenly occurred to me why so many girls fell in love with Nadeshiko; it wasn't the oval face, or radishy eyebrows, it was his voice. He spoke gently and earnestly, as if I was his sole saviour. It was madness to swear loyalty to an old enemy. It was madness to make alliances as if this was a war. But doesn't a woman already make allies when she makes friends?

I swallowed, and nodded.
Breakfast the next morning was unusually good: steamed rice, topped with tonkatsu, strips of seaweed and Worcestershire sauce. Nobody was more delighted than Yaya, who kept shovelling in seconds with nothing short of enthusiasm. Between bites, she refused to stop talking about food, much to everyone's general weariness.

"We always eat horse mackerel at home," Yaya gushed, sticky rice sticking to the corner of her mouth. "Dried horse mackerel, raw horse mackerel, horse mackerel in soups, horse mackerel on rice with that really good sauce, you know, Amu-chi, that sauce, the one--"

"This isn't horse mackerel, Yuiki," Hoshina-san replied, nibbling on a piece of rice like a rabbit. "This isn't even horse. This is pork."

Hoshina-san had began to sit with us for breakfast and dinner, amid very profuse claims that she was only sitting over here because we "shouldn't misunderstand, it's warmer on this side of the room," that she was doing it for her sake, and that we shouldn't "flatter ourselves into thinking it was because of our riveting conversational skills". She blushed and huffed a lot as she said it, which made me think that Hoshina-san was a great deal weirder than I first thought.

"Was it okonomi sauce?" Amu contributed, helpfully, but it was too late – Yaya had already been distracted, eyes lighting up maniacally. "Pork! Pork! When I lived in Taiwan, they had koah-pau which are stuffed full of pork, and bao stuffed with pork except the pork is roasted, and also pork stuffed within pork –"

"What?" Hoshina interjected loudly, face incredulous.

"Yes, pork stuffed within pork which is stuffed within--"

"I don't believe that," Hoshina replied dismissively, "You can't stuff pork within pork, that's unethical and disgusting. But when were you in Taiwan?"
"I was about to ask the same thing," Amu interjected curiously, leaning across the table so that her wispy hair ends threatened to trail in her rice. Very helpfully, I put a hand under her hair. If my own mouth wasn't stuffed full of food, I would have smugly reminded Amu and Hoshina that I knew Yaya was Chinese and that they were clearly all terrible friends for not knowing. But unfortunately, my mouth was full, so I was forced to sit sullenly with hamster cheeks.

"Mashiro!" Kichigai-sensei hooted like an owl from the far corner, flapping her arms in paroxysms of grief. "A-lady-does-NOT stuff her cheeks full of food like some kind of BLOWFISH. What will your future husband say if he catches you cramming your mouth full of rice like some kind of STARVING ORPHAN?"

I quickly tried to hack it all down in one go, which was a mistake; the pork got stuck in my throat, and I began to cough.

"Welllll," Yaya beamed over the sound of me choking. "My mother and little brother--"

At that moment, Misaki stuck her head into the eating hall, with an almighty bellow. "Post's here!"

There was a rustle and the sound of benches scraping back. Girls scurried towards the door in a rush, like some kind of stampede. Since when did everyone like getting mail so much? Before anyone could so much as blink, Yaya, too, had launched herself out of her seat and joined the conglomeration of black skirts shrieking and cooing.

"Kukai-chan, Kukai-chan," one girl wailed, "Where's mine, where's mine-?"

"Has post come from Kyoto yet, Soma-kun, or is this only Tokyo area--"

I looked from the cluster of girls outside the schoolhouse, to Amu and Hoshina's faces and rubbed my throat. "Who's Kukai-chan?" I croaked, with watery eyes.

"Post boy," Hoshina said, brusquely. Amu hastily passed me her handkerchief and then got to her feet to try and see over the crowd. Upon catching sight of Kukai-chan, she went faintly pink around the ears.

"... So that's why everyone likes post day so much," she said in the high-pitched voice that she reserved for handsome boys, playing with the ends of her hair. Dabbing my eyes delicately, I accidentally poked myself with something akin to cardboard and stared at the handkerchief, aghast.

"You aren't expecting any mail, Hoshina-san?" I looked at her with my one non-watering eye.

"Nobody I want to hear from," she said, dismissively. "And I don't want to hear you saying 'Hoshina-san, Hoshina-san' all day, either, it makes me think you're talking to my mother. You can call me Utau like Amu and Yaya."

It was the first indication she had ever given of the infamous elder Hoshina-san, sole heir to a huge parent corporation. Thankfully, I was saved from saying anything other than a puzzled "alright" by the bright return of Yaya, clutching an envelope with a face like the rising sun. She wasn't the only one to get mail— I saw a girl call, "Hoshina, letter!" and toss a thick manila envelope across the table towards us.

I caught a glimpse of the envelope's crest – a black crescent moon, containing a single solid circle – before Utau casually brushed it off the edge of the table, as if it was nothing but a piece of litter. Cautiously, I tuned back in to what Yaya was saying.
"Yaya’s papa is from Yokohama, but Mama is from Taiwan," she explained, breathlessly unfolding the envelope with the frenzy of a puppy with wrapping paper. "Mama and my baby brother are still living there, she said she’d mail me a real photograph, look–"

With glee, she poured out the contents of the envelope. Flourishing a tiny, black-and-white photograph of a blob, she puffed her chest out as if she birthed it herself. "His name is Tsubasa!"

Amu immediately began to coo. Utau gave an approving nod. "You must be so proud, Yuiki. Your mother gave birth to a huge dumpling."

"Utaaaaan!"

"I spoke what everyone else was thinking."

At that moment, I decided I would have to derail the Baby Committee to make a very important announcement.

"Amu," I said, "There's something weird in your handkerchief."

It was the same one she had lost nearly a month before. Linen, stitched-on strawberries. The corner, however, was very stiff and not at all as absorbent as I had hoped. A tiny, folded-up piece of paper had been intricately re-sewn into the hem, and I held it up to show her.

"A secret message?!" Yaya whispered in hushed tones. "Remember that man who returned it to you, Amu-chi? Did he put it there?"

"It would have to be," I replied, thoughtfully. "Sewing a message into a stranger's handkerchief is rather creepy, though. Perhaps it’s a threat. Perhaps he wrote it in blood."

Strangely, this did not appear to comfort Amu. She stared at the handkerchief in my hands, eyebrows scrunched up. Finally, she murmured something inaudibly.

"Eh?" said Utau. It was the first time she had spoken since this revelation; she looked a bit pale.

"… Nadeshiko's seam ripper," Amu said, louder.

Personally, I wasn't all that invested in whatever love note was stuffed into Amu's handkerchief. I had more important matters to tend to.

"Good morning, Nadeshiko!" I chirped the minute we walked into calligraphy. I took the desk next to "hers", pushing it in soundlessly. "It's a shame you missed breakfast, it was quite good today. There was meat. But Nadeshiko-san doesn't eat breakfast, does she?"

Nagihiko beamed, pleased as punch. "I get the same food as the rest of the school, you know. I just eat it while I'm being dressed in my obi, or in my mother's office."

There was something excessively odd about this sentence, but nobody seemed to have noticed but me. Certainly I knew that wherever Nagihiko went, it involved wearing a pretty kimono… but why would he be sitting in his mother's office so early in the morning? Nobody else seemed to have found this strange.

"But why…?" I began.

Nagihiko made a polite "hmm?" noise at me.

Amu tilted her head. "Oh! Nadeshiko usually has dance practice in the morning. She takes private
lessons from Fujisaki-sensei. Don't you remember, Rima?"

What? No, of course I didn't remember. So this was why he was constantly absent from breakfast and dinner! It made so much sense that I was angry at myself for not guessing sooner. For me, the thought of spending at least four hours a day dancing, plus our class once a week, was almost too much to consider. Then again… wasn't dance the entire reason he was dressing up as a woman? … He certainly must have liked it quite a bit, to do it so often.

I turned, staring at Nagihiko out of the corner of my eye. He shrugged back at me, sheepishly. "I thought you knew."

"More importantly," Yaya burst in, unable to contain herself any more, "Nade-chin, where's your stitch ripper thing? You know, that you use in sewing to tear out bad embroidery?"

Nadeshiko looked mildly surprised, but she patted the chair on the other side of herself. "My sewing kit's in my room. I can go get it for you during our lunch break, if you like?"

"We can't wait that long!" Yaya cried, maddeningly.

Amu said hastily, "Y-Yes, we can! Lunch break is fine— thanks—"

"What do you need it for?" Nagihiko tried to ask, but at the moment the teacher began talking about *tare* radicals, and he immediately dropped into silence.

I, too, fell into disgruntled silence – for I was curious to see Nagihiko's reaction when we showed him the handkerchief. He had mistrusted the stranger in the village from the start, and I was not looking forward to his smug Nadeshiko-Is-Always-Right smile. I could practically hear his musical, Nadeshikoey tones already: ah, ah, Amu-chan! How terribly shady! We should go show the headmistress at once. I warned you, you know — a girl with a radiant heart draws the eye of lechers and rakes!

Annoyed just from the thought, I turned back to what the teacher was saying.

"Today, I'll be showing the first-years brush position and simple stroke order," the calligraphy teacher, Fujimura-sensei, spoke with a sigh as if she was too old for this (she wasn't). "So, for the older students, I'm going to mix it up a bit. As a bit of review, I'll have you all write your own names; you should know how to do that, at least, and it never hurts to know how to sign your name nicely."

Kichigai-sensei was constantly twitching with disapproval at our calligraphy instructor's bobbed hair and loose men's trousers. Our etiquette teacher would often mutter the word *moga* with disdain over the swish-swish noise of Fujimura-sensei's trousers, but for most of my classmates, it was a label of reverence: "She's a moga, you know, a modern girl. I hear she smokes cigarettes," Amu once said, voice full of envy mingled with trepidation.

"Hiragi, don't just draw a box like you're a child drawing a house," Fujimura-sensei was saying exasperatedly to an enthusiastic first-year. She had said a similar thing to me during my first class, when I had drawn the first character of my surname like a line-riddled square.

I was about to stand up to get materials when Nagihiko held up his inkstone with a smile. "We can share mine, if you like, Rima-chan."

In private, Nagihiko called me *Rima*. I nixed *Rima-chan* as far too intimate for a man's mouth to utter when we were alone. However, Nadeshiko had always called me *Rima-chan* in public (no matter how passive-aggressive in its delivery), which means I had to continue to tolerate it during
the daytime. My life continued to be a constant cacophony of soprano Rima-chans.

"Rima-chaaan…!" he called out, whenever he wanted to catch up to me and Yaya in the hallways, hopping close to us like a cheerful songbird with his arms kept effeminately close to his sides.

"Rima-chan!" he cried admonishingly, when I grumpily referred to Kichigai-sensei as a "hyena in human clothing".

"Rima-chan," he said in a very flat voice whenever I kindly remarked that "Nadeshiko, you have such big hands! Like a mannish peasant."

At first, it had felt a little uncomfortable, and associated it with the misery of Nadeshiko's presence. Slowly, I grew to almost enjoy the affectionate nature of the words— although I'd set myself on fire before I admitted this to Nagihiko.

"I suppose we can share, yes," I replied, picking up my water-dropper. Nagihiko placed his hand over mine with a rather paternal smile. "Let me."

"I know how to make ink," I said, annoyed. My hands withered under his whiter ones like plants under cloud cover.

The bridge of his nose crinkled at me. "I've seen you make ink," he said, the barest hint of laughter in his voice. "You add too much water."

"And you don't add enough," I sallied back. "Your calligraphy is as black as your soul, Nadeshiko-chan."

I was suddenly conscious of the fact that Amu and Yaya were watching us, both looking rather entertained. As if oblivious to my stare, Yaya offered Amu some konpeito out of a bag. Dammit! I was supposed to be the one sitting with Yaya, laughing at Amu's antics — but instead, here I was, arguing with Nadeshiko about ink. I clamped my mouth shut, already regretting my decision.

Grinning, Nagihiko picked up his water dropper in a single motion, tilting his hand just so. I was uncannily reminded of his mother, picking up her own teacup with understated grace; everything really was dance to the Fujisakis. I watched him, eyebrows furrowed.

If "Nadeshiko" was a role — as Naghiko was oft to remind me — then Nadeshiko's walk was choreography, deliberate dance steps in a never-ending recital. The thought was daunting.

Carefully, he dropped water into his inkstone, and I counted them silently— one-two-three-four-five, six, seven. "One more," I said.

"Definitely not." Nagihiko put down his dropper with a soft porcelain clink. It was round like a perfectly-shaped stone, made of white glazed ceramic. Bright blue inked flowers trailed their way across the top. He caught me looking at it with undisguised admiration.

"It is nice, isn't it?" he tapped it fondly, fingernails clinking against the glaze. "It was a gift from my instructor in Peking."

"Why has everyone been to China except me?" I grumbled, impatiently passing Nagihiko the inkstick.

"I haven't been to China, either," Amu supplied helpfully, as Nagihiko gently rubbed the cake of
ink against the plain of the inkstone. The black dust dissipated into the water in clouds, staining it a deep gelatinous black. Nagihiko then slid it towards me gently, with a challenging smile. "There you go, Rima-chan."

"I'm forever in your debt," I replied sarcastically, picking up my paintbrush to dip. A pause; I could hardly resist my own curiosity, and Nagihiko knew it.

"... Why did you have an instructor in Peking?" I added, grumpily.

Nadeshiko had the rare talent of being able to tell a story as she wrote, which I found utterly baffling; listening and writing at the same time was difficult enough for me, and as a result, her voice tuned in and out like a faulty radio.

"Well, you know that between the ages of twelve and thirteen, just before you transferred here, I travelled abroad..." Nadeshiko began, in her musical voice. "... But I also travelled for a time when I was much younger, and stayed for a time in China with my father... I must have been no older than seven or eight. I stayed for seven months at a Peking Opera School. It was terrible." He laughed, very mournfully. "They woke us up at five in the morning for wushu training in the courtyard, and we were made to hold stances for hours at a time. And then, whenever someone fell, the entire group was beaten with bamboo canes."

"Wushu?" Amu interjected. "But it's opera--"

Nadeshiko lifted a finger, with a smile; I felt an ethereal monologue coming on. As if on cue, Yaya's eyelids began to droop.

"Martial arts and dancing are sisters in principle. We both train our body to move a certain way. If you ever see a martial arts master demonstrating, look closely at his feet – you'll see he's dancing!" She laughed with a tinkling of bells. I didn't think it was that funny, but to each their own. She continued sweeping his brush across the page with a soft slither, like a snake on grass.

I peeked over at my deskmate's page as she wrote. I had an idea of how her name was written, for Nadeshiko had only one kanji transcription: the first character, naderu, meant stroking or petting (horrifyingly enough). The second, ko, was a common name ending, referring to a child or something otherwise precious. Together, the characters combined to create the fringed dianthus carnation, yamato nadeshiko, a flower said to evoke a child so endearing that it must be caressed. Personally, I thought that getting maternal over a plant was creepy and weird, but I was in the evident minority.

It made me wonder about the name Nagihiko. Back in our parent's day, names were not picked lightly for children; a name expressed the hopes and dreams that the parent placed upon their offspring's shoulders, a foreteller of their future. I wasn't entirely sure what possessed me to ask, but I pulled a sheaf of scrap paper towards me, writing with patient brush strokes upon its surface. I then slid it across the desk wordlessly.

How do you write Nagihiko? it said.

If Nagihiko was surprised at my question, he gave no indication of such; pushing his beautifully-spelled female name to the side, he took up his brush again, poised like a crane about to take flight. First, a bold downward stroke— then a soft outline down from the top, a half-open box. Inside, he painted four more grid-like lines. I was left face-to-face with nagi, the kanji for calm, or a lull in the ocean.

His brush hesitated over the page with a drip-drip. Two black dots appeared on the paper. Quickly,
the self-conscious feeling of prying far too much into Nagihiko's private family life returned – for a fleeting minute, I wished that I hadn't asked at all.

"You dripped," I told him.

"Yes," he whispered apologetically, dipping his brush into his ink once more. "It's been… some time since I wrote my name."

The second character was hiko – boy, or prince. He finished it with a rather anticlimactic breath, and he placed his brush back on its rest with a smile. "You see? Like this."

I nodded once, and Amu leaned over, tilting her head. "What are you writing to each other over there?"

As if brushing away a troublesome fly, Nagihiko slid the paper towards me and away from Amu's prying eyes, lightly. "I was showing Rima-chan how to write the hokozukuri radical for her family name, she always draws it so stiffly—"

"I know how to write my own name, Nadeshiko-chan just likes telling me what to do—"

"Who can blame me, Rima-chan? You're just so endearingly helpless."

Amu only giggled a bit behind her hand. I had been hoping for a reaction more akin to, "Nadeshiko, you big meanie! Stop picking on poor, vulnerable Rima!", but I suppose that was too much to expect. Much to my own concern, I was beginning to find Nagihiko's ability to lie at the drop of a hat impressive rather than menacing.

"Perhaps you should demonstrate that for us, since your page is still blank," Nagihiko pointed out, eyes glinting. He certainly had me there. With Amu and Yaya watching, I could hardly argue. I picked up my brush with a dirty look and began to write, self-conscious over the fact that I had an audience.

My surname, Mashiro, referred to a castle or fortress. The characters for my given name were ri, denoting a glassy blue, and ma, referring to the Arabian jasmine flower, something which Nadeshiko seemed to find excessively amusing.

"Ri-matsu," he tittered in his Nadeshiko voice, admiring my stuffy cursive script with mirth. "Why did your mother name you after a foreign flower?"

"Why did your mother name you for an adorable child, when you are neither?" I shot back, leering. We stared at each other like that for a while, bristling at each other like alley cats. Finally, Amu cleared her throat. "Y-you two, I-I think class is over. Nadeshiko, you said I could borrow your seam ripp...er?"

"Oh, yes," Nadeshiko replied, straightening up and rolling up her now-dried scroll with a beautiful smile. "Of course you can, but why do you need it? If you're letting down the hem of your skirt, you shouldn't do it while you're wearing it."

"Oh, no, no! Nothing like that," Amu replied, flustered, and Yaya interrupted with a dazzling smile. "No, no, let me tell her, Amu-chi! Please!"

All away across school lawn to the dormitory building, Yaya pontificated on the story like a weaver at the loom. Finally, we decided that it was explanation enough to produce the handkerchief for Nadeshiko's inspection, so that she could see the message jammed into the hem.
Much to my surprise, Nadeshiko didn’t seem anywhere near as displeased as I had anticipated; in fact, all she did was raise a single eyebrow.

"… And it must be a love note! Or a threat! Right, Nade-nade?"

"It might very well be something else," was all Nadeshiko said, quite cryptically. I gave her a look, but got no further elaboration. Inside our dormitory room, Nagihiko would not consent to give Amu the seam ripper: instead, he gestured to Amu gently, indicating that she should hand over the handkerchief.

"I'll do a neater job, I think," he said, not unkindly. Stitch hook in hand, he tore only a single stitch — the rest he pulled out with the pointed end, so that he left behind an intact thread that could later be sewn back. Nobody would be any the wiser. Finally, the paper was freed; it was Amu who pulled it out excitedly, fingers trembling with trepidation.

There was an excited rustle as she straightened the piece of paper, and then a too-long pause. Nagihiko's eyes went politely wide. Yaya and I were far too short to read what was on the page, so I tugged at Nagihiko's sleeve. "What does it say?"

His voice was distant in disbelief when he finally spoke. "It's addressed to Hoshina-san."

As a matter of fact, Utau was scrawled onto the front of the folded piece of paper, not Hoshina-san. Simply Utau, nothing else— no address, although admittedly an elegant hand. We all exchanged looks of confusion, unsure what to say. The way it stood, it seemed most likely that it was a love note from an illicit paramour— something that would not blow over well, should one of the teachers catch wind of such a thing.

"That man..." Amu began, face churning with something incomprehensible, but Yaya cut in with a rather sneaky look on her face. "Now, now, Amu-chi, do not be so quick to place the handsome stranger as the culprit. Everybody knows that the rich men of Tokyo use messengers to deliver their letters, like in the Tale of Genji. Obviously our Utan has been carrying on an affair with a rich married man in Tokyo—"

"Yaya!" Amu spluttered, scandalized, as Yaya chuckled darkly into her sleeve. Privately, I thought that Yaya may not be too far off the mark. It was still common for people to take mistresses, and Utau was very mature for her age. Although taking a schoolgirl mistress from a prominent Tokyo business family was scandalous, to say the very least. I took the letter from Amu's grip with a steely eye.

"Rima, you aren't honestly going to--" Nagihiko began, flashing me the Nadeshikoey Rima-chan, you are not behaving like a lady stare. Staring back stubbornly, I unfolded the tiny letter, with nothing less than haughty indifference. "I couldn't care less of Utau's sordid affairs, but Amu has a right to read it. It's her handkerchief, after all."

"I don't exactly see her reading it," Nagihiko commented, drily, but I ignored him and smoothed it open. Upon the thin rice paper's surface, there was only written five words:

*Train station, 12th day, 1.00.*

"No way..." Yaya said in a low voice, reading over my shoulder. "Utan's gonna elope."

After lunchtime, we had history. The minute we walked into the classroom, Yaya immediately flung herself at Utau's chest in a cacophony of sniffles.
"Uta–an, you can't leave Yaya! Make a promise, okay? Give me your pinky, hurry up-"

"What on earth are you talking about?" she replied huffily, using her textbook to push Yaya's face off her bosom. She glared up at us as though this was our fault (it wasn't), eyes flashing.

Wordlessly, Amu slid the incriminating note across the table. Still glaring up a storm, she picked it up as if it was a dirty rag. After a cursory glance, she put it down, a no-nonsense look on her face.

"You read this," she said.

"Well," began Amu, flustered. "Well, yes, I sup-"

"It was sewn into your handkerchief."

"Y-yes, but-"

"Kindly describe the man who gave this to you."

Nadeshiko and I exchanged a glance; it was her who spoke when Amu could not, voice calm. "A handsome man with a rather feline face, I would describe it as. He had rather mischievous eyes and walked quite elegantly, but his face was browoned from the sun."

"That's a rather useless description," I replied, helpfully.

"Hoshina-san, you cannot."

I knew that Nadeshiko would attempt to stop Utau as much as she could. Girls running away from the school was a stain upon its reputation. Rumours circulated that when a girl ran away, her roommate was beaten in her place. Only the most deplorable of people would have another person suffer for their selfishness.

"I wasn't asking you," Utau said coldly, tucking the note into her collar and opened her textbook. As far as she was concerned, the conversation was over. As far as Nadeshiko was concerned, it wasn't, although she pressed her lips together in silence. I had a bad premonition that this would not turn out to be nothing.

Chapter End Notes

1. **Rima** (璃茉): The character "ma" refers to *Jasminum sambac*, or the Arabian jasmine, read as either *matsu* or *ma*. Even more amusingly, Nadeshiko's name coupled with her surname means "purple-blossomed carnation", which I find ridiculous.

2. **Mashiro** (真城): I originally assigned the "Ma" in Mashiro a meaning, but I can't make head nor tail of its English meanings (a real castle? As opposed to a fake one?).

Some notes on names: The first names of all the Shugo Chara characters are actually spelled by PEACH-PIT using the hiragana alphabet, because the target audience is middle-schoolers who haven't necessarily learned all the Chinese characters in school yet. Therefore, the kanji assigned to Rima and Nagihiko's names was picked by me and is completely non-canon. (The exception is Nadeshiko's name, which as Rima states, has only one kanji reading.) I wrote out my 'headcanon' characters out properly
for anybody curious below.

Nadeshiko:藤咲撫子
Nagihiko:凪彦
Rima:真城璃茉
On May twelfth, Amu burst into our room in a tizzy. "Nadeshiko, you have to help me!"

I was sprawled out on my bed reading *The Secret Garden*, tetchy at being jerked away from my rainy English moors. "Ah, don't mind me," I commented, offhandedly. "I'm just a piece of furniture."

"Utau's going to sneak out and meet that man, and she wants me to help her," Amu wheezed, leaning against the doorframe. "Wh-what do I do?"

Nagihiko looked up from where he was writing schmaltzy poetry at the fold-down desk with a startled look. Despite his wide innocent eyes, I was sure that Nagihiko had seen this coming. There was a certain artificiality to the way he tilted his head.

"Why, if Hoshina-san has decided to run away, then I suppose Hoshina-san will run away," he said, in the same reserved-yet-puzzled Nadeshiko voice as before. "That's like wondering what to do when the tide starts coming in."

"Well, yes, but... she's not running away, really," Amu amended hastily. "She just wants to talk to him. It's... complicated."

I was still pretending to read about British girl exploits, although admittedly with furrowed brow. Amu's evasive tone seemed to hint at knowing something the rest of us didn't. Moreover, why hadn't Amu asked me?

I may have not been a rakish, risk-taking lawbreaker, but an overprotective extended family had given me a certain disregard for rules set in place to protect me. Nagihiko, on the other hand, was an obedient lapdog who dressed up in women's clothing to please his mother's outdated ideals. I had anticipated this from the moment Amu walked in—Nagihiko was incapable of saying no.

"If that's the case, what would you have me do?" his voice reluctantly slipped into his Nadeshiko register, from where it had been going dangerously low.

Amu visibly relaxed, scratching her cheek sheepishly. "Well, there's the caretaker that patrols at
night, you know…”

"Ah, yes.” Nadeshiko closed her eyes, but opened them again suddenly.

"Wait, no. Hold on a moment. A caretaker? We've never hired one—you must be mistaken. Why would we need night guards? We have gated walls."

This was also the first time I had ever heard of a caretaker. I stared at Amu, baffled. She stared back at us, face suddenly panicked. "You mean, that man— who's often out by the woods, looking at the stars— he doesn't work for the school?"

"Why is there such an overabundance of tall, despicable men in this town?" I asked dispassionately. Nagihiko pretended not to hear me.

"That's very worrying." He furrowed his eyebrows, very hesitantly. "... Forgive me for this question, but was he wearing, for instance, burial clothes…?"

"Huh? N-no, just a shirt and trousers," Amu stuttered. "I've talked to him once or twice... W-wait a minute, Nadeshiko! You don't really think it could be a g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g..."

"A ghost?" I cut in, helpfully.

"You have to deal with it!" Amu wailed, flapping her arms wildly enough to look like Kichigai-sensei's descendant. "I can't! You're the heir to the school, right? That means you own this land! B-banish it with the land deed!"

"But I've never heard of any deaths on this property," Nadeshiko murmured to herself, preoccupied with more important details. "My father's family has owned this land since the Edo period. We would know if it was haunted."

"Maybe it's your dead great-grand-uncle or something," Amu whispered, nervously.

"No, he died during the Boshin war, in Hiroshima…"

Amu relaxed. Nagihiko finished his sentence, leering. "… Family legend says that his ghost continues to defend the imperial family to this day. One may hear the clop-clop-clop of his horse's hooves across the countryside on warm summer nights–"

Amu jumped, with a cry. "Nadeshikoooo! Don't joke about that!"

This was the Fujisakis we were talking about, so it probably wasn't a joke, but I kept my mouth shut. Amu notoriously hated ghosts. If Nagihiko knew better, he'd simply agree to help distract whatever might be patrolling the grounds just to shut her up.

Indeed, he must have thought the same thing as me, for he nodded reluctantly. "Very well, Amu-chan... for you."

I didn't quite like that.

"What will we do if we're caught?" Amu whispered.

"You aren't friends with the headmistress's daughter for nothing," Nadeshiko replied, in a measured tone. "I have influence. This is why you asked, was it not?"

"Well, a bit, but--" sheepishly, Amu sat down on my bed. I moved my elbow, distastefully. "You're so much better at this strategy stuff than I am, you know? I try my best, but you always help me
straighten my thoughts."

Nadeshiko smiled very slowly at this, the timid smile of a carnation opening its petals in direct sunlight. I scowled like a pile of garbage.

"I suppose I can look out for anybody who will catch you two… but I think that's the least of your problems," she said. "You'll want to be quiet, or you'll wake up the teachers. But as soon as you're outside, there ought to be nothing stopping you but the gate."

"Except the g-ghos—"

Nadeshiko cut across her, smoothly. "Yes, we'll see about that."

On the night that Utau was to run away, the sky was the clearest I had seen all spring. The stars glimmered sharply, like slivers of ice on the rapidly darkening blue, something that only made Nagihiko more antsy.

"It's a new moon, but those stars will make us easily-spotted," he muttered softly to himself, struggling to keep composure. "That's why he picked tonight. With no moon, it'll be pitch black. He was probably counting on cloud cover, though…"

"Fascinating," I commented, smoothing my nightgown down and staring at him with an ugly expression. He didn't notice through his fretting, something that annoyed me even more.

"… Well," I announced, crawling under the covers pointedly. "I'm going to bed."

When that garnered no reaction, I reached over to turn the oil lamp next to my bed down. Nagihiko continued to pace in the dark, hair over his shoulder, fingers hopelessly tangled in it like ivory bars in black silk.

How obnoxious. I decided that if he wanted to dither away through the night, I would let him. I lay down and closed my eyes. Sometime during this, I must have dozed off, although true sleep lingered on the threshold of my mind and refused to stay.

It felt like hours later when I heard the softest of sighs and the sound of leather boots rustling. It was roughly eleven-thirty, by the clock on the wall, and lights-out had been long ago. Opening my eyes, I saw that he was lacing up his boots.

In a daze, I automatically sat up and began putting my feet into my shoes. Nagihiko looked up, eyes glimmering in the semidarkness. "Rima, what are you doing?"

"I'm coming with you."

"Oh, are you?" He laughed, like an amused father whose young daughter has said something particularly clever. "Whatever brought this on?"

"Your own incompetency, mostly." I buckled the straps to my bare feet with a firm noise, and opened the wardrobe door to get my coat.

I took care to make every word of my next sentence very deliberate.

"You– are– a– coward." I buttoned a button for every word. "If you are so terribly afraid, then I will escort you. Will you really fail Amu and Utau-san over something as petty as… what?…"
I turned to squint out the window, very scornfully. "Getting discovered by ghost caretakers?"

"To be quite clear, ghost caretakers is not why I am hesitating--"

"We are allies." Very coldly, I adjusted the fur lining around my neck, regarding him haughtily. "Or are we only allies when it suits you, Fujisaki-san?"

"You know it's not like that," he replied very slowly, gritting his teeth. "What if you're caught?"

I tossed my hair, mimicking his Nadeshiko voice. "You're not friends with the headmistress's daughter for nothing, you know. I have influence."

He closed his eyes as if I had deeply wounded him, but an amused smile played at his mouth. Too late, I realized I had said the f-word—friends—even if I had only been parroting Nadeshiko. I prayed that Nagihiko wouldn't notice, but I wasn't entirely sure he hadn't. His smile was especially smug.

"When I choose to help Amu, that's one thing—she's made up her mind to go. It's another thing to let you come with me, take a blow for me, even. At least think this through."

"I have!"

"I don't think you have!" Nagihiko shot back, loudly. I flinched. He seemed to almost regret raising his voice, but his voice was nevertheless stern. "You're only a girl, you know, however much you try to act like an empress!"

The temperature went from reasonably muggy to stone cold in an instant. I was almost a full head shorter than Nagihiko, built like a child where he was nearly a man; he could have easily overpowered me, but he positively quailed under my cold stare.

"Ah," I whispered, dangerously soft. "Only a girl?"

"Rima, I was just--"

"Are you saying that you are not a mere woman, Lady Nadeshiko?"

The bitterness rose in my throat, betraying inadequacy. I had nearly forgotten—ah, yes, Nadeshiko had the woman's pedestal without the woman's burden. Let him do as he pleases, no regards to his own safety, but suddenly I had to stay inside. Things had been going so well with Fujisaki-san, but he had to go and make a royal arse of himself. What more should I have expected?

Nagihiko seemed to have retained his masculine sixth-sense to understand when he was on thin ice; he leapt to repair the damage. "Don't take that tone, please. You know you're not--"

"You're noisy," I interrupted, extremely bad-tempered. "If you are quite done attempting to insult me, we should be going."

He was no longer in any position to argue. With a hollow sort of air, he opened the door, and stepped back to let me go first. As quiet as we tried to be, every sound seemed deafeningly loud.


I had the distinct impression that Nagihiko was attempting to leave our row behind our closed
dormitory door, even as I brooded in it. No matter where it had gone, we reached the dormitory exit without incident nor word from Fujisaki Nagihiko's mouth.

Exhaling in relief, I wrenched the front door to our dormitory building open with a cold draft of air. There was a sound of rustling blankets from behind the nearest door.

Nagihiko's reproachful eyes glimmered in the darkness. Without thinking, I scoffed back. My voice echoed down the hallway, and resounding back, the soft squeak of door hinges. Damn it to hell. The door directly on my left creaked open, much to my horror.

"Senpai?" Two pale faces appeared at the doorway. I turned to face them slowly, silently sizing them up. It was first-year from calligraphy, Hīragi, and her roommate, a soft-looking girl with glasses. I clamped a hand on Nagihiko's sleeve, from where he had been about to make a desperate bolt for it. Sometimes Nagihiko reminded me of a spineless deer.

"Shhh," I admonished, fixing them both with a hawk-like stare to rival Sanjō-sensei's. "Close the door and stop walking on the floor without shoes. Fujisaki-san and I found a snake slithering around the hallway."

Nagihiko's reproachful stare was now burning a hole in my back.

"Wh-whaaaat?! A snake?" Hīragi clapped a hand to her mouth, eyes wide with horror. Her roommate seemed to be rooted to the spot in terror, but Hīragi was doing an odd sort of jig, as if the snake was already under her feet. Thud. Thud. Thud.

"Stop that this instant, or you'll wake up the teachers," I hissed. "Hīragi, you complete and utter imbecile, if you keep the door open, it'll slither in. Close the door and go back to sleep. Snakes can't get under the door crack."

I was very good with children. I think even Nagihiko was impressed by my blatant lies.

"W-what if the snake's in our room?" her roommate squeaked, face shining with sweat.

Nagihiko seemed to sense that I was not the most sensitive of creatures—he leapt in with a very gentle, feminine voice.

"That's impossible! We would have seen it go in. It's just a completely harmless grass snake, you know. I don't want you two to get in trouble because Mashiro-san's been frightening you with tales of demons." He laughed in his Nadeshiko voice, and put either hand on both their backs soothingly to turn them around. "Come on, now."

Reluctantly, the first-years allowed themselves to be herded back into their room by Nagihiko. Softly shutting the door behind them, he stared at me disapprovingly, as if I should have nurtured my mother complex more.

"You're welcome," I replied, affronted.

Finally—finally—we stepped out into the cool night air. I had ran across this familiar lawn only the other day when I had been late for class, but night-time seemed to change the scenery into something foreign. The silence was louder; the breeze was full in my ears. It was too early for crickets, but the grasses rustled on the wind like a mother humming at the loom.

I trotted after Nagihiko like a cocker spaniel amid distinct feeling that it was us, not Utau, who was running away. I thought Nagihiko would be more jittery, nervous; but there was something eerily casual about the way he stepped noiselessly through the grass with languid steps. It was me who
kept tip-toeing as if the ground would shatter under me any moment.

"Calm down," Nagihiko said, scanning the distant gate at the foot of the hill with the air of a seasoned war veteran. "We're fine."

"Says the one who was analyzing the moon phases," I snarked back. At that moment, we saw two fuzzy shapes approaching us through the grass.

"You came," Amu whispered in the moonlight, face drawn with terror. "Thank goodn— oh, hello, Rima."

"Good evening," I said elegantly, as if we were at an evening ball rather than a human trafficking mission. I saw Utau's eyebrow politely rise in the dim visibility before Amu pushed us further down the slope, muttering something about not standing around and chatting so close to where everyone was sleeping.

"No, no, this is fine," Nagihiko said, still with the demeanour of a lady of war. "Rima and I will stay here and make sure nobody sees you. You two can go on by yourselves to the train station."

"We've already had to shake off a pair of first-years," I interjected, pulling my coat around myself tighter.

"I bet it was Hiragi and Glasses Girl, those busybodies," Utau muttered very audibly, before being frantically hushed by Amu. Although not happy at getting to miss juicy Utau information, I nevertheless regaled myself to the position of Nagihiko's Hunting Dog; it would be the most useful, that's for certain.

"We'll see you when we get back," Amu whispered, face pale and drawn. Before she could turn around, Nagihiko hastily grabbed her arm, wide-eyed.

"Wait. How are you going to get over the gate?"

Amu looked like a deer in headlights. Utau, however, wordlessly held up a ring of keys with a steely eye.

For a minute, I thought Nagihiko was going to slap her. When he finally spoke, it was nothing that any of us expected; it was an exhale of admiration. "Why, Hoshina-san. Those are-"

"–Your mother's keys, yes," Utau finished, boredly.

Cripes! Elegant and refined Hoshina-san, stealing the gate keys from Nagihiko's mum! I was as enthralled as I was horrified. I could do nothing but put a warning hand on Nagihiko's arm, in a very comforting *Fujisaki-don't-have-a-strap-in-the-middle-of-the-school-lawn* kind of way.

Fujisaki, however, did not look as if he was ready to have a strop. His almost-black eyes reflected the thin moonlight towards distant horizons. He slowly let go of Amu's arm, breaking the unfortunate friend chain.

"If those keys are not back on my mother's desk by five in the morning, she will notice." His gaze flicked to the distant electrical light of the train station. "Hoshina san– if, by chance, you do not return, leave them with Amu. I will ensure they are back in their place"

Utau seemed to have expected as much. I wondered what was going through this crazy girl's mind as she exchanged a nod of understanding with my roommate, to Amu's and my watching awe. I did not expect this. Amu did not expect this. But somehow, Utau had.
"Well, I'll be going," she announced.

"Good luck," I said.

"Luck?" Utau drew herself up with all the composure of the daughter of a financier, eyes glimmering dangerously. "The shrewd man has no need for luck."

I had expected as much. Steadily, Amu and Utau retreated through the dewy grass and purply darkness, towards the distant black spikes of the school gate. Nagihiko watched them go, but I could no longer see his face in the foggy night cover.

It made me want to grab onto his arm tighter. Resisting the urge, I relinquished his arm instead and stuffed it in my rabbit-lined coat pocket. I had forgotten that I was cross with him.

Right. So now our plan was to keep an eye out for adults. But as far as we could see, the surrounding area was silent and free of suspicious teachers. So what was left?

Together, we gazed into the leafy green forest that bordered the building. Even in darkness, the place was friendly and familiar. Bushy trees and shrubby undergrowth scattered through the grass, rays of moonlight shining in to barely illuminate the forest floor. It was hardly the dark and foreboding place of folklore, odd tales of ghosts aside. This was reinforced by Nagihiko picking his way through the undergrowth comfortably, not unlike a grazing deer. He had obviously done this a thousand times before, but I still wondered how far he planned to go into the trees. Did he seriously believe this caretaker-ghost nonsense?

Despite my misgivings, I obediently followed. Quickly, it became apparent that the forest was not my natural habitat. Tree branches pulled at my already-tangled hair. The ground was treacherous, riddled with rocks and tree roots. My visibility was severely limited by the moon's absence; I saw nothing but very dark green amid even darker black. The only way I knew that Nagihiko was continuing to walk in front of me was by the white wisteria crest on the back of his padded haori, bobbing up and down in front of me with every step.

If I hadn't been in a row with him, I would have moaned and complained about it at length. Did he think I was fit to go walking in these shoes? If I had known that we would be tromping through the sodding forest like Girl Guides, I would have at least stolen a pair of his ridiculous boots…!

Nagihiko stopped walking so abruptly that I, looking the other way, walked directly into his back.

"Augh," I said, which didn't count as talking because it was a vocalization of pain-slash-annoyance. "What--"

"Be quiet," Nagihiko whispered, without further explanation. He flung out his arm to stop me; something that shouldn't have flattered me, but did. "You see that?"

I peered into the gloom. The trees rustled. Before us stood a barely-visible forest clearing, thick clusters of black leaves dancing on the deep blue of the sky. Only minimal starlight was able to pierce the canopy above, and it was reflected directly into our eyes by something man-made—something metallic.

Slowly and cautiously, we approached the edge of the clearing, twigs cracking like fireworks under our feet. The closer we got, the more apparent it was that we should not be getting closer; at once, we saw a dark humanoid shape rise to its feet.

We moved fast; I lunged behind the nearest tree. Nagihiko seemed to have the same idea at precisely the same moment—he twirled behind me, black hair whipping me in the face. Staring
eye-to-eye, chest-to-chest, we exhaled in terror as one.

"My, my…” A voice rang out beyond our tree.

Nagihiko had not spoken, judging from his immobile jaw and soft, wispy breathing. I did not believe in ghosts, but I did believe in real, dangerous men in forests. There was somebody else here.

I tentatively reached for Nagihiko's arm in the darkness, knuckles scratching the tree bark I was pressed up against. I felt a sleeve rustle, and Nagihiko's larger, cooler hand around mine. I squeezed it, leaning back a few mere inches to try and see beyond the tree trunk. Nothing.

It couldn't be helped. We'd have to say something. But it couldn't be me. If someone thought there to be two girls in a forest at night, with no teacher aware that they were missing... well, Utau's escape would be the least of our problems.

I tried to exhale instructions as softly as I could. "Say something."

I thanked all the gods I could name when Nagihiko did not question me. He straightened up, my hand still clenched in his clammy fist. I did not thank the gods for this, because it was disgusting.

I heard him inhale, very deliberately, in a deep voice—"Who's there?" he bellowed, voice echoing. A startled scops owl whook-whooked.

Eep.

It was the lowest pitch I had ever heard come out of Nagihiko's mouth. My stomach jolted, a mix of fear-driven adrenaline and something else. For once, his gender was an enormous asset. I was hardly proud to crouch behind a man's authority, but I also wasn't a fool.

"Why, only me, sir!" a warm male voice replied, bordering on laughing. "There's no need to shout so—you'll give every night-bird in a ten-mile radius quite the shock."

"Stay behind me," Nagihiko said, through gritted teeth, sounding fully prepared to deck someone.

"Don't be a prat." I nonetheless stayed behind him. If Nagihiko got punched out, I reasoned, I could bolt while he was distracted.

My roommate stepped out from behind the tree in a single reckless motion, squaring his shoulders, still in the same deep, haughty voice. "My family owns the land that you stand on, so I daresay that I may shout as I please." Oh, how I wanted to chuckle. Nagihiko trying to act like a little feudal prince was as impressive as it was precious.

There was a silence, and then another laugh. A lantern was hoisted high, so that I could see a sliver of a young man's unlined face and the glint of an almond-shaped eye. "So then this would be the famous Fujisaki-kun, is it? I do beg your pardon."

I bristled. So did Nagihiko. Fujisaki-kun, he had said.

"How do you…" he began, deep voice turning tremulous.

"You needn't worry," the man replied, setting the lantern down on a rock so that its light was thrown towards us. "I'm an old friend of your mother's. She permits me use of these grounds for astronomy."And then he winked very obviously at Nagihiko. "Shall I not tell her that you're sneaking around with girls after dark?"
"We weren't doing anything questionable," I tried to protest, but changed my mind last-minute. "We wuuuuuuuuuuuuuhhhhhhh..." I whined, like a wounded piece of machinery, and Nagihiko stepped on my foot.

"How do you know my mother? She's never spoken of you," he said, a little accusatorily.

"Oh? I find this hard to believe, given that we're your brother school."

"Huh?" Nagihiko said, hollowly.

"My name is Amakawa," he said, laughter in his voice. "I'm the chairman of Ōzono Academy."

Ōzono Academy was the all-boy's school a way's to the east, considered a mystery as far as we were concerned. I looked at Nagihiko. Nagihiko looked directly ahead, suddenly the picture of meekness.

"Oh... er... I'm sorry, sir."

"Whatever for, Fujisaki-kun?" Amakawa turned back to the metallic object behind him with the loving caress of a mother. In the lantern light, I could now see clearly that it was a telescope. "I'm not going to punish you, just because you snuck into my school a few times."

"You knew about that?" he said, aghast.

"You snuck into their school?" I hissed, finding my voice. Did even goody-goody Nadeshiko routinely sneak out of this school on a regular basis? I had thought myself a daring rule-breaker, but between Utau currently eloping with a sexy older man and Nagihiko the juvenile delinquent, I felt like quite the model citizen.

"I have friends at Ōzono!" Nagihiko tried to defend himself.

I waved my hand dismissively. "No, that's impossible. You don't have any other friends."

Nagihiko opened his mouth to retort, but nothing came out.

Amakawa watched this exchange with an amused twinkle in his eye, like a jolly Father Christmas. He seemed to decide that this was a good opportunity to distract us before I ate Nagihiko alive.

"As for how I know your mother, Fujisaki-kun... well, it's quite the story. I wouldn't dare try to do it justice with my own tongue. You should ask her."

"I think we have the time, Amakawa-sensei," he said, regaining his composure and leaning against the tree behind me. He smiled, almost... cockily. "... Since you decided to interrupt our romantic tryst."

Bastard! I hid my face in my coat's fur lining and stomped on Nagihiko's foot, hard.

From the continually blissful look on Amakawa's face, he interpreted this as a maiden's embarrassed shyness instead of a woman's outrage. He moved the lantern slightly so that he could take a seat, lovingly adjusting his telescope. As he spoke, he continued to peer through it.

"I first met Satsubaki when I worked as an astrologer in the district of Gion. By that time, she was already an accomplished maiko, always bustling to and from dance practice. She was headlining Dances of the Old Capital the year I began working, and my... none of the posters let me forget it."

So Fujisaki-sensei really had been a geisha. Amu and Yaya would be enthralled if they knew. But
if Amakawa-sensei could remember Fujisaki's mother as a young woman... how old was he, really? I squinted at him. He couldn't be a day over thirty.

At my squinty look, he added, " Barely anything is done in Kyoto without consulting an almanac or an astrologer. It's important to pick an auspicious dates for important events, is it not? She was one of many clients, but the most memorable, for certain. At first it was because of her fame... later for her sudden marriage... and finally for fate leading us both to run schools within the same prefecture."

He moved his telescope slightly, and turned the lens to focus. "I still remember the day she made an appointment with me, and came into my office to inquire about dates. I tried to ask her what event it was for, but she was quite evasive. Finally, she said, 'Tsukasa, I'm getting married,' quite firmly. Just like that! With such a serious, earnest look on her face. And it happened, too. When Satsubaki sets her mind to something, woe betide the person who tries to stand in her way. She certainly had to wade through her fair share of beautiful women to get her claws into Fujisaki-san, let me tell you that."

Impressive. Nagihiko looked slightly amused, but mostly terrified. I presumed this was because he had been on the receiving end of the dragon's claws more than once.

I wondered about Nagihiko's father, but did not want to ask, should I look too interested. Amakawa's gaze flicked from me and back again.

"We should have seen it coming, of course. He was her patron for years, but we all thought she enjoyed independence too much. Satsubaki lived for dance. We didn't think in a million years that she would retire to become a housewife, but here we are. And here you are." He leaned back, fixing Nagihiko with quite the smile. "There's no need to fret, you know, Fujisaki-kun. Your parents married for love."

Nagihiko started, and I was at once alerted to the fact that he existed. Had Nagihiko been fretting about such a thing? I never spared much thought as to whether or not my parents had been madly in love or not. Love was the last thing I was spending my days mooning about, unlike Hinamori Aimless over here.

"I see," Nagihiko murmured.

"I believe your girlfriend is a little anxious," Amakawa-sensei commented, nonchalantly. "Perhaps you should both check on Hoshina-san."

Nagihiko had a look on his face like he had been slapped. I was so astonished that I forgot to tell him that I wasn't Nagihiko's girlfriend. How did he know? All this time, we had thought we were stalling him, but—

Without missing a beat, Amakawa-sensei folded up his telescope, smiling at the both of us in a rather grandfatherly manner. "Well, Fujisaki-kun... should you ever get the urge, I'm sure there will always be a school door left unlocked so that you can come in and distract my students. But I daresay we'll be seeing each other again before the winter snows come."

How did he know?

"Goodnight, Mashiro-san, Fujisaki-kun."

How did he know my name? Bleeding hell...!

He left us standing in the exact spot we had started in, sweaty hands clasped together, staring
blankly into the woods. I gazed mistrustfully into the darkness where he had vanished.

"Dodgy bloke," I murmured, darkly. Nagihiko relinquished my hand like a guilty schoolboy who had been caught with his hands on an expensive vase he wasn't supposed to be touching.

"I s'pose," he replied, looking at me sideways. "We should see about Hoshina-san."

"Yes," I whispered. The best idea you've had all night, I added, in my head. I stuffed my hands in my pockets, self-consciously.

This time, it was I who led the way out of the forest quite eagerly, picking over roots and rocks and obsessively following the thinning trees. I wanted out of this bloody forest, full of weird psychic exposition astronomers, mean trees and awkward Nagihiko faces.

As we approached the geometric iron gate, I gazed at Nagihiko. Had we not been currently sneaking out, I reflected, I might have enjoyed the stroll. It was rather romantic and calming, if not horribly, horribly dark. Once again, I cursed Nagihiko for ruining what could have been a perfectly good moonlit tromp and forcing me to shun him for badly-timed and ill-advised chauvinism.

As if the gate recognized Nagihiko as its master, it creaked open under his hand. I saw no padlock on the other side of the gate. Evidently, the gate only locked from the inside; it meant that Utau had to leave it unlocked when she escaped, a blessing and a curse. Wordlessly, Nagihiko held the gate open, and I walked through it without thinking twice.

You're only a girl, however much you try to act like an empress, he had said.

Did he think I didn't know? I was reminded every waking moment of my life that I was a girl. My mother reminded me every time she didn't let me step foot outside my own front door with an escort. Fujisaki-sensei reminded me with every ridiculous speech she made about how vital women were in the lives of men. I was reminded every minute I was trapped in the forest with that idiot, realizing that if we had been two girls, we could have easily been attacked.

So, in a way, he was right. I was frail and petite, more doll than human, the shortest of all my friends. I had pitiful upper-body strength; I was the worst at physical activities in my class, to the point where it became a joke. Don't hit the ball at Rima-chan, Nadeshiko had laughed once, eyes sparkling with mirth. She's so pretty that even the ball is drawn to her huge head. You'll knock her right out. She doesn't even make an attempt to defend herself.

On the first day back to school, the dirt path from the train station had seemed to stretch on for miles and miles. In the night-time, with only Nagihiko at my side, it seemed to take mere minutes. I felt like we approached the train station from the back far too soon.

What we referred to as a "train station" was, in reality, no more than a tiny wood covering on a raised platform. It ran alongside the polished black railroad tracks, which then vanished into the hills. It was lit by a single electric light, encased by wires, surrounded by fluttering moths. I could see Utau's hair glinting under the flickering light, and presumably Amu at her side.

Nagihiko and I slowly approached the train station from the far side, half-hidden in the undergrowth and wooden backing of the building.

Before we could alert them to our presence, Utau's hair glinted under the lights. She rushed forward towards the train tracks, in a single, breathless gasp—

"Ikuto!"
I quickly moved to hide behind the train station, and Nagihiko followed suit.

A tall figure seemed to materialize out of the surrounding blackness. She threw her arms around him without fear, a bright illuminated figure embracing the darkness. They stood there together for a few moments, clasped in each other's arms.

"It's been too long… you're too thin." She took her face out of his chest to clasp his face tenderly in her hands. "Oh, Ikuto—where have you been? They think I know where you're hiding, they've been hounding me for months, you— …you shouldn't have come. Where have you been?"

"Here and there," he replied, evasively. Even in the semidarkness, I could tell he was the same man from before. He awkwardly released Utau as though even hugging made him physically uncomfortable. "You know that Stepfather dearest's company thugs can't keep up with me."

There was something excessively odd about this sentence. I exchanged a look with Nagihiko.

"Are you sure?"

"Course," he replied, evenly. "Nearly caught up to me in Osaka."

Utau made a sharp, angry noise.

"Didn't get me, though. I like being on the run. But not… if it affects you." He murmured this, ineloquently.

"They're still trying to force me to sell my shares back to the company," Utau whispered, frantic. "Because if Father is truly dead, then we own at least fifty percent collectively—"

This time, it was Nagihiko who gave me a look of complete and utter bafflement. I had thought myself watching the beginning of some sweeping romance novel; to see it sink into the stock market was jarring, to say the least. I was slowly beginning to realize that Utau did not, in fact, have a lover, but instead…

"But Father's not dead," Ikuto replied, stiffly.

"It's time to put your idealism to rest, older brother." Utau's voice was like gravel and ice. "If he wasn't dead to begin with, Ichinomiya-san's most certainly ensured he's dead by now. If he finds out where you are, you're next."

"A thousand times better than what he'll do if he gets his hands on you," Ikuto said, full of hate. "Keep ignoring their offers."

"I was already doing it. You don't have to tell me," she said, stubbornly. "I'm still a member of the Board of Directors. If I can resist their demands until I come of age, then perhaps I can convince them—"

"—That maybe he'll have no regrets about disposing of you like an adult," Ikuto said, harshly. "As long as he's married to her, he holds all the power. There's nothing left for us here, Utau."

There was silence. Behind them, Amu's eyes shone with horror; she seemed longing to say something, but wasn't sure what. I was willing to bet that the economics had severely compounded her understanding of the situation. This was clearly a family situation that we could only hope to piece together at best.

A moth nearly flew into my eye, and I tipped backwards into Nagihiko. He grabbed my shoulders
to steady me, pulling me further out of view so that our view was obscured completely.

"Why did you come here, Ikuto?" I heard Utau say, quietly. Her voice was resigned.

So was his. "I'm running away."

"Running away?" She made a noise that could have been a scoff, and I heard Amu swallow audibly. "Where will you go?"

"Manchuria. There's fifty thousand Japanese prospecting in Northern China. They won't notice two more."

Utau sounded as if she was putting two-and-two together. "They won't notice… two more?"

Ikuto's shadow moved in the pool of light. "I'm not leaving without you," he said, staunchly. "The last train for Tokyo leaves in fifteen minutes. From there, we could catch a ship in the dockyards. Be out of the country by morning."

"You would abandon our mother?!"

"I would abandon the woman that trapped me in a life that is not my own."

Nagihiko sucked in a breath, sharply, and his fingernails dug into my shoulder.

"My place is here," Utau replied, voice weary. "I have my own plans. If you can wait a few more months…"

"You're asking me to stay?" he said.

"No, I am telling you to stay," she ordered. "I have an education to concern myself with— more than can be said for you."

Something mischievous glinted in Ikuto's eye. "There's no education like the streets."

"Oh, don't pull that on me," she shot back, disgusted. "When we tried to send you to school, you rode the train all the way back to Tokyo."

"Sure did," Ikuto replied, amused.

This seemed to be all the answer he needed. He shouldered a black, bulky case shaped like a gourd, and turned towards the lights of the town. "I'll bide my time until winter, see what news comes my way. You'd better hope that your plotting falls through by then, little sister."

"Good. Hurry up and clear off," Utau said, huffily.

He sauntered towards the village at a liesurely pace, stopping only once, to look over his shoulder.

"Oh. One more thing." A grin widened on his face. "Make sure to thank your cute friend for dropping all her handkerchiefs at the Tokyo platform like a clumsy idiot. It came in terrible handy for contacting you."

I saw Amu go scarlet in the dim light, audibly spluttering. "TH-TH-THAT'S-"

He had already disappeared down the hill.

Utau looked mildly ruffled, as if she had just been forced to scold a disobedient cat. Amu, still
extremely overcome, leaned against the wooden platform for support.

"Is-is he always like that?" she spluttered.

"Essentially," Utau replied, although worry subtly wove through her words.

"U-Utau..." Amu straightened up, frowning at the keyring in her grasp. "... What did all that mean?"

Utau did not reply.

I presumed this was a good time to reveal myself from the shadows; I quickly walked forward into the light, trying to look as bored and completely disinterested as I possibly could. It wasn't difficult at all, because my face already looked bored and disinterested.

"Are you both done here?" I said, staring around me with complete lack of empathy. "It's freezing. Evidently Utau-san is not running away, because she is still standing here."

"Yes, we're quite done here, I think," Amu said quickly, scuttling closer like a nervous squirrel. "Rima's right, we shouldn't have taken this long. Nadeshiko, can you take the gate keys, please? I feel bad just holding them."

"Of course, give it to me," Nagihiko's white arm stretched around my shoulder to pluck the keys from her sweaty hand. The Nadeshiko mask was once again fixed with a gentle smile upon his face.

That was the last phrase anybody said all the way back to Seiyo. We walked back up the hill in silence, accompanied by nothing but the crunching of dirt under our feet. I believe we were all still preoccupied with our own thoughts. My mind was churning with shareholder law and all I knew of the Hoshina family; Amu was gnawing her lip next to me, cheeks still pink. On my other side, Nagihiko stared hungrily at the stars, as if he could see so much more. Ever since he had eavesdropped with me on Ikuto, he had been acting oddly.

And ahead of us, Hoshina Utau strode briskly, head held high. I was now conscious of how much difference a year in age could make. She was sixteen years old, an adult in Old Japan by many standards. She could marry—she could divorce. She could inherit property, bequeath it. It was overwhelming.

The gate loomed in front of us, no longer a symbol of fear and prison. It curved towards us like an old friend, as homey as a lantern lit on the porch of one's home.

Perhaps my metaphor was a bit too literal to my own crazed mind, for there was, in fact, a glimmering light in front of the gate. But surely I must be going mad... that was impossible.

A dark mass held the lantern, the shape of what looked like two people. Oh, horrors. Something was terribly wrong.

Hoshina strode forward as confidently as if the light was not there. I hurried in her wake, a remora fish comforted by the presence of the shark. As we approached, the first face became rapidly and horrifyingly clear.

"Hoshina," Sanjō-sensei said curtly, glasses an opaque gold in the light of the lantern. She regarded Utau coolly, as a wrestler regards his bigger but feeble opponent. "Hinamori... Mashiro... of course... Fujisaki."
I couldn't tell if Sanjō's *of course* was an addendum to my own surname, or a prefix to his. After all that I learned tonight, I was suspecting the latter.

Nagihiko pushed me back forcefully, going to stand next to Utau. "Mother–"

"I'll take those, thank you," a soft voice said from behind Sanjō, pulling the key ring from his unresisting fingers. The terrifyingly beautiful face of Fujisaki-sensei came into view, cold eyes staring out from behind an impregnable Noh mask.
When I was eleven, I had acted out in class. I forget the exact details of what, precisely, I did—probably something very hilarious—but regardless, Sanjō-sensei finally put her foot down. "Mashiro," she barked, voice making the desks shake, "Up front."

I toddled to the front of the classroom on my short noodle legs.

"Hand, please."

I held it out, haughtily. Sanjō took the rattan cane from where it normally sat undisturbed in the corner of the classroom, and gestured for me to come closer. Then she briskly slapped my open palm with the rod, three times.

The first whack hurt, but bearably. It felt exactly as I had expected. The second whack stung on already-irritated flesh. The third whack burned, making my fingers twitch in vain. Although I had struggled to keep my face impassive, my eyelids couldn't help but flutter with pain. Afterwards, angry red marks lingered on my hand for the next hour.

This was worse.

The hits were a steady rhythm against my back, like rain on a roof, a mallet on a drum-skin, biting wood on the flesh of a peach. As my flesh smarted and burned, I began to play a game with myself. If I focused enough on the pain wracking my body—localized and compartmentalized it to a sole area—the sensation grew distant and easily dealt with. I treated the constant thuds of pain on my back as if it was an earthquake occurring far away from my urban center. I was still getting beaten; I could still feel it, but it was no longer registering clearly in my mind. It was, perhaps, the only thing keeping me calm. I tried to keep myself in this state, fists clenched, face frozen.

An hour prior, I had found myself seiza-ing in Fujisaki's sodding office. The other side of the desk was lacking its usual reptilian inhabitant, although I was not alone; Amu's leg pressed against mine, trembling profusely. She had never gotten in trouble before, never mind beaten. She must have been terrified.
Well, this was exactly what we deserved, if I was being fair to myself. We had snuck out, broken school rules. To all who didn't know the truth, it must have looked uncannily as if we were running away to catch a train, or something else excessively stupid.

All the same, I had only been caned once—and that was only three times, on the hand. By Fujisaki-sensei's foreboding voice, this was not going to be a metaphorical slap on the wrist.

We had been instructed by a livid Sanjō-sensei not to talk. She then dragged Utau away by the ear, face full of bitter disappointment. It was common knowledge within the school that Sanjō-sensei was fond of Hoshina-san, regarding her as a protégé of sorts. Perhaps that's why it sounded as if Utau was getting beaten especially long and hard. The cracking of the cane was audible over the muffled, scratchy sounds of a female singer crooning a ballad from the gramophone. I wondered if this was how military prisoners felt: trapped in the semidarkness, nothing but the sound of their shrieking comrades for company, forced to listen to the vocal equivalent of the electric saw. What kind of eccentric woman was Fujisaki-sensei, to listen to enka music at one in the morning? Perhaps she had purposefully turned it on for us.

I allowed my eyes to wander—anything to take my mind off Utau's muffled scoffs of pain. Fujisaki-sensei's desk was strewn with thin sheaves of rice paper and a now-cold cup of tea, a brush resting on its wooden stand as if placed there hurriedly. Had she been pulled away to deal with us while she was still writing letters?

Well, I thought grimly, it wouldn't be the last letter she wrote. We had been informed by the dragon herself that our parents were being notified. What exactly the letters would contain was anybody's guess. None of us breathed a word about Ikuto—neither teacher had bothered to ask, focused more on the crime than the motive. It left me to conclude that very soon, my mother would be getting a letter going something along the lines of this:

Dear the miss unmarried Mashiro-sama,

Late spring brings warm days and cold nights. Like the spring morning dew, it is with a heavy and cold heart that I must bring you bad news so close to summertime.

Your beloved only daughter was caught returning to school after a joyous night wandering the countryside aimlessly, in the company of friends who shall remain nameless for their own personal safety. They were not, however, running away in any capacity. I can only presume that they were drinking and revelling in the company of construction workers, for I have little grasp of motivations that are not my own.

I pray to Ukemochi-no-kami that you shall take care of this matter. A woman's virtuousness begins at the mother's breast, or something. I apologize again for this tragic news.

Fujisaki Satsuhakibakigakikko

(some over elaborate flower stamp, probably.)

Wood clacked, and the screen slid open over by Fujisaki-sensei's desk. Utau was shoved through it, eyes dark and rebellious. Her blouse was clutched to her chest, wearing nothing but her brassiere, bangs sticking to her forehead.

"This is my punishment for letting you escape, too, you know," Sanjō gasped for breath. Her sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, and her glasses were sliding off her nose. "To stay up and beat you all within an inch of your lives instead of returning to my warm bed."
I had a thousand snide comments to make about this, all left unspoken. Instead, I said the first thing that came to mind. "Where's Nadeshiko?"

Nagihiko had vanished on the way to Fujisaki-sensei's office, wordlessly beckoned away from us and down a different corridor in his mother's wake. Utau or Amu might have been foolish enough to think Nadeshiko exempt from punishment: I knew better.

"Fujisaki-san answers only to the headmistress," Sanjō said grimly. "I can assure you that her punishment is likely worse than all three of yours combined."

Well, that was reassuring.

"Alright, Mashiro." Having caught her breath, Sanjō straightened up, fixing me with a stare. "You'll be next. Hoshina, kindly put your blouse back on and return to your room."

Utau turned away from us to slide the screen door open. As she did, we could all see her bare back was dotted all over with ugly purple bruises. There were red oozes of blood on her shoulder blades, where repetitive pressure had broken the skin.

I heard Amu gasp softly; I stiffened. Would my back also bleed and bruise when it was hit? Sanjō-sensei already looked exhausted; surely she wouldn't be able to beat me as hard as she had beaten Utau. I was suddenly fiercely grateful that Amu was going last, and would thus bear the weakest blows.

"Sometime this week, if you please, Mashiro," Sanjō added, curtly.

I longed to reassure Amu that somehow, it would be fine, but I could not bring myself to speak up in Fujisaki-sensei's office. Although the headmistress was absent in body, I felt her eyes all over the walls, watching us like little rustling insects. So instead, I followed Sanjō outside stoically, stomach in knots.

The screen in the back corner of Fujisaki-sensei's office opened out to a beautiful inner courtyard, walled in on all sides by the low wooden sides of the school hallways. The cool air hit my face in a rush, and I heard the muffled clunk of a bamboo spout, knocking against its stand as it filled with water. There was nothing but stone under my feet. By day, it must have been a beautiful garden of some kind. By night, it looked like the kind of creepy place where someone would hang himself.

Sanjō gestured to the ground, sounding more weary than anything. I dropped into the now-familiar seiza position onto the flagstones, staring at the lit stone lantern directly ahead of me. I was determined not to cry out as Utau had, in case Fujisaki-sensei or—god forbid, Nagihiko— was listening from somewhere else.

In Sanjo-sensei's pale hand, she clutched the infamous rod that normally sat in the corner her classroom. To the superficial eye, the cane may have looked like bamboo, but most people knew it to be rattan. Rattan, like bamboo, had a sort of yellowish blocky look to it. Unlike bamboo, rattan is solid all the way through. This cane in question was only a single stalk, for which we ought to have been grateful; at the judicial level, it was several bound together, and it drew blood.

So focused was I on the fascinating history of the Calameae genus that the first hit came unexpectedly. I locked in a shocked squeal. Would bracing my knees and stiffening my back would do anything against the next one, or was it better to be pliant, yielding? I tensed up against the stone, elbows locked into place.

Two. My knees buckled, and I grimaced. It made no difference.
The first hit had shocked me with how much it hurt, but now they were losing momentum. It seemed as if I was right—she had tired herself out on Utau, who Sanjō knew was the primary culprit and deserved the strongest beating. Next in order of culpability was I, for having a criminal record. Last would be Amu, who, as always, was so sweet and blameless.

I closed my eyes, waiting for another searing hit.

It did not come. Instead, I heard the distinct sound of delicate, tiny butterfly steps on stone. My heart thudded against my ribcage like a terrified bird. The only one who walked with such measured steps was Fujisaki-sensei. I dared not turn around to confirm my suspicions.

"Yukari-san, you may return inside and send Hinamori-san back to her room," her voice lilted on the wind like flower petals. "I will take it from here."

Sanjō was a practical woman, and knew when not to argue. I heard her sound of assent and the fading footsteps. The door slid shut, and a little bit of tension drained from my aching shoulders. Poor Amu would have no idea what on earth was happening, being sent back without me, but she would do so without question. I felt no bitterness at her exclusion from this twisted punishment.

Curiosity finally getting the better of me, I craned my neck over my shoulder. Nadeshiko stood next to her mother in disgrace, face the stark colour of fallen snow. She turned to look at me, but it was Nagihiko who met my eyes through the holes of the mask, pleading. You're in trouble, his face seemed to say with a grimace, and I'm in trouble.

His worry had the adverse effect of calming me and steeling my momentary panic. I hardened my gaze, and subtly nodded. So be it, I told him silently, looking haughty and unshakable.

What Fujisaki-sensei said next severely impacted by ability to look haughty and unshakable.

"Pick up the cane, Nagihiko."

Clunk, clunk.

The bamboo spout behind us filled with water, emptied, and sprung back up again.

He was going to beat me.

I did not want to admit that my own pride had caused me to step directly into this trap. I'm coming with you, I had whined, fancying myself intelligent—but had it not been from a good place? The fool would have been lost without me. It was not my fault that we were both being punished, played off against each other like chess pieces. It was the fault of our headmistress.

Nagihiko did not move to pick up the cane. We both stared at her instead, like stubborn horses.

Nagihiko's mother then seemed to sense that she'd have more luck appealing to me; she turned in my direction, tucking a wisp of her still-black hair behind a marble ear in a very stern voice.
"Mashiro-san, I thought we had an understanding. The understanding was that upon being let into a confidential secret, you would not lead my son into more risk and rule-breaking. I thought you were the prudent one... a pity."

My mother is very skilled at commissioning a hut and then demanding a castle, Nagihiko had said, once, the picture of grace. Now he was every bit ragged chivalry, voice rough and masculine.
"Mother, please, it was m-

His sentence broke halfway. In a swift and graceful motion, Fujisaki-sensei slapped Nagihiko hard
across the jaw. Her kimono sleeve drifted in its wake like a dream.

"Hold your tongue." Her voice was a cold blade left out in the winter air. "You are both equally accountable for your own actions, and will be punished accordingly. Pick up the cane, Nagihiko. I will not ask again."

Although the entire side of his face was slapped red, he straightened up, long hair settling back into place as if it was never ruffled. He picked up the cane.

"I hope you know that this hurts me more than it hurts you," Fujisaki-sensei said, once again serene. "Hit until I tell you to stop."

*I think this is going to hurt me more than either of you,* I wanted to say snidely. But when I looked up at Nagihiko, suddenly I wasn't so sure. His wild eyes reflected the light like a wolf's. His face, so unusually readable, contained nothing but paralyzed horror and disbelief.

I mentally kicked myself for being so self-absorbed, remembering all at once that Nadeshiko did not have many friends. Was it because Fujisaki-sensei forced her to beat them all? I stared at Fujisaki, locking my jaw. I would not give her the satisfaction of burning my shaky bridge with Nagihiko over something as petty as getting whipped to death.

"Go ahead," I said.

There were a million apologies in his eyes when he brought the cane down on my shoulder, a soft sound. I could have cried; he went for an area left untouched, and the force was negligible to me, feathery touches compared to Sanjō's. I felt a sick, swooping rush of affection.

"This is not a child's game, Nagihiko. Hit harder," Fujisaki-sensei said, through gritted teeth.

I felt a lurch of foreboding. Of course she wouldn't allow him to go easy on me; this was mostly a punishment for him, after all. I dared not turn around for fear of repercussion, but I did subtly push my shoulders back. This was a clear situation in which nothing could be helped—the best he could do was shred me up and then pray I was intact at the end. And come up with a metaphor that wasn't so poor.

All this I knew. Yet, Nagihiko's second hit connected with shocking strength. I forgot how strong he actually was.

"Eurgh!" I squeaked before I could stop myself, more from surprise than anything. I heard the cane clatter to the ground. "Mother, please!" Nagihiko pleaded loudly.

"Oh, for Heaven's sakes, Nagihiko." Fujisaki-sensei replied, bored. "You've done worse before. The faster you do it, the faster it will be over."

She was right. I gave Nagihiko a grim look over my shoulder, my mother's trademark Rima-you'd-better-do-as-I-say-or-I-will-make-a-nasty-sour-face stare. Who's the woman now, Nagihiko? I wanted to snarl, throat full of bitterness. *Too weak to strike a schoolgirl?*

My feeble thoughts sounded horrifying, even to the cavernous echo of my own head. If anything, it only made him more maddeningly like a gentleman; but this was hardly the place to defer to the fairer sex.

I heard the rattan cane whistle defiantly through the air, and the rush of the wind parting for Nagihiko's hands—I glowered to myself, steeling myself for the invariably painful hit that would follow.
When it hit, I was rather impressed with myself; I had anticipated worse, so what connected barely seem to hurt at all. He hit in an interesting manner; different from Sanjō's, something I couldn't put my finger on. I stayed absolutely still and channelled a rock for three more beats.

Three. Four. Five. The hits hurt—a little more than the first one, but not by much. Yet, I could feel the rattan canes whistling through the air as if at extremely high speeds.

I realized, all at once, that clever Nagihiko was taking advantage of having his back to his mother. He brought down the cane through the air at high speed, making it look as if he was going to connect with my back with all the momentum behind him, before greatly slowing down just before it hit my skin. Executing such a thing was not for the weak of… arms. I felt some grudging admiration.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve. My determination only wavered when I felt something hot and sticky worm its way down my back, a sickly saccharine trail. The rattan cane came down for the twenty billionth time, squelching on wet fabric, and I cringed hard enough to send a shudder through my body.

The smell of iron slunk dizzyingly through the air. Immediately, the cane dropped. The sight of blood was evidently enough to make Nagihiko lose his nerve. "Rima, you're bleeding," he whispered in horror.

The blissful reprieve of Fujisaki-sensei's voice sang on the wind. "Very well, then, Mashiro-san. You may go."

I didn't need to be told twice, but my body had other ideas. My back felt as if it had been rent to shreds. I was quite sure the wounds on my back would split into gashes, like runs in a nylon stocking, if I so much as moved a shoulder. Nevertheless, legs knocking together, I rose to my feet.

Nagihiko dove forward to grab my elbow, eyes brimming with worry. Fujisaki-sensei raised a gentle hand, watching us like a lady might regard a mated pair of Mandarin ducks with amusement. "That's quite enough, Nagihiko. If you don't mind, I'd like you to stay behind so that we may have a little chat."

I was ever-conscious of how Fujisaki-sensei talked to her son like he was an employee in a company firm. My resentment for her quadrupled. First she makes Nagihiko beat me within an inch of my life, and now I was to be deprived of his presence for God knows how much longer? All I wanted to do was get to the safety of my dormitory room, where I could rinse the blood off my back, sit down on my bed and perhaps have a good long talk with Nagihiko about what both of witnessed with Utau. Instead, I found myself walking back alone, back stinging, through the dark wooden hallways.

I leaned over the sink in my dormitory to inspect the damage, struggling to undo my nightgown buttons from the back. My shoulder joints were impossibly stiff, and my arms refused to bend backwards; I hopped up and down on the spot, trying to gently wrench a space open. This was how Nagihiko found me when he walked in some time later, bouncing around in a circle like a possessed jack-in-the-box.

"That was fast," I said shortly.

"Yes, I was not kept long," he said, tilting his head demurely. "Do you…?"

Do I what? I stopped my hopping to stare over my shoulder at him. He was carrying a bowl of
steaming water in his thin hands, and looked like a wreck.

"You look like a wreck," I said, although it was lacking its normal satisfaction.

"So do you." Nagihiko pointed at me with his chin, grimacing.

I looked up at the round mirror over the sink, and almost recoiled. My eyelids were red-rimmed, as if I'd been crying, and the bruises under my eyes were enormous and practically the colour of Nadeshiko's hair. I took a stumbling step back, almost hitting the bathroom door.

"Careful, careful!" said Nagihiko quickly, narrowly missing spilling water everywhere. "Sit down. I can undo do that for you."

Undo what? I looked from my half-undone nightgown buttons to Nagihiko's face in a very slow, outraged motion.

He made a face at me, as if being concerned for my own modesty was irreparably childish. "Oh, come now, Rima, do you honestly believe I'm going to eye you up like a construction worker?"

"Yes," I said, not even bothering to think about it. "Who wouldn't? I'm stunning."

"Let's not forget modest. If I wanted to peek like a low-class thief, I would have done it months ago." He made a wry face at me, overridden with remorse. "The least I can do is get the blood off you, you know. You'll want that cleaned, and—well, after all, it was my… fault…"

I knew this was coming; God forbid we just sweep it under the carpet.

"Only an idiot would try to blame himself," I interrupted, disapprovingly. "Sanjō-sensei hits harder than you do when she's sleep-deprived."

Nagihiko did not smile. "At least let me wash it off."

"If you think I'll let a boy undress me, your head must be emptier than I thought." I crossed my arms, stubbornly. "Nadeshiko."

"Eh?" he responded in a puzzled lilt. Even so, his voice ended on a high pitch by reflex.

"Nadeshiko-san," I elaborated firmly. "I want Nadeshiko to do it."

He stared at me for a moment as if I had said something… well, I don't quite know what. I wondered what I was playing at by asking such a thing. Nadeshiko or not, he was still a man, and a man was still decidedly not supposed to be looking at a woman's bare back. Then again, he was not supposed to be rooming with one, either…

Nagihiko slowly sat down on his bed, patting the spot beside him with the shyness of a newlywed wife.

"Very well, then," she said, gently, flowers blooming in her words. "Sit down, Rima-chan, before I murder you."

Slightly more comforted, I moved between the two beds to sat down on the other side of Nagihiko's mattress. Nadeshiko, pleased at getting her spaniel to sit, undid the buttons with fast and clever fingers. "You've got a bloodstains on this, I'm sorry," she murmured. "I really tried not to…"

"Well, I was trying to take it off to rinse the blood out," I replied huffily. "No need to fuss. It'll come out fine with cold water and salt."
Nadeshiko combed hair away from my neck, fingernails grazing skin as she pulled my mass of curls over a shoulder. "... Is that so?"

I had forgotten, so quickly, that she wasn't a girl.

"You can take my word for it. Women wash blood out of their clothes quite a bit, you know," I pointed out with the subtlety of a blunt knife.

"Ah. I forgot." Nadeshiko left it there. As she peeled my nightgown open, I shuddered a little.

"Sorry, does it hurt?" she whispered, right in my ear. Her breath tickled my cheek and the hairs at the back of my neck stood straight up. Christ! Stop that!

"Not much," I lied. I would have happily dived headfirst into Edo Bay than confess it wasn't a shudder of pain.

"Well, it shouldn't," she said, trying to comfort me. "There's only two, three shallow cuts here. It's not as bad as it must feel—the pain is from the bruising."

"You sound like you know a lot about getting beaten with a stick."

I could practically feel Nadeshiko's face darken, and I was heartily sorry I mentioned it. She put the warm cloth on my back, and tension immediately began to drain from my muscles.

"Old dancing families like ours can be a little bit old-fashioned." That was an understatement.

"Your mother hasn't ever hit you, Rima-chan?"

"No," I said, although I wondered if this answer qualified—my mother was often absent, so discipline was less non-corporal and more non-existent. I craned my head over my shoulder, only to make a pained face as I felt my skin stretch across a cut. Nadeshiko whapped the side of my cheek sternly. "Don't move."

"I wasn't—"

"You were!" She scolded me like a hen, unscrewing a glass jar I hadn't seen her carrying.

I eyed it warily, distracted by the shiny object. "What is that?"

"Hit wine."

I remembered the taste of sake from the cherry blossom viewing, and my wariness amplified. "I don't drink alcohol."

"Ah, excuse me. Not for drinking. It's diē dā jiǔ." Her voice stumbled over Chinese tones, and I snorted.

"You mustn't snort." She tipped some of the jar's contents into her hand, sternly. "It's an age-old family secret, given to us from the white hands of Toyotama-hime herself, who came to us in the form of a turtle and told the founder of our clan, Fujiwara-no-Saki, that it would cure any—"

"Do you expect me to believe this, or do you just like telling lies?" I demanded, wincing at the way it burned on my skin. She laughed, a low and sultry noise unfamiliar to the tinkling of bells I was so used to hearing. "Both, of course. Why can't you be gullible and believe it?"

"Because I've got a brain." Her hands spread out over my back, and I bristled like a cat being petted the wrong way. "What are you doing?"
"What d'you think, that I'm trying to grope you through your spine?" That was Nagihiko. I glowered, and Nadeshiko smiled winningly back at me. "It's supposed to be rubbed in."

"You spend most of your life rubbing it in," I grumbled audibly. If Nadeshiko heard, she gave no indication as such; she was too intent on digging her pointy fingers into my skin. Gradually, the sensation faded from painful to almost pleasurable; I wondered if Nadeshiko knew this, but decided quickly I wasn't going to breathe a word.

"Rima-chan?"

"Yes?" I choked, through a haze of being touched by a pretty girl.

"I was wondering… did you understand what all that was about earlier? With Hoshina-san, I mean."

"To what are you specifically referring?" I asked drolly, pushing my shoulders against Nadeshiko's hands and arching back like a pleased cat.

"There was some talk of companies… I'm afraid it was quite lost on me. Did you understand?" Nadeshiko stifled a pretty little yawn behind her sleeve.

"Of course I diiid," I yawned back, tears in my eyes. I turned around to look out the window, where it was still pitch black outside. "… It's quite late. Are you not tired?"

I could not believe that it was still the same day; that in less than five hours, I had snuck out, fought and forgotten a feud, met a dodgy geezer in a forest, enabled a not-really-escape, been corporal punished, and—what—now this?

"I don't believe I could sleep if I tried." Nadeshiko's voice was weary. "The worst you could do was bore me to slumber."

"Or myself, maybe," I remarked dryly. I got to my feet, holding the back of my bloodied nightgown up. "Let me get out of this, at least."

"Of course." She sat down on the bed and crossed her legs under her, smiling expectantly at me. About to pull an arm out of its sleeve, I stared suspiciously. "Do you mind?"

She shook her head, brightly. "Not at all!"

Once again, I had forgotten that she was a boy. With a soft hmph, I flounced behind the painted screen set up in the corner. What a lech!

As I pulled on another nightgown almost identical in construction to the previous one, I heard Nadeshiko ask, "Goodness gracious, how many silk nightgowns do you have?"

I stuck my head out from behind the screen, looking down at myself. The only subtle difference was that this one was made of more yellowy silk, and had a modern V-neck instead of a buttoned collar. "I brought four nightgowns with me, if that's what you're asking."

"So, all of them?" Nadeshiko seemed oblivious to the concept of nosiness. "I noticed that all your blouses are silk, too."

"Well, yes," I said, matter-of-factly. I gathered the nightgown in my hands and padded into the washroom to rinse the bloodstain, taking a few minutes to realize that she wanted a more thorough
answer. Leaving the stain to soak, I flopped onto my bed, facing Nadeshiko. "My family works in silk manufacturing, so I daresay we tend to often have yards of it in abundant supply."

"Ah. So Rima-chan was born into a business family."

"That is correct. So was Hoshina-san." It suddenly occurred to me that Tokyo lived in its own little business-savvy bubble, away from the relaxed attitude of rural areas. Utau, Amu and I were all from the city, although Amu herself lived in middle-class oblivion to the comings and goings of the business world. "… Do you really not know any of this?" I added, bewilderedly.

"Of course not," Nadeshiko laughed as though it was silly for me to even ask. "I was born in Hiroshima. I can count the amount of times I've been into Tokyo on one hand. Father hates the Kantō region."

"Hates it? For what reason?" I demanded, a bit offended. I forgot my earlier curiosity at the elusive Fujisaki patriarch and thought only of my love for Ginza—the crunching of car wheels on cobblestones, the glint of white parasols, and the imposing cloud-grey pillared buildings that looked all the world like something from a European fairy tale.

"Too many philistines. Tokyoites don't appreciate culture, he says, only gag plays." Touché.

"Yes. I'm listening."

"This is all gossip, mind you. You didn't hear it from me."

"Not a word."

"Right," I began. I was laconic by nature; long explanations were Nadeshiko's element, not mine. Yet, she smiled kindly at me in a way that helped me form the words to elucidate. "The Hoshina family runs one of the biggest financial cliques in Japan, one of the zaibatsu. A financial clique is… not unlike a school clique, I suppose."

Nagihiko smiled a little bit at this, amused. "I take it comes with all the bickering and games of schoolgirls?"

"You would be correct." I nodded. This was a quick and easy metaphor to assist me. "A clique is a sort of business conglomerate. A zaibatsu, first and foremost, will almost always own a bank. You can think of the bank as the second-in-command, the arm through which the zaibatsu does its dealings. With that money, the financial clique can then begin to invest in different types of industry."

"Is your family's business owned by a zaibatsu?" Nagihiko asked, shrewdly.

I nodded in assent. "Of sorts, yes. Our investor is not the Hoshina family, however." Thank goodness, because that would make our friendship excessively awkward.

Nagihiko looked as if he wanted to investigate further into this, something I wanted to dissuade. We might have been friends, but we were still not friendly enough for me to explain the very un-nationalistic circumstances under which my family operated. I hastily continued.

"That's what a financial clique does with their money. It invests, to get more money." I was trying
to explain this as simply as I can, using child's vocabulary. With furrowed brow, I mimed a pie slice. "They buy a little chunk of a company, which is called a share. When a financial clique buys a share, they own a little bit of the company… which means they get a little bit of the money it makes…"

"I’m following." He smiled, encouragingly. Quite remarkably, he did not look remotely sleepy.

"But owning a share means many other things. If you buy enough stock— that's just the plural of share, don't give me that face—you own the company, in a way. You've put so much money into the business that you can dictate what they do, and the company has to consult you for everything. When you get to this point, you are considered a shareholder, and placed on a Board of Directors. That way, all the people who own loads of stock can all get together and argue about what they want the business to do."

"So you're saying that Hoshina-san owns… stock? In her own parent's company? How does that work?"

"I was getting there." I grimaced. "Financial cliques are family-owned, and passed down father to son."

There was a flicker of dawning comprehension.

"From here, it's stuff and speculation, but… I think it's likely that children in zaibatsu families are given shares as children. That way, they can start accumulating money from a very young age, and can survive off the fortune for the rest of their life. But it also means that they're technically on the Board of Directors, because they own a big part of the company. I think this is likely the case with Utau and Ikuto-san."

I could practically hear the whirring of Nagihiko's brain working a mile a minute. "She spoke of people trying to get her to sell her shares back to the company, though. Why would someone want her to do that?"

"Well." I gave Nagihiko a look to indicate that this was a whole other explanation. He stared back. "The Hoshina family was a… special case. They didn't have any boys to inherit the company; only a girl, Hoshina Souko-san. They decided the best way to solve this problem was to marry her off to the son of another wealthy financier. That way, their businesses could combine, and the corporation could get a man in the CEO's chair who knew what he was doing."

"I take it that plan did not go through?"

"No, it did not." I smiled, ruefully. "She eloped."

"Aha!" Nadeshiko clapped her hands. "I knew we'd get an elopement, one way or another!"

"A musician," I ploughed on, "A terribly poor one. You can imagine that he wasn't suited for the business world of Tokyo."

"Indeed."

"So, when her husband went missing, many supposed it was because she forced him into a world he didn't quite belong in. That he cracked under the pressure, or was having an affair, that sort of thing."

"What do you think?"
"It doesn't matter what I think," I said, dismissively.

"It matters to me," said Nagihiko patiently.

"I have no opinion on the issue," I said, firmly. "This was before we were born. But I can tell you what my mother thinks."

"Very well," Nagihiko's head lolled onto his shoulder, sleepily. "Tell me what Rima's mother thinks."

"She thinks he was killed. Assassinated, his body dumped in quicksand."

"Why, your mother sounds nearly as charming as you, Miss Mashiro."

"Oh, sod off," I replied huffily. "It's grim, to be sure, but it's likely considering what happened next — only a few months after his disappearance, Souko-san was married off again, this time to some old codger."

"Rima?"

"Yes?" I said, irritated on being interrupted halfway through my tirade for a second time.

Nagihiko stared across the room at me, eyes bright and serious. "… What on earth is an old codger?"

I opened and shut my mouth like an electrocuted carp, and paused. After a struggle to get words out, we simultaneously both burst out laughing.

"Ow! Ow!" I gasped. "Back! Stop it!"

"I'm not the one dropping silly words all over the place like a girl dropping handkerchiefs!" Nadeshiko shrieked, hurling a pillow at me. "Speak Japanese!"

"Maybe if you studied English more you'd understand me, Mr What-Colour-Is-Your-Bicycle!"

"It was a legitimate question!" she wheezed, burying her face in her sleeve. "Give me my pillow back!"

"Why, Miss Fujisaki, I believe I'll be keeping it!" I retorted.

At that moment, a muffled thud reverberated through the wall, almost like the sound of a broom handle whacking against it. Then, a voice through the thick layers of plaster: "Mashiro, if you don't stop shrieking, I'll cut off all your hair in your sleep!"

I crammed my fist in my mouth, snorting.

Nadeshiko giggled through her hands, taking several deep breaths. "Watarai Misaki-san is as energetic as ever, even when half-asleep, it seems. Oh, dear."

We both took a minute to stop giggling. Nadeshiko sat up on an elbow, smiling at me; very slowly and cautiously, I smiled back. It was excessively awkward, to sit there and exchange smiles with a reptile.

Then, out of nowhere, Nagihiko brushed his fringe out of his eyes, seriously. "I'm sorry."

I started. This was out of nowhere. I had almost forgotten the events of prior until he apologized, at
which point I lidded my eyes a little haughtily. "Oh?"

"I was being a chauvinist gourd," Nagihiko leaned forward a little, earnestly. "You aren't only a girl. It was a foolish thing to say."

I looked up interestedly. "Did you just call yourself a gourd?"

"Rima, I'm trying to apologize," he added, weakly. "I suppose no matter how much I'm a girl by day, I can't help but unconsciously believe horrible things..."

"It's quite alright, you know." Quite flustered at this point, I tried to maintain a degree of light-heartedness. I didn't want to delve into this void. "You're right, I'm not a girl. I'm a goddess."

"Why do I even put up with you?" he asked wearily, rolling over with a smile.

"Because I'm a goddess."

"Goddesses don't dance like limp soybean sprouts," he ended his sentence with a yawn, tears in his eyes. I raised an eyebrow.

"Is it bedtime for idiots already?"

"You're not done with your explanation," he reminded me, even though he closed his eyes as he spoke. "You have to finish."

"I'll explain the rest tomorrow," I said irritably, feeling drowsy myself. "It's not a bedtime story, for Heaven's sakes."

This only seemed to give him more ideas. "Once upon a time, there lived a very sour-faced princess in the courts of the New Capital named Hoshina-no-kimi," came Nagihiko's sleepy singsong voice from under the covers. I tossed the pillow back at his head.

"She killed all her suitors and threw their bodies in quicksand—"

"Go to sleep!"
I had promised Nagihiko the rest of my explanation, but I did not count on the repercussions of staying up all night. The next morning gained on me like an approaching train: a thousand pounds of steel and dread, approaching my face at unthinkable speed.

My eyes flew open to too-bright light. Immediately, I fought the temptation tooth and nail to let my eyelids fall blissfully shut again. It felt as if they weighed a thousand pounds, and everything outside my body was cold. Very cold. Why was it so cold?

This was the time at which I usually woke up; there was no reason for me to be dragging my feet like this… or eyelids, I should say. Except that there was, because… I rubbed my eyes blearily. Because we had helped Utau sneak out, and then punished for it, and then Nadeshiko had me up all hours of the night explaining corporate law to her— that saucy minx. This was all her fault.

I sat up on an elbow, and immediately winced with pain. The scabs on my back stretched menacingly over my skin. I spent several agonising minutes attempting to find a comfortable position to no avail.

I gave up, falling back onto my stomach with a softfwump. On my far right, Nagihiko's dark head struggled to break the surface of his bedcovers, like a cormorant drowning in the ocean. Beautiful. My eyelids drooped shut.

I couldn't stay focused through sleepiness and a more subconscious feeling of dissatisfaction. There was something remarkably odd about today's morning; something felt different. I had never woken up at the same time as Nagihiko before; he was always gone in the mornings. It felt rather intimate to be waking up together—wait.

Nagihiko was still here.

Nagihiko was not supposed to still be here.

The covers rustled. Nagihiko sat up, squinting into the sunlight and looking all the world like an old-timey woodblock. I was interested to note that his hair was still stick-straight and looked freshly combed, even though he had been burrowing in his bed like a rabbit. How did it do that?
"Hello," he said groggily, as if speaking through a mist. "What a disgusting morning."

I had a moment of silence for this solemn proclamation, before remembering my sense of urgency.

"Nagihiko," I mumbled, "You have dancing."

Being not much for enunciating at the crack of bloody dawn, it came out sounding like "Naghkl... youha danding?" I did not bother to correct myself, being too tired, and busy debating the merit of faking tuberculosis for two more hours of sleep.

Nagihiko did not seem particularly bothered by this.

"Oh, yes," he said vaguely. His eyes were closed but his back was straight, like he was having a tea ceremony in bed. "Yes. Yes."

"Stop."

"Yes."

"Stop it."

"Yes."

"Your mother." I said, sharply. Nagihiko's eyes opened a crack. I could see a strip of ivory white under his dark lashes.

"Dancing. You have lessons before class. What time is it?"

"Hmmm." Nagihiko rolled over, thoughtfully, so that he was facing away from me. Rude. "I don't know."

"Then check."

Silence. He had fallen back asleep.

As always, men were completely useless. With difficulty, I wiggled into an upright position, wincing all the while, and grabbed my dressing gown from the hook by my bed. Wool wrapped tightly around me, I walked with tottering, uneven steps towards the clock on Nagihiko's nightstand to inspect the time.

Immediately, I knew I had made a mistake. Instead of a time-telling device, I was greeted by a brass face lined with two rows of numbers and zodiac symbols, rotating lazily inside a glass case. The two revolving pistons at the top made an unconvincing tick-tick-tick noise, which seemed all the world like a dog doing a poor imitation of a cat's meow.

Like everything else in the blasted Fujisaki arsenal, it dated from roughly five hundred years ago, and was thus incomprehensible to my modernized mind. I could no more read it than I could decipher German.

I looked down on Nagihiko's sleeping face with disapproval. His mouth was open. Repulsive.

"Nagihiko," I hissed, "Your clock's all funny."

I pressed up on the underside of his chin, trying to close his mouth, but it kept falling open again. I could practically see his tonsils. Was that normal?
"Five more minutes," yawned Nagihiko. His mouth stretched open. Disgusting.

"No, not five more minutes," I growled back, absolutely outraged at this blatant impudence. "Now. What has gotten into you?"

"Sleep deprivation."

Thoroughly fed up, I hunched my woollen shoulders around myself like an affronted sheep. "I told you that you'd be tired yesterday, but you didn't listen to me because you are stupid. Get up this instant, and decipher this worthless timekeeping device for me."

Nagihiko finally closed his mouth, but his eyes refused to open. Instead, he shifted to lying on his side, rubbing his cheek. "Tell me where the arrow is pointing."

Temporarily quelled, I glanced at the clock again. It took me several minutes to work this out; the arrow was tiny.

"At the character for 'dragon',' I finally said. "Are you telling me that it's dragon o'clock?"

"Yes." Nagihiko was now rubbing his entire face with both hands, like a rat grooming itself. "If you look at the inside circle, they have the Western time symbols—"

"This is ridiculous!" I squinted at the face, realized that wasn't dignified, and straightened up. "Six."

"Definitely not six o'clock," said Nagihiko sleepily, narrowing his eyes at the window over my bed. "The sun's too high for that…"

In the time it took to steep a cup of tea, his face drifted from placid indifference, to one of surprised realization, to horror. I took voracious pleasure from watching his concept of time sink in. Eyes flying open, he scrambled for the clock with both hands and turned it to face him. Evidently, he could read dragons better than I could.

"Rima— how long have I been sleeping?"

Having already told him eighty billion times that he had missed dancing lessons, I instead folded my arms coolly and stared. He could work it out for himself.

"Has class started?" he added quickly, throwing the covers back.

I shook my head, deliberately. He relaxed, only slightly.

"It can't be helped," I commented, turning so that my mat of curls narrowly missed slapping his face. I took down my uniform from where it hung in the wardrobe. It wasn't me missing dancing lessons, after all. "Will sensei even care? She kept you up late."

Up late, punishing us for no reason, I implied silently.

"She will." Nagihiko grimaced, wrenching his yukata off and lunging for his uniform shirt. I made a startled squawk and tottered back, like a ruffled flamingo.

"Excuse me?!" I spluttered, holding my collar's scarf up over my eyes. "What happened to the modesty rule?"

"The modesty rule?" Nagihiko fluttered in his worst Nadeshiko voice, cadence diving up and down the scales. He yanked his shirt over his head in record time. "Is that the rule where I remind you
that my eyes are up here?"

Nagihiko raised his eyebrows, and looked down at himself pointedly. I realized I was staring directly at his chest over the top of my scarf, eyes slightly glazed over.

"No. No," I snapped, averting my eyes and flouncing behind the screen set up in the corner. "It's the one where you don't ruin my marriage prospects!"

"Mashiro-san, treasured colleague, light of my life, blooming rose of the business market, I hate to be the one to tell you this—"

"Perhaps you ought to first ask yourself if you should say anything at all?" I asked gently from behind the screen.

"—But your marriage prospects have been ruined ever since that time you swatted that poor boy's arm away and went... what was it? Please don't pilfer my sleeve with your peasant hands, it's an inconvenience."

"That must have been years ago," I said. Was this another scare tactic? Why was she bringing this up? Who... who even was that? I took a moment to compose myself behind the screen. "I don't remember it at all. Perhaps you are making it up."

I reappeared from behind the screen to tie my scarf in the mirror. Nadeshiko leaned over my shoulder, straightening hers.

"You wouldn't have, I suppose," she said, pulling her hair on top of her head. "But I did. Kirishima-san... was that his name? He was besotted with you."

She smiled, smugly, having successfully pulled one over on me. I gave her a taken-aback look.

"Do you really not remember?" Nadeshiko said, surprised. "Hmm... well, you do have a reputation that precedes you for attracting men and repelling girls."

She let the proclamation hang tantalizingly in the air, before taking her leave.

I stewed. For attracting men and repelling girls? Who did she think she was? I trotted after her briskly, hair ribbon still clutched in my hands.

"Did Yamabuki-san tell you that? Because she couldn't get a man to look at her if she was covered head to toe in Kobe beef and oiran paint, it's fairly clear that she's just sinking to desperate measures—"

"No, she didn’t," Nadeshiko laughed. "Which one does that make me, then?"

My walking rhythm broke, and I had to stop and start again. "I don't follow."

Nadeshiko pointed at her own face, smiling beatifically. "Which am I, Rima-chan? You always bully me like I’m a girl, don’t you? But I’m actually a boy, aren’t I? So, which one do you think I am?"

Was this some sort of fairy tale riddle I had to answer before I could cross a bridge? I made a face.

"I refuse to dignify this with a response," I said evasively, squinting out onto the sunny lawn. I couldn't tell what answer Nadeshiko had expected— her expression had returned to her default masklike smile.
Falling quiet, I watched a bird nest in one of the trees. "That reminds me…”

Nadeshiko blinked at me, holding the door to the dining hall open. "Hm?"

"The letter Hoshina-san got a few days ago," I murmured, more to myself. "It had a crest on it, like yours."

Family crests, more roundels than anything, functioned as identifiers for prominent families and business companies and dated back to the age of the samurai. I, falling into neither category, did not have one. The only reason I remembered was because they had been the only spots of white on Nagihiko's dark clothes last night. Three white circles, bobbing in front of me, trailing wisteria on every one.

"Mine?" Nadeshiko pointed to herself, giving me a puzzled look. Then her eyes suddenly widened with understanding. "Ah— on my haori, you mean!"

I nodded.

"Oh, yes. That’s the Fujisaki clan seal. Falling wisteria." Nadeshiko mimed two dangling wisteria branches with her arms, and then dropped them, crestfallen. "It doesn't look as good without the props.

“But the Hoshinas wouldn't have one… why would it be on an envelope?" With a bite of snobbery — "Only old merchant and samurai families have crests, Rima-chan."

"You can be such a prig. This is the twentieth century, you know," I sneered back. "Companies have crests too, that's what I’m talking about— it's an identifier, on stamps and such— I was thinking about what Utau-san was saying last night, and—" It all came out in a jumble. I tripped over my words.

"Slowly, slowly. Take your time."

Nadeshiko pulled me through the doors, crouching down so that she was on my level. Like a condescending uncle, she put her hands on my shoulders in what she probably thought was a comforting motion. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hīragi and her glasses roommate jostle through the dining hall doors, giving us curious looks.

I took a deep breath, eyeing her hands mistrustfully. "Zaibatsu have family crests, too. There was one on the envelope Utau got... the sideways crescent moon with a dot in the centre. It’s almost certainly the business’s crest, is it not? And at first I wondered why they would be mailing Utau-san, until last night.... she said..."

"They're still trying to force me to sell my shares back to the company," Nadeshiko finished for me, encouragingly.

"Yes," I furrowed my brow, concerned. Sleep deprivation was muddling my cognitive ability. "Utau and Ikuto-san collectively own so much of the company because of stock they inherited… so… I suppose that's troublesome for Miss Hoshina's new husband."

"How so?"

"Well," I said, very quietly. "If Hoshina Souko-san doesn't have another child, Utau’s brother will be default heir to the company. And even if he isn't... she said they owned over fifty percent of the company collectively."
"So together, they're essentially co-directors?"

"Yes," I said, shrewdly. "No wonder the director wants to make them sell their stock back. They've got a great deal of power in their hands"

"… Crikey," Nadeshiko breathed.

"Oh, hello."

Utau was standing there: hip cocked, eyebrow raised, as perfect and impressive-looking as ever. We both jumped apart and straightened up. Nadeshiko snatched her hands from my shoulders like she had been caught touching precious china.

_Had Utau heard us?_ From the look on her face, she most certainly had. I remembered what had happened to the last girl who was caught talking about Utau’s mother— _verbally lashed to tears_ was the phrase I used, I believe.

"You two are friendly, for a pair that used to snap at each other like feuding chickens," she observed with suspicion. Not exactly my preferred simile.

"Good morning, Hoshina-san." Nadeshiko raised an eyebrow and looked over her shoulder, as if she was expecting to see a fantabulous rooster tail trailing behind her. "Perhaps you’re right, but even two feuding roosters will cooperate when they're staring into the eyes of a cat."

"I’m not a chicken," I said.

"How very poetic," Utau replied, acridly. "Both of you, _sit down._"

She sounded so uncannily like Sanjō-san that we both immediately dropped onto the closest bench.

Utau walked around the table like a formidable general surveying her troops, taking a seat opposite us rather gingerly. I remembered, all of a sudden, that she was probably more sore than I was—and that aside, she didn't have a roommate with an illicit medicinal drug supply. I exchanged a worried look with Nadeshiko, who seemed to be temporarily absorbed in her own lap.

"Well, then," Utau said abruptly. "Let's make this quick before Amu and Yuiki come down for breakfast. I want to make this absolutely clear: what happened last night was _none of your business._"

It was almost funny how much I had anticipated this. Nadeshiko looked very intimidated, but I felt bored, at best. I had a suspicion that Utau's bark was worse than her bite.

"It's a bit late for that, don't you think?" I replied disinterestedly. "My back's already bleeding."

"Rima—" Nadeshiko began placatingly. Utau's eyes flashed.

"You came out of your own volition, knew what you were signing up for. I didn't ask you to do so, nor did I ask you to get wrapped up in this."

"Yes, well, here's the kicker, see?" I pulled a bowl of rice towards myself, drawling. Nadeshiko looked scandalized, as if talking and eating at the same time was a greater concern than confronting Hoshina Utau. "It's our business because you made it Amu's business."

"She's… not wrong, Hoshina-san," Nadeshiko murmured back into her skirt in her most feminine voice, trying her very best to have a backbone. "Of all people to bring into this…"
"Amu—" she began, furiously.

"—Is the only person you see as a friend, which is why you asked her," I cut her off, vehemently. I felt a pang of unwilling sympathy, although I kept it from my voice. "I understand better than you give me credit for, Hoshina-san. It is seldom easy to trust others when you've had to keep secrets. Do you fancy the two of us so terribly different?"

A muscle twitched in Utau's jaw. Nadeshiko twisted around to stare at me incredulously. I tucked a thick curl behind my ear, self-consciously.

"... It is not pleasant nor easy," I added, slowly. "To swallow your pride and place your confidence in people. One isn't always rewarded with a favourable outcome. But as you can see, I've learnt to tolerate Fujisaki-san, and the world hasn't yet ended."

"Goodness gracious," Nadeshiko said, visibly touched. "From Rima-chan, that's like I love you."

"Ho ho," I said in a bored voice. "Don't get a swelled head, or you won't be able to jam your hat on. Look—if you wish, Utau-san, I'll never bring it up to your face again. But you can't stop me from understanding, for Heaven's sakes."

"How could you possibly?" she replied, through gritted teeth. "You have no idea what it's been like for me and Ikuto."

"Of course I don't, don't be presumptuous," I said dismissively, waving a hand carelessly. "But I can use my bloody imagination, can't I? I don't like Hoshina group's Director Ichinomiya any more than you do."

Evidently, this was a more gravitational pronouncement than I had reckoned. The man was a storybook villain, but Nadeshiko was giving me a confused, sympathetic look as if I had proclaimed my distaste for something completely incidental and irrelevant, like a head of cabbage.

"Is that...?" Nadeshiko began tentatively, looking from me to Utau. Utau was the one that answered, narrowing her eyes at me mistrustfully. "My mother's second husband, yes. Why would you have a reason to hate him, of all people?"

"Nobody at this school pays attention to those outside the top tax bracket, do they?" I commented, offhandedly. This was the second person in twenty-four hours who I was trusting with secretive company business. I had clearly gone insane from lack of sleep, but a lady must practice what she preaches.

"My family exports silk," I added, robotically. At this point it was a mantra. "We're not even your competitors, mind, but your new leadership's been causing my own family trouble for months now. Do you think they appreciate accusations of Western fraternization being thrown left and right by the Hoshina Group?"

"What?!" Nadeshiko spluttered, whirling around to stare at me. "Western frate— Rima-chan— you didn't tell me that!"

"You didn't ask, and you'll hear no more of it," I said sulkily. I was regretting this already. "What I'm trying to say is that it is in my own best interests to keep my mouth shut about this mess. None of us told sensei, did we?"

Nadeshiko waved her hand across her face in a delicate no. Utau shook her head.
"Good." Throat dry, I said in a whisper, "Nadeshiko, teapot."

Nagihiko, the eternal doormat, picked up the teapot and poured me tea. Taking a dainty sip, I fixed Utau with a stare over the rim.

"The Hoshina Group, as of late, is threatened by the smaller businesses that operate outside the realm of the all-powerful zaibatsu. Frankly, I'm thoroughly bored of it. I'm on your side."

"As much as I'm loathe to say it," Nadeshiko said, sliding another cup of tea across the table towards Utau, "So am I. The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"You must not have that many friends," I said, unable to help myself.

Nadeshiko folded her hands under her own chin, smiling beatifically. "I serve only the emperor, Rima-chan. I scorn mercantile companies and governments that muddy his divine authority."

"Fujisaki, you're even more of a freak than I thought." Utau put down her cup, sardonically. She paused, and then muttered.

"... Thank you."

Nadeshiko smiled mysteriously. I turned my head and crammed more rice in my mouth.

Amu and Yaya finally appeared in the dining hall not long after, near the end of breakfast. Amu's face was worried, drawn; the minute she saw us, it broke forth with relief.

"Nadeshiko! You're never here for breakfast, is everything okay—y-you and Rima, I was so worried!" Amu wrung her hands like a distressed raccoon, working herself into a frenzy. "Sanjō-sensei just told me to go back to my room last night and refused to tell me anything! I had no idea what happened, and—well—what... happened?"

For the briefest moments, I made eye contact with Nagihiko; he bit his lip, guiltily.

"Just a few slaps on the wrist," I said, taking another sip of tea. "I got lucky. Sanjō yelled a lot, though."

Amu wailed and threw her arms around us. Yaya, not to be excluded from an opportunity to be noisy, wrapped the side of Utau's head in a tight hug. I was very grateful when Kichigai-sensei flew off the handle at them, shrieking like a deranged vulture and forcing them to relinquish their grip.

In Amu's hand, I saw a bunch of letters were grasped; I looked at her enquiringly.

"Oho," said Nadeshiko, coyly, seeing it too. "Has someone been flirting with the post-boy?"

"D-don’t be ridiculous!" Amu stammered, face going red. "Just because he's sort of cool... I-I mean, I figured since I was the late one, I might as well bring the post, instead of, well--"

She looked at Utau, nervously. Utau stared back, impassive.

"I figured it was better for me to give this to you, rather than Watarai-san, given the, erm, circumstances," Amu mumbled. She slid the envelope across the table. The same family crest I had described earlier was clearly visible on the front: a crescent moon enclosing a dot. Nadeshiko looked at me. I gave her an I told you so look.

"Another one?" Utau hissed. "It's only been a week. Dirt is certainly persistent."
"Figures, since money and power's on the line. Old men are simple-minded," I said, conversationally. Amu placed a letter next to my bowl. "Hm?"

"Tokyo's on the return address." Amu pointed to it. "Is it your mother?"

I picked it up with two dainty fingers, scanning the address briefly. A familiar Chūō-dori Ginza address stared back at me like a friendly face through a window, and my heart leapt. Nadeshiko leaned to read over my shoulder, the faint scent of camellias wafting over me.

"Bother," I muttered, turning it over. "Surely she couldn't have written back to Fujisaki-sensei's letter this fast, could she?"

"Can't be," said Amu, with her mouth full. She was trying to eat breakfast as fast as she could, because class was in minutes. She chewed, and swallowed. "I mean, even if she sent them express, they'd only be getting there tomorrow."

So this letter had already in the post for a while, I thought. I struggled to open it neatly, and finally settled on tearing it open raggedly with a fingernail.

"Odd— ah!"

More clumsy than usual from lack of sleep, my finger slipped on the edge of the thick paper. The pad of my thumb stung, and I gasped a little. A bloody paper cut, of all things! This would be the first thing I complained about in my return letter—Dear Mother, you may be rest assured that your letter arrived safely. The same cannot be said for myself, as your choice in paper proceeded to slice open my precious flesh...

"Rima-chan?!" Nadeshiko jumped like a startled partridge, watching a tiny bead of blood drip onto the envelope. "Are you alright? E-eurgh, you're bleeding all over the place! Let me—"

With my unscathed hand, I was already fishing in my front pocket for my handkerchief. But in my rush to get dressed this morning, I had forgotten to take one; my pockets came up empty.

Nagihiko always had one—or two, or three. I automatically looked to him expectantly. Without missing a beat, he procured one from his breast pocket and yanked my wrist towards himself roughly.

"Oy!" I hissed at him, offended by this manhandling. "I'm a delicate woman, not a fish you're about to boil!"

Nagihiko ignored me in favour of trying to stop the blood with his handkerchief, dark eyes focused away from my hand, at some point over my shoulder. I recalled how he seemed to lose his will to continue hitting me last night when I began to bleed. Was he queasy at the sight of blood?

I privately filed this away, and briefly mourned the alliance that kept me from abusing this newfound weakness.

"I can do it." I took pity on him, tugging my hand from his cooler one. "I'll return your handkerchief, I promise."

Nadeshiko relinquished me far too quickly. "If you say so," she said, nervously.

We both looked up to see Amu, Yaya and Utáu all staring at us like we had proclaimed our undying love for each other.
"Class," said Utau, brusquely.

Class turned out to be music, which was great for Utau and terrible for the rest of us. Despite all that had happened, I had to admire Sanjō-sensei's poise; she barely acknowledged us as she walked in, and certainly did not have the face of a woman who had been kept up late.

In fact, the only one who seemed to be paying any kind of bodily toll for sleep fatigue was me, much to my own outrage. On my right, Nadeshiko had impenetrably white, puffy lower eyelids and thick skin that barely showed expression, never mind dark circles. On my left, Utau's skin stretched tight across her cheekbones, giving her a similarly impassive face.

One that looked… remarkably good for someone who had been beaten worse than I was. Leaning forward suspiciously, I saw a barely-iridescent powdery texture visible on her hairline. Was Utau wearing makeup? I cursed her acumen. Had I known that makeup was an acceptable cheating method, I would have used it to my own advantage!

Discreetly edging behind Nadeshiko's wide shoulder, I pulled my folding compact mirror out of my pocket to survey the damage. Wide eyes the colour of milk tea stared back at me; my normally-rosy cheeks were stark and my under-eyes darkly bruised, like a peach's flesh. Ugh. My eyes narrowed.

"Mashiro!" Sanjō cut in sharply, folding her arms. The entire class turned around to stare at me. Enjoying the audience, I stared into the mirror and patted my fringe down fussily.

"When you're quite done preening, would you kindly take your place with the koto section instead of hiding behind Fujisaki's shoulder where you think I can't see you?"

There were a handful of titters. Nadeshiko glanced down at me, amused. I snapped my mirror shut, tucking it back into my pocket and glancing up.

"I can't, sensei," I deadpanned, holding up my thumb wrapped in colourful flowered cotton. "I'm wounded."

"Is this true, Fujisaki-san?" Sanjō said, not bothering to glance up. If she had, she would have realized that the thumb isn't needed for plucking koto strings. Thankfully, Sanjō was too busy trying to avoid eye contact.

"It is," Nadeshiko responded, folding her hands in front of her in a perfect teacher's pet manner. "There was blood everywhere. It was unpleasant."

"You're unpleasant," I added, kindly.

"Both of you are unpleasant," said Sanjō, sounding thoroughly fed up with the banter at this point. "Very well—Fujisaki, take Mashiro's place on koto, Yukina, take Fujisaki's place on shamisen, just for today, and try to play along as best you can. Mashiro, you can stay where you are in the singing section."

The finality in her voice left no room for argument. I wondered what the hell she was thinking; my voice was soft and hoarse, like an owl’s. From the moment I stepped into her class, Sanjō had sensed my lack of vocal talents and placed me in the stringed instrument section. I didn't mind playing the koto most days, but I had hoped she would say something like “very well, Mashiro, since you have a papercut on your finger, you can go back to your dormitory room and nap for three hours.” Unfortunately, Sanjō was an irredeemable twit. What was this totalitarian state I was living in? This was oppression. I sulked.
Over the sound of my sulking, Sanjō cleared her throat, rustling her music sheets.

“Now, as Mashiro so splendidly indicates with her convenient injury, now is not the time to slack in your musical education. As the older students should already know—”

Oh, sod off, Sanjō!

“—we perform every July at the local tanabata festival in front of a considerable crowd. That’s roughly a month and a half from now, so we will begin practicing today. I expect you all to be keeping up and practicing in your off-hours; I hear a great deal of giggling at night, but not nearly enough string-twanging.”

Everyone collectively made a guilty face. Misaki twisted around in her seat to stare at me with a huge frown; I stared blankly back, to assert my dominance.

"… At the very least,” Sanjō droned, “You should work hard to support your classmates with singing and dancing parts."

At dancing, our heads automatically snapped to Nadeshiko, who was tuning the strings of my koto in her lap with a beatific look. Sanjō rolled her eyes, exasperatedly. "Fujisaki-san is one of them, yes, as you might have guessed."

A few girls threw Nadeshiko glowing looks and murmured congratulations. I gave her a dubious side-eye.

"Whaaaat? The Tanabata dancers been picked already?" Yaya shouted out, anxiously. "Who are the others, sensei? Tell us!"

There was a desperate clamour of voices, and several girls leaned forward eagerly.

"It's me, isn't it? Isn't it, sensei--?"

"It's obviously me!" Yamabuki Sāya crowed over the din, like an incoming ham.

Sanjō slammed her fist down on the ground like a judge's gavel. Everyone fell silent faster than a gunshot.

"Yuiki is one."

Yaya gasped theatrically, lungs heaving like they were full of saltwater. "Hhhhhhhhhhhghgggkk!"

"The others are Hinamori, Himekawa, Kirimori..." Sanjō pushed her glasses up with a finger, droning on a list of roughly fifteen people. "… And Watanabe. Are we done here? May I move on?"

"E-ehhh?!?" Amu's eyes went wide. Not a chance.

One of Amu’s other, less cool friends— Manami, maybe— put her hands on Amu's shoulders like a proud mother, boasting. "As expected of Amu-chan! So cool!"

"I never expected--" Amu spluttered, but she was drowned out. The classroom henceforth burst into debate over whether or not Amu was good enough for the part. I acted swiftly.

"Which one's Himekawa-san, again?" I asked whomever could hear, despite not particularly caring for the answer. Just as planned, Watarai Loudmouth Misaki heard me and repeated my question at the volume of a freight train.
"Hey!" she bellowed. "Who's Himekawa?"

Yaya answered the classroom's curiosity, eagerly. "Himekawa-senpai's in the other class! I hear her mama's a professional ballerina, so she's really good!"

"I really don't care, Yuiki," said Sanjō dismissively. "Anyway, as I was saying, there will also be a member of the prefectural school board there observing the proceedings. Your best behaviour is recommended."

Sanjō pursed her lips at this, as if she had swallowed a lemon. The classroom continued to buzz.

Why were we being inspected by government stooge at a festival, of all things…? Well, it wasn't any of my concern. Hopefully it would give Fujisaki-sensei something to do, besides ruin my life. I made a face.

"On that note, we'll start with *Kimi ga yo*. Shamisens up, ladies. On one, two—"

My finger twitched against my leg, silently counting the koto section in. I whispered the entire national anthem, and allowed Utau's belting to drown me out.

At lunchtime, I ate with a bunch of small-time celebrities. Much to my unending annoyance, a constant stream of people kept coming over to congratulate my friends on landing the dancing parts in the festival. But mostly, they just showed up to lick Nadeshiko's boots.

"I mean, it figures, of course," gushed Hīragi's roommate, clasping her hands together like a stringy idiot. "With a father like yours… my family always goes to see Fujisaki Aoi IV's plays when he performs in Ginza. His Oiwa gave me chills."

I almost grinned to myself, remembering that Nagihiko's father hated Tokyo.

"I couldn't sleep for weeks," she added, eyes going maniacally wide. Was that a good thing? "But then, we hardly ever see Nadeshiko-san dance. I'm really excited! I'll give it my undivided attention— um, but I'll still make sure to play my koto, though."

"You'd better," I remarked, giving Marimo the Roommate the grumpy side-eye. She was the best koto player we had, and had a solo portion. If she was too busy drooling over Nadeshiko's delicate feetsies, we'd all go under.

Everyone ignored me.

"You saw Father in *Ghost Story of Yotsuya*?" Nagihiko's eyes lit up a little, putting his chopsticks down. He smiled bright enough to rival the sun; Marimo blinked dazedly at his face. "When I was a child, I loved watching the scene in Act Two when Oiwa just picks up the sword and stabs it through her own throat, my heart starts beating so fast and I—"

"Alright, Nadeshiko-san," I cut across her smoothly, stepping on Nagihiko's foot, hard. Marimo's face had rapidly gone from dreamy to terrified, and Utau was staring at Nadeshiko like she had committed a murder. "You'll have to beg her pardon, Hakenake-san. Nadeshiko is a little tired today."

"I'm Hatanaka," she said, earnestly. "We play the koto together."

"I know," I said, blankly. She gave me a crestfallen face.

Once Hatoneko was out of earshot, I whirled on Nadeshiko. "*What are you doing?*" I hissed.
"What do you mean?" Nadeshiko made a pouty face, like I was yelling at her.

"She's right," said Utau, staring at Nadeshiko with some amusement. "Girls don't act like that about ghost stories. It isn't cute."

I was suddenly fidgety. *Utau couldn't possibly know that, could she?* Heavens. I needed to relax, and stop acting like a paranoid mother hen.

Yaya laughed with her mouth open, rice falling onto her shirt. "Usually Nade-chin puts some effort into it! She'll cover her mouth and go 'ara-ara, how spooky!'"

"No, no, Yaya, you're putting too much gusto into it." I pushed my shoulders back and held a finger against my throat like I had seen Nagihiko do sometimes. With a hum, I forced my voice out at a terse pitch. "*Goodness gracious! How terribly chilling! The ghosts are as energetic as ever, it seems!*"

"What are you, a myna bird?" said Utau, sounding far more disturbed than impressed.

Amu jumped to her defence. "You guys, stop bullying Nadeshiko! It's not her fault she's kind of a weirdo and into scary things, like g-ghosts!"

"I'm not like I'm into them… I just find them beautiful," Nadeshiko said modestly, turning her head away from us with a soulful look in her eyes. "There's nothing more striking than a crazed dead woman, bent on revenge."

"Oh, is that why you enjoy manners class so much, Nadeshiko?" I said, snidely.

The entire table cackled. I sat back, pleased with myself.

"If you want a woman bent on revenge, you'll be glad to know that your favourite class is after lunch," said Nadeshiko, eyes glittering maliciously. Immediately, my brief pleasure evaporated, and I scowled.

"Eh- you mean dancing lessons?" Amu said sympathetically, leaning over the table around Nadeshiko. "Oh, oh no, that's right— Fujisaki-sensei wrote home about it!"

Her eyes went round, and she pointed at me with a shaking finger. "So that's why your mama sent you a letter in the middle of term like this! I-I'm sorry, Rima, I totally forgot until just now!"

Whoops. So had I, to be frank.

"Is she super angry with you?" Yaya whispered, like I was already on my deathbed.

I gave Nagihiko a cursory glance, as if to silently remind him of the hole his lies had dug us into.

"I haven't read it," I said— and this part was truthful. I wanted some privacy. When Mama wrote, it was serious business, and I was wary about people looking over my shoulder. "But probably not. She sends me here so that I can become a marriageable woman, not a dancing prostitute."

Yaya whistled. "So scary."

"So offensive," lamented Nadeshiko behind her sleeve.

"Why should I even go in the first place?" I got up and gathered my dishes. "We do the same dance. *Every year.* We can all do it in our sleep."
"Mashiro-san's got a point," said Utau, seriously. "If we dance too much, we might turn into prostitutes."

We all looked in unison at Nadeshiko.

Nadeshiko winked suggestively.

In the end, I followed the others to the dance classroom with dragging feet and a heavy heart. I hardly wanted to face Fujisaki-sensei, but the longer I pored it over, the more I realized how suspicious this would look; she would certainly notice my absence. So, with no choice in the matter, I went.

Nadeshiko's mother taught dance class herself, and monitored it very closely for girls who showed signs of promise. So far, her search had proven fruitless. It was true that Amu had stage presence, and Yaya had clumsy skill honed through months of blood, sweat and tears. But neither were particularly talented, and neither showed very much interest in it as a career. I didn't blame them. Once upon a time, being a dancer meant prestige and, with luck, patrons. But with the economic depression came a decline in the old arts. Only the established old families like the Fujisakis remained in the trade, to hang on for dear life and pray that they outlasted the drought.

And it was a wonder they had held on as long as they had! Classical Japanese dancing was tepid, dragging, painstakingly tedious. It was little movements, tiny shuffles, gentle turns, less like dancing and more like a toy figurine moving on a rotary motor. In contrast, the dances of kabuki were quick, bombastic and sweeping— based more in pantomime and slapstick than in beauty, riddled with jokes and exaggerated gestures. But kabuki was masculine, and deemed useless for girls.

"It's unlikely that you will ever dance again after you graduate," Fujisaki-sensei often sighed, in a grim disapproving sort of way, "But you'll thank me when you're married. Dance makes your steps tiny and graceful. If it wasn't for this, you would all walk like peasants."

If I had my way, I would still be tromping around like a hulking peasant. But Fujisaki-sensei was right: three years of lessons had given me small steps, straight posture, and not a lick of talent.

"Mashiro-san, lighter arms!" The witch herself sang out across the room, over the sound of the tinny recording. "Buoyant and aloft like a butterfly, not wobbly. You are not a bowl of noodles!"

"You're making me wish I was one," I thought. For good measure, I made my arms floppier, like a chicken making a desperate bid for flight. The shamisen recording scratched and twanged through static fuzz, reminding me that I could be practicing koto.

"You're just not trying," Utau said from my left, giving me a now-familiar how dare you complain stare. She continued to turn on the spot like a figurine in a music box. It was a very half-hearted motion; Utau danced like it was an afterthought.

"Neither are you," I pointed out, arms flopping.

"I practice," she shot back. "It improves work ethic, to do things one hates."

If that was true, I'd have the work ethic of a carpenter ant. It wasn't my fault that dancing was disinteresting, and that I would much rather think about what was for dinner than continue to hobble along like this.

Nadeshiko whooshed behind me, ponytail nearly slapping the back of my head. I turned my head to snap, like a cocker spaniel flushing out a duck, when Fujisaki-sensei’s crocodilian voice rang in my ears:

"If I had my way, I would still be tromping around like a hulking peasant. But Fujisaki-sensei was right: three years of lessons had given me small steps, straight posture, and not a lick of talent.

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ears.

“Mashiro, head forward!”

I grit my teeth behind closed lips.

A lady did not slam doors, but the walls shook when I shut the door behind me. The empty dormitory room rang with silence. Nagihiko was still at dancing lessons. Normally, I cherished this hour to myself; but today, I longed more than anything to see Nagihiko’s wan face waiting for me at the writing-desk, ready to listen to me hurl vitriol about lessons and his toxic mother.

Well, that was fine. I had more productive things to do, anyway. Taking my koto from its substantial lacquer case, I arranged myself at Nagihiko’s writing-desk. No sooner had I poised the pick in my hand when I heard the sound of paper crumpling from my skirt.

Mother’s letter! I dropped the pick and pulled it out of my pocket, turning it over with loving hands. In all of the ruckus at breakfast, I had forgotten it was there. But now that I was alone, I could read it.

To my surprise, three sheaves of paper fell out of the envelope, all in differing tints of white. Mother did not mince words; she was laconic on paper and in-person. So why…?

The first sheet was clean, off-white business stationary, the likes of which mother wrote on, but the writing was an endless line of English loops. My English literacy was still poor, and I could no more read cursive handwriting than I could backflip out the bloody window.

I read it anyway, hands shaking slightly; every restrained loop of the G’s, every skitter of the lowercase M’s on the invisible line. I touched the words at the very top, from the curly tail of the R to the trailing wave of the A. Rima. Dear Rima.

I turned it over and over again, feverishly, several times. Then, I peeked at the piece of paper behind it. This one was stiffer, whiter paper. A lion and a unicorn fought each other on either side of the shield at the top of the page, but the script was clean and vertical, stencilled Japanese.

With embarrassment, I realized that I was holding the paper only several inches from my face. I flattened it over the table to read.

Notarized by sworn public translator 29th May—

That was irrelevant. I jumped down a line.

Dear Rima,

It’s been some time since my last letter. Things are busy in London, with this and that — there are many letters to write, not least of which to you. I trust that your mother to forward this to your address, as I do not recall the name of your school. Due to very recent

“Rima?”

I pressed the letter to my chest, turning around. Nagihiko’s eyes jumped suspiciously from my breathless face to the letter.

“Forgive me.” Innocently, he placed his hand on the doorknob. “Would you like some more time alone so that you can finish rea…?”
“I don’t care,” I said, impatient from interruption. “This is your room, too.”

Cautiously, he closed the door behind him and went directly to the wardrobe. I realized I was still clutching the letter to my breast.

“It’s nothing weird,” I added, defensively.

“I never said it was,” Nagihiko said, maddeningly calm.

My lips tightened. I couldn’t tolerate him thinking whatever he wanted, so I goaded him into striking. “You’re in no place to judge me.”

Nagihiko turned over his shoulder to smile dazzlingly at me, the picture of pleasantry. “Oh, come, now. Having a paramour outside of school jurisdiction is hardly odd at our age, Mashiro-san. Why would I judge you over something so trivial?”

I had never met a man so full of himself that he’d jump to any conclusion on the puffed-up assurance of his own perceptiveness. I narrowed my eyes at him, curling my lip. “Shockingly, it’s not a paramour. How deluded can you be?”

Without waiting for a response, I turned back to the letter.

Due to very recent developments, I have compelled myself to write and alert you of such matters in your interest. You must forgive me for my brevity— for even now I cannot spare much time to write this— and also my vagueness, for the walls have eyes.

"Who is it, then?" Nadeshiko said intensely, as if unable to stop herself from jamming her Roman nose into my business.

"Shhh!" I hissed. She shhhed.

Your mother and I have long sustained an understanding that, should your living conditions become less-than-ideal within Japan, your passage overseas would be taken care of. By all means, I do not say this to startle you; I understand that you are still in school, and I fully expect you to complete your education. I broach the subject only to assure you of its verity, and allow you some time to grow used to the idea, as it would be a considerable adjustment.

I would hardly expect you to arrive as soon as the coming year, especially when your schooling remains incomplete. If, however, you should consent, you can always send word through the embassy in Tokyo, which has a direct wire to my offices.

All my love—

Father.

He always signed that way, because Daddy was too juvenile and his name too formal. Father, father. I gazed at the letter for a few minutes, breath heaving in my chest. Join me here... passage overseas—

When I looked up, Nadeshiko was staring at me across the room like an eager cat waiting to be fed.

“It’s family,” I told her, trying to divulge only the barest of scraps. Despite myself, my eyes shone.

“I take it your mother is well?”
“She’d better be,” I murmured, quickly turning back to the desk. Behind Father’s letter lay a sheaf of pretty rice paper, the cleanest white of all. This, most certainly, was mother, and it was no more than two tiny lines.

*I am forwarding this letter to you. It was held up unusually long in customs at Nagasaki, arriving a few weeks ago. We will talk in July.*

Stamped. Brusque. Short. I wanted to smile, but kept my face stoic. “She seems to be in as good health as ever. Did you need something besides reassurance that my mother is not close to dropping dead?”

“As a matter of fact, Mashiro-san, I do.” Nadeshiko turned around, tying her obi jauntily in front of her so that she looked like a teahouse tartlet. “I see that you were going to practice your koto. I have an efficient proposition for you.”

Her eyes were heavy-lidded and seductive. My stomach jumped like a frightened jackrabbit.

“I’m not going to traffic drugs for you,” I said, very fast.

“What?” Nadeshiko burst out into hysterical giggles. I caught a flash of white teeth before her face vanished behind her yukata sleeve, shoulders silently shaking. “I was going to ask if we could practice together. I’m stuck on a difficult part of the wandering song.”

“Nadeshiko-san, stuck on something?” I said, feigning shock. “Surely, it can’t be.”

Clearly my voice was full of more bitterness than I thought. Nadeshiko looked at me, surprised.

“Yes, that’s correct. I’m experiencing difficulty with the steps.”

“… And so, you’re going to practice in this tiny little room?” I raised both my eyebrows. “I thought that’s what your after-school practice time was for.”

“It is! But when Mother let me leave, I still hadn’t gotten it right…”

“So try again tomorrow,” I suggested.

“Why bother waiting if I can get it right, now?” she said, pigheadedly.

Once again, I had been verbally danced into a corner by snakeface Fujisaki. I had hoped to pore over Father’s letter, and perhaps draft a response, but that would have to wait. I slumped over my koto in defeat. “… The Nagasaki Wandering song, is it?”

“Yes, that one. Thank you, Rima-chan,” she said, sweetly.

I lay my koto across my lap and plucked the string, testily. “What did you do to my koto?” I said, unhappily. “It sounds queer.”


*Rubbish. I played the first smattering of notes. Reluctantly satisfied, I pulled the koto closer, giving her a final mutinous look before I started playing.*

It wasn’t the easiest of pieces, which required me to keep my eyes on the strings at all times. Yet, almost compulsively, my eye was drawn to Nadeshiko’s form. Her dancing was unlike anything I had seen her do in class before—her body was fluid and her arms were weightless. I had compared it to dolls on a rotary motor before, but this—this was hardly robotic, even if it was deliberate.
Before my very eyes, her face went from a burdened mother to the wide-eyed face of a child, and my fingers stumbled.

“Rima-chan?” Nadeshiko froze, surprised.

“Whoops,” I said, tonelessly.

“Do you want to start again?”

“One moment. Let me take a moment to figure out where my skill went.” I rolled my eyes and sat back on my haunches, letting out an uncharacteristically deep sigh. Nadeshiko took a cautious seat across from me on the floor, watching me anxiously as I studied the music sheet with some distaste.

“… Bit of a dull song, isn’t it?” I said, conversationally.

Nadeshiko swished her head side-to-side, noncommittally. “It’s alright. You know, this song actually originated in a brothel during the Tokugawa period?”

“What?”

“Oh, yes.” She seemed pleased. “Mother likes to say that anything of worth was created by the water trade.”

“I didn’t know the pleasure districts invented money,” I said, in sarcastic surprise.

Nagihiko winked at me, lecherously. “Even older. They pioneered the concept of currency. Supply and demand, you know.”

“Disdainful.”

“Must you be so materialistic?” Nagihiko said, condescendingly. “There are things of worth besides money, you know.”

I hadn’t been talking about the money. “You’re correct, of course,” I said, gravely. “There’s also the value of attention—“

“—water trade—”

“Favours—”

“—water trade—”

“And allegiance!” I said, louder.

Nagihiko paused, in frustration.

“Hm?” I said, sweetly.

“… The samurai class,” he said, reluctantly. “But bought allegiance is worthless.”

I groaned. This felt like school. “Elaborate?”

“The things one will do for money are finite.”

“Wrong. Greed is infinite,” I said, almost enjoying myself.
“Not so!” Nagihiko said. “It is far safer to hold a man’s allegiance through love. Or sex. Or the exchange of favours. *Pleasure districts.*”

“Oh, so this is how you hold my loyalties?” I asked, contemptuously. “With cheap favours? What a fascinating insight into your twisted mind!”

“No,” said Nagihiko, with a roguish grin. “I believe that’s with love.”

Something hot flashed behind my eyes, but it didn’t feel like anger. I pelted the music sheet at him. Predictably, it hit a gust of wind and blew back in my face.

“A poetic metaphor for most of your endeavours,” Nagihiko observed.

“Sod off!”

He got to his feet, grinning, and smoothed down the front of his legs. Once again, I put my koto back across my lap, swallowing.

“… You are a very good dancer,” I added, begrudgingly.

I did not pay compliments very often. I expected Nadeshiko to smile modestly at this, dismiss it as nothing, or say that she had so much more to learn. Instead, Nagihiko grinned at me arrogantly, raising his chin ever-so-slightly.

“This? This is child’s play. Wait until you see me perform this winter.”

Why did he think I’d see him perform at all, never mind in winter? And if he fancied this *child’s play*, why did he need me to practice? There was no end to this boy’s idiocy.

When I started to play again, it was with light and nimble fingers. Nadeshiko turned in front of me in a dizzying blur, fan outstretched. In the blood-red light of the setting sun, her face was radiant; both male and female, light and dark, love and hate.
The summer rainy season came on tidings of missing Japanese soldiers in Peking. Utau shook the newspaper open, like she had done every morning for the past month, and read the headline aloud.

"Sudden clash between the Japanese and Chinese armies in the northern outskirts of Peking. July seven—Yaya, would you get off me?"

If there was one person more interested in the news than Utau, it was Yaya. Every morning she waited for the latest gory headline with bated breath and fearful eyes.

She wasn’t the only one. Since Father’s letter, I had been unusually on-edge about international headlines, keeping a hawk eye out for any disturbances west of Honshu. So far, there had been only minor scuffles like this one, whispers of this and that, as father would say: nothing of remark.

"Is there anything about Taiwan, Utan?" Yaya asked immediately, jostling elbows in her rush to peer over Utau’s shoulder. "There weren’t any deaths, were there? Just—"

"No word of Taiwan, just mainland conflict." Utau pushed Yaya off her knees, like a mother cat who was tired of her kitten mobbing for attention. "Yuiki, listen to me: that's a good thing. The more Taiwan stays out of headlines, the better. The last thing they need is attention.

Especially now."

Yaya slumped back into her seat, defeated. The mood was damp, both inside and out; rain thrummed down relentlessly outside, casting dancing green lights on the table. The sound of water rolling off the awning sounded like muffled marbles on tin. Inside, most girls chatted away over breakfast unconcernedly, as if oblivious to dark tidings. The primary concern reigning over the dining hall today seemed to be whether the rain would interfere with the festival that evening. Sāya was loudly explaining, within earshot, that her yukata could not get wet, as it was expensive material, you see. I could not have possibly been more bored off my arse.

Our end of the table was silent, withdrawn. Nadeshiko had not touched her food; she was gazing outside at the rainy lawn, face contemplative.

"Nadeshiko?" Amu said curiously, peering over at her. Yaya took Amu's thick tofu off her plate
while she was distracted, whisking it efficiently into her mouth like a raccoon.

Nadeshiko's dark eyes flicked to Amu, with a tired smile. "Amu-chan."

Amu tilted her head.

"The hydrangeas are in full bloom outside. Come and see."

Amu moved over to peek over Nadeshiko's shoulder, and gasped. "Waaah… how pretty!"

Feeling the familiar cringe of annoyance, I deliberately took Nadeshiko's share of tofu off her plate with chopsticks and stared a hole in the back of my roommate's head.

"That's distasteful," Utau told me, without removing her eyes from the paper.

"Hm?" I asked, still staring at the green lights dancing on Nadeshiko's sleek hair.

"What you're doing," she said, grimly. I thought she was referring to the tofu, until— "Fujisaki-san doesn't belong to you, you know."

My hair fluffed up, indignantly. All week, the humidity had wreaking havoc on it, filling it with moisture like a cumulus cloud. Was Utau so imperceptive as to think that I was jealous over Nadeshiko? It was clearly Amu that I cherished.

“Of course she’s not mine,” I said, cutting my tofu up into edible pieces with my chopsticks with disgust. “Don’t group me in with the likes of you.”

Utau’s eyes flashed. She looked as if she had a retort, but thought better of it when she noticed Yaya staring at us with bright, intelligent eyes. Our friend's face in that moment reminded me uncannily of a macaque I had seen at Ueno zoo when I was younger. Perched cutely on a tree branch, the monkey had waited for an opportunity to strike with the most adorable of faces, before snatching a bag of peanuts from an unsuspecting boy’s hand.

I cleared my throat. “Is there anything else in there, Hoshina-san?”

“What, in this old rag?” Utau shook the limp newspaper.

“Yes.”

She listed the headlines of interest at top speed. “Admirals continue to crack down on free-market capitalism, far-flying airplane gets prototyped, something about an Orange Peel commission…”

“Orange peels?” Yaya’s ears perked up.

“My mistake— Peel commission. Rima?”

“What’s all this about far-flying aeroplanes?” I asked, leaning over with interest.

“The kamikaze-go, Mitsubishi Ki-15 Karigane J-BAAI—”

“Good lord, woman,” I interrupted. “I asked for elaboration, not machine rubbish.”

“Ooh, are you talking about the Kamikaze plane?” Nadeshiko re-joined the conversation, evidently deeming us worthy of attention. “The one that flew to London in fifty hours?”

“No,” I said, attempting vainly to shut her out.
“Yeah, we are,” said Utau. “Didn’t know you were into planes, Fujisaki.”

“I’m not,” Nadeshiko turned her head, modestly. “I only remember because the Prince and Princess Chichibu got to fly in it…”

“Good night!” I said in disgust, standing up. The table emitted a series of groans and protests, begging Nadeshiko not to launch into another lovelorn tirade about the beauty of the Imperial family.

“Alright, alright, I see how it is!” said Nadeshiko, also getting to her feet. “I’ll just tell Amu-chan about how beautiful the Emperor’s wife looked later, because she’s the only one who listens to me…”

“‘Listens to me’… is that what you call it? When she falls asleep with her eyes open,” I observed. Amu’s ears went bright red.

“N-no, Nadeshiko, I do listen, honest! I just, you know, don’t keep up with that stuff…”

“The case rests,” Utau folded up the newspaper with resignation, as if she shouldered a burden beyond her capacity. Although the Hoshina company letters had slowed to a monthly hindrance, it never took much of a load off of Utau. If anything, the passing weeks seemed to try her doubly. In the cool light of the morning monsoon, she looked very old.

Amu stacked up all our bowls from breakfast, one on top of the other. Content to let others do the work, I watched with mild interest.

“Rima, do you want to take these to the kitchens?” Amu asked, holding the leaning tower of Disgusting Rice Bowls out so that they wobbled precariously.

“Me?” I eyed them with distaste. “Whyever for?”

“You don’t want to?” Amu sounded innocent, but her voice carried a twinge of exasperation. “It’s your turn for kitchen duty, you know... Sanjō-sensei will give you an earful if she finds you skipping work.”

I cursed under my breath. Nadeshiko made a *hem hem* noise of objection in her throat.

“Very well,” I said, taking the bowls with some trepidation. “I shall… kitchen duty.”

I carried the teetering pile of bowls around the dining hall’s screen separator, to the kitchen, and deposited them amongst their multiplicitous siblings. Two other classmates—Manami and Wakana—were already there, jostling each other as they filled the basin with warm water. They gave little notice of me. I gave little notice of them. Amu reappeared behind me afterwards with the cups, lower lip gnawed in concentration.

“Amu-chan!” Manami said, whirling around and drying her hands on a dishtowel. Manami always wore her hair in two buns on either side of her head, glinting like glazed Viennese bread rolls. “Didn’t expect to see you here with little ol’ us. What gives?”

“Dish duty,” said Amu, bending over to help them pick up the basin. I watched them all struggle in vain to pick it up, look of enjoyment on my face. Amu stared at me, which went ignored. As Amu and her other lame friends did the dishes, they chattered. I eavesdropped, contenting myself to dry the same dish over and over for ten minutes.

“What are you wearing for the festival?” Manami asked. Wakana launched into detail about her
yukata and how boring it looked. I zoned out, hand around a soy sauce dish.

“… Do you think the Kouen students will be there? I’d be so nervous I’d die,” confessed Wakana. I heard blathers of Hotori-kun and so handsome.

Tired, the soy sauce dish slid out of my hand and to the floor with a clatter. Abruptly, they stopped talking and looked at me.

I looked at Amu.

Amu looked at the soy sauce dish.

“… What about you, Mashiro-san?” Manami asked cautiously, as though I had subliminally asked them to drag me into their vapid discourse.

“What about me?” I said. I bent down to pick up the dish.

“Do you know anybody at Kouen?” Manami said, slowly, as though implying something.

“Mashiro-san has always been very popular with boys,” Wakana observed, impartial. To my surprise, I found myself nervous and annoyed. I thought of Nadeshiko. Not Nagihiko—Nadeshiko.

“I know the headmaster,” I said, remembering the incident in the forest. Amu looked at me, surprised. Manami couldn’t have been less interested, until I added, “He is rather young-looking, isn’t he?”

The two of them giggled and looked at each other. “Yes,” Manami said, keenly. “Surely he can’t be married?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Wakana teased.

Manami threw a dishtowel at Wakana’s shoulder, huffing. “Why don’t you!”

As it turned out, Manami and Wakana’s gossip proved to be useful. I knew of the headmaster’s past, but not his present. I learnt three facts:

One, he was, indeed, unmarried. Two, he was somehow related to a student called Hotori Tadase, who sounded about as interesting as a slice of bread. Thirdly, and most interesting of all, Manami and Wakana could not verify any connection to the Fujisakis. Was his friendship with Amakawa-san not common knowledge? Of course, Nagihiko could just be sneaking around again. Ho hum!

Suppose Nagihiko was shagging the fellow? I hummed through class, attracting startled stares from everyone around me.

Classes ended at noontime, as they usually did on Saturdays. On fine days, we would often take to the outdoors, sit outside and chatter, take our socks and shoes off and put our feet in the river. But the rain was still coming down as we exited the building, dripping off the leaves and soaking my stockings up over the ankle. By the time we got inside, the dormitory hallway was crowded with wet shoes and the musty smell that only came from damp people at close quarters. It was a chaotic whirlpool of girls, running room-to-room to borrow hairbrushes and pins and powder puffs, standing in hallways and overflowing from doorways. Many pairs of feet monopolized the bathrooms, all attempting to get closer to the big mirror on the wall. I edged my way around the chaos, ducking a hanging obi sash half-tied onto someone’s waist and missing Yamabuki Saya’s ferocious curler-lined head by millimetres. She looked like a triceratops.
Cripes! I shut the door to my room. The noise muffled to a quiet roar.

I had packed a single yukata with me at the start of spring term. It was squashed into the bottom corner of my suitcase and wrapped in several layers of rice paper. Several years old but worn sparingly, it was an alluring peachy-pink and dotted with stylized bobbins. I assumed Nadeshiko would be pleased, for once, to see me in the traditional clothes of my people. I was therefore surprised to step out from behind the screen and have her feather-gray eyebrows rise up in polite incredulity.

I frowned at her, pride wounded. Her eyes narrowed, staring at my feet.

“It’s a bit short in the ankle. You have it bound too tightly.”

“Surely you must be joking!” I said, exasperated. Was nothing I did perfect enough for this upper-class twit?

“I do not joke about such matters, Rima-chan.”

I forgot she had no sense of humour—or irony. Eyebrows furrowed and chin wrinkled, she glared at my raiment. “Is that the only yukata you brought with you?”

“Of course it is,” I replied, annoyed. “Why would I bring another?”

Gazing at the pattern, she reached a pale hand forward to finger the obijime cord tight around my waist. I tried to lean into her touch and away from it at once, and so only ended up hunching my torso like a noodle.

“… If you like, you can borrow one of mine?” she offered, ignoring my prior question and mysterious wiggling motion.

“Whyever for?” I said, suspiciously.

She sighed, hummed and hawed for a while.

“The one you’re wearing is inappropriate for the season,” she finally consented to explain to me, in a placating voice. “Peach in July is unheard of. I’ve always felt as if Rima-chan…”

“Oh, you’ve felt now, have you?” I said, never tiring of this little jape.

“I’ve always felt,” Nadeshiko ploughed on, “that Rima-chan looked the most beautiful in colder colours. Whites, and blues… cool colours would offset your pink skin well, wouldn’t it?”

My pink skin? She was eyeing up my skin, now? Did she wish to eat it clean off my face? I put a hand on my cheek, and turned my gaze downwards in mild surprise. My mother adored pinks and baby yellows on me. My pull to black and icy lavenders and sharp blues was nothing more than a veneer, I fancied, to make myself look like even more of a glacier. I glanced back up at Nadeshiko. “There is no ulterior motive to this?”

“None,” she responded, a tinge offended, until guilt shadowed her face. “Well– a little.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Sometimes, when we were younger, you know, I’d… I’d look at you in the hallways, and imagine all the ways in which I’d…”

Flustered, I took a step back. WHAT?
“In which I’d dress you up, you know, if I got the chance. I know it’s silly, and a little perverse, but I love clothes, you know, and there were a few I had in mind, and I’ve never had a roommate before, and Rima-chan, please, please?” she begged, twisting her mouth into a little pout like a ripe plum on the branch.

“My God,” I swore, undoing the cord holding my obi in place, “It would take a crueller woman than I to continue to let you suffer so.”

Nadeshiko giggled a little at this, and I felt a thrill. Cracking the white-clay veneer of the Fujisaki mask was no mean feat, even for an accomplished wisecracker like myself.

She made short work of laying out her collection out on our beds, a dizzying array of colours: sunset oranges and bloodred crimson, golden yellows and tender bamboo-shoot greens. A deep indigo the colour of the night sky held stitched-on gleaming fireflies nestled in its folds, and an elaborate Heian court scene lay on a bright gold brocade, right down to a pair of little boys playing with a ball. Nadeshiko sifted past some of them quickly. On others, she could hardly resist a loving caress and a story, of which there seemed to be vast and many.

“I snuck out of practice in this one, once,” Nagihiko said, pointing to a serene heather-grey of silk, dragonflies skimming its surface. “I skinned my knee chasing a deer in Miyajima. Mother never found out.”

I could hardly believe it until, to my delight, he turned over the silky outside. The inner corner hid a small brown bloodstain. I wrinkled my nose only for his benefit, and he laughed.

Of the dark blue one with fireflies, he told me of accompanying his father’s Kabuki troupe on a moon-viewing party. It took place aboard a long river boat, in the middle of a lake. “It sounds romantic, but actors are awful drunks,” Nadeshiko remarked. “They spent the entire time playing drinking games and telling lewd jokes. My ears felt violated.”

“Lewd? I wish to hear one,” I said, intensely.

Nagihiko’s ears went bright scarlet. “Funny… I can’t remember any.”

“Funny,” I echoed. If women weren’t banned from the theatre, perhaps I would have liked to be a Kabuki actor, getting sodding drunk on river boats and violating people’s ears. I pointed at the bloody red cotton. “And what of this one?”

“Mine, for tonight.” Nadeshiko’s eyes glinted like a beady serpent’s; she pulled it out of its box to show me. Golden mountain lilies blossomed up its surface, stark pearly white against the dark red. There was no bleeding on the fabric; The pattern was clean, crisp. High-grade cotton, I thought. “You’ll watch, of course?”

“Do I have a choice?” I said.

“No,” with a twinkling eye, “But you’ll like it.”

“If you say so,” I said, still touching Nadeshiko’s yukata. I had never seen her in such a vivid red before. Seeing her hold it up, I had to wonder why. It highlighted the often invisible colour in her cheeks, and made her hair look almost darker than it truly was.

She smiled her knowing smile at me, folding it back into its lacquer box. “Let me show you the ones I was thinking for you.”

“There’s more than this?” I said incredulously, as she held up a silky ivory embroidered in
seashells to my neck. “Where did you get all these? Surely you can’t own all of them.”

Kimono were expensive, and often ran as high as a labourer’s yearly wage. Perhaps they were stolen.

Nadeshiko furrowed her brow, holding up a mousy blue next to the off-white under my pink face. “Some, bought. Others, our family is currently borrowing. It’s not uncommon for dance houses to pass kimono between them.”

“That cannot account for all of them.”

“Oh, definitely not,” she said, vaguely. “Stand up and turn around. I want to see how this one looks.”

“Am I no more than a dress-up doll to you?” I said, infuriated at her dodgy replies.

“Oh, goodness, no, Rima-chan,” Nadeshiko said earnestly. “You are so much more than that! Hold your arms out.”

I held them out, watching her with a suspicious eye. I was still dissatisfied with her response. “Where else did you get all these, then?”

“Gifts,” she replied, evasively. “You know, from teachers and such… or awards for performances… and, well, you know.”

I gave her a funny look. No, I didn’t know. “ ‘Awards for performances…’ Is that right?”

“From patrons,” she said, very fast.

“Patrons!”

I could see a visible sheen of sweat on Nadeshiko’s neck, like spring dew on a snowdrop. “It’s not like that! It’s not as if…”

“Good God in heaven!” I interrupted, unable to contain my vicious glee. “Mama was right all along—dancers are prostitutes!”

“Not so!” Nagihiko’s face flushed, scandalized. “I’ve given them nothing but my company—if you could get away with entertaining old geezers for expensive presents, I believe you’d do it more than I!”

This was undeniable, but I couldn’t help giving her an offended look. Her white hands locked around my waist, turning me to face the mirror.

“And anyways, why complain?” Her voice said right in my ear, and I jumped. Why did she always do that? “It means I have more pretty clothes to share with you, doesn’t it?”

I did not respond, only glowered. Nadeshiko was beautiful, and the idea that she got presents from vapid men irritated me beyond reason. It should be me! Getting presents, I meant. Not giving them to her. Besides, Nagihiko was a boy; wasn’t that somewhat deceptive?

“Isn’t that somewhat deceptive?” I hinted, but Nagihiko no longer seemed interested in pursuing the subject. Yukata hanging off my shoulders, he drew away from me to go look for an obi, humming a song under his breath that sounded suspiciously like the Nagasaki Wandering song. “What colour are you thinking?”
“White?”

“No,” he said immediately.

“Alright, then.” I drew my attention to my cuticle beds instead, picking at my hands with some impatience. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy the attention—but must she be so clinical and thorough? When Nadeshiko returned to the mirror, it was with a pale beige obi the colour of ripe wheat. Hints of gold thread winked at me from its crisscrossing fibres. I tried to contain my reaction, but perhaps my face was not as stoic as I would have fancied. Nadeshiko smiled at me knowingly, as if my face was full of Christmas glee.

“You shouldn’t feel awkward, you know. I insist you wear it. Think of it as compensation for putting up with me.”

I hardly felt awkward. Only dazed, like I was in a dream. Amu would have pushed it away amid protest that it was too good for the likes of her, but me? No. This was most certainly good enough for me. I allowed Nadeshiko talk me into holding the yukata closed while he tied it around my waist, gazing at my reflection with enamourment.

“How would you like it tied?” Nadeshiko leaned over my shoulder, joining me in my vanity project.

I thought about it, craning my head over my shoulder to look at the dangling gold ends in Nadeshiko’s hands. “I usually wear the butterfly knot.”

Nagihiko nodded back at me. “That will do nicely, I think.”

I wondered for a moment why he poised his arms so masculinely, before he answered my question with brute strength. Arms straining, Nagihiko pulled the ends together around my waist, less like a pretty girl dressing another and more like a man mooring a ship to a pier. I let out a small eep. The look I gave him was no less than offended.

“What?” Nagihiko asked, placing a broad hand over my stomach, pulling us flush together. Eep! “Hold here, please.” With a laugh. “Kimono-dressing is no light woman’s work. It requires a man’s strength.”

“Does it, now?” My voice shook, a little.

“Most things of beauty require some level of sweat and tears,” he commented, as though he was composing a deep haiku out loud. He made me stand there while he tucked and pulled and adjusted. His hands seemed to dart everywhere. I fidgeted. When he turned me around to face the mirror again, I was finally relinquished with a gentle push.

It was a cold, solid blue-green, save for the wind chimes that blew on invisible gusts of wind near the hem. I reached down to brush the tops of my knees, not used to the grade of fabric against my skin.

“I like the colour,” I said in a demure voice, feeling obligated to pay a compliment.

“So do I,” said Nadeshiko. “It’s celadon. Like the glazed pottery.”

I was almost sure he was going to say something soppy, and was grateful when he didn’t. “This is really alright, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “You do it credit—but I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you that.”
“Oh no, please,” I fluttered, rolling my eyes and tucking a flyaway curl behind my face, “I do. It’s the least I deserve.”

Nadeshiko dressed herself in her red kimono. I sat down on the chair at the foot of my bed and prepared my face for makeup by rubbing lotion all over my face. I thought Nadeshiko wasn’t paying attention until I picked up a powder puff and caught her staring at me, looking curious. “What are you doing?”

I brushed the puff in some powder. “Makeup?”

“May I?” She pointed at the powder tin. I handed it to her, too distracted by my own reflection in my tiny hand-mirror. She tilted her head at it in childish delight, and I was reminded of a jackdaw peering at a manmade curio.

“We use something like this for dancing,” she murmured, putting the tin back on the bed, “But it’s pure white. Yours is pink.”

“I buy it in Ginza,” I said, surprised at how normally I could talk about cosmetics with a boy. “The pink tinge is more natural, these days. It’s what actresses wear in the West.”

She watched, fascinated as I rouged my cheeks. With a prickle down my neck, I began to fancy myself hardly needing the colour. I lined my eyebrows thin and arching with a brown pencil, mimicking the pictures of girls on the cover of my books. Then it was lipstick, a pink-orange coral colour. Just when I thought Nadeshiko’s interest was waning, I clamped an eyelash-curler over my eyes.

She reacted as if I had just jabbed a hot poker in my own face. “Ah! What is that!?”

“Eyelash curler,” I said, switching eyes.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” She pressed a hand to her mouth.

“It’s only my eyelashes, you dolt,” I said unkindly, before feeling a bit sorry. “It only feels a bit warm, from the heat. But nobody burns your eyelids, not if they’re careful.”

Nadeshiko leaned close to inspect my eyelashes, which curled up to make my eyes look wide and astonished. There was something almost constituting envy in her voice. Her breath tickled my chin and neck. “Your eyelashes are so long.”

I stood stock-still, throat feeling as though I had swallowed an entire trout. “Do you want— want to try?” I asked, in my trout-voice.

Nadeshiko pointed to her eyes. “Me? But my eyelashes are much shorter than yours.”

“I can do it,” I lied, dismissively. “I’ve done this on loads of people before.”

I held the tongs over the oil lamp to heat them up again, and took a closer look at her face. She hadn’t been lying about her eyelashes. They were short and coarser than mine, and stuck straight out like a horse’s. Undeterred, I brushed her bangs off her eyebrows and mimed my hand over my own face. “Try to keep your eyes as open as you usually do. And don’t blink.”

I clamped the metal curlers around her eyelashes.

“This feels scary,” she whispered back, hands clenched on my arms.
I released the tongs, only to see that they didn’t curve as much as I would have liked. I tutted. “You think ghosts are romantic, but are afraid of eyelash curlers?”

In answer to my question, she whined. “Are you going to put those near my face again?”

I rolled my eyes, and moved to her second eye. Perhaps I moved too suddenly, because she gasped a bit in pain, jerking back. Two eyelashes came with it, and she clapped a hand to her face.

A sane person (Amu) might have gasped “Nadeshiko! Are you okay, my sweet?” but I, with my slow reflexes, only stared as she clapped an eye to her face. “Did I burn you?”

“I—I don’t know!”

“Let me see.”

Nadeshiko’s hand didn’t budge, remaining glued to her left eye. I pulled at her wrist. “Let me look at it, you big baby.”

“It hurts,” said Nagihiko, unconvincingly, but let me peel his hand away from his face. His red-rimmed eye, glazed over with tears, had a little gap between hairs in the centre of his eyelid.

“You just moved back and ripped some eyelashes out, you oaf.” I opened the eyelash curler. Three short black hairs lay there, white roots visible.

It was as if I had shown him his own severed limbs. Nagihiko gasped as if at fallen comrades, and pressed his fingers onto the pad of the curler. The eyelashes stuck to his finger.

I sensed a meltdown. “Make a wish.”

“A wish?” He looked up at me, brown eyes wide and ignorant. I resisted the urge to kiss his eyeballs condescendingly.

“If your eyelash falls out, you’re supposed to blow it away and wish for something.” I explained, as though it was an obvious aspect of everyday life. My mother mentioned it to me as a child, when I’d find eyelashes stuck to my hand from rubbing my face. It may have been a family legend endemic only to Mashiros.

“Does it work if your roommate ripped them out of your face?” he said, with an almost Rima-like cadence.

“Does it matter?” I said, unimpressed at his mimicry. “Wishes aren’t real.”

His eyes locked on mine. I stared back. Softly, he pursed his lips and blew; the eyelash vanished from his fingertip, and the hair around my face stirred from the air. I felt thoroughly unsettled—flattered—a little guilty, as though there were a thousand people staring at me. To silence it, I forced his head back. His hand tightened on my arm.

“Even after everything that happened, you’re still going to curl my eyelashes?” he said, incredulous.

“Otherwise, your face will be asymmetrical,” I tried to reason.

Nagihiko closed his eyes, consenting to curling his eyelashes. He consented, too, to let me comb his hair back into a chignon at the back of his neck, and to put a pin with trailing white flowers just behind it. Just as I was attempting to cloy her into rouging her cheeks, there was a polite knock at
The door swung open without prompting, Yaya, Amu, and Utau in its wake. I wondered what would have happened, had Nagihiko not been already seated in his yukata, padded and bound, leg crossed girlishly over the other. Visions of Yaya bursting in on Nagihiko half-undressed danced through my head. I wondered how he managed when he lived alone, before I existed to sound the alarm.

I looked up, politely, only to make startling eye contact with Amu.

“Ah!” she exclaimed, sadly. “You got ready without me, Nadeshiko?”

I felt nothing but mutiny at this. To save myself, I hopped off the bed and picked up my geta sandals by the thong. Carefully, I tucked my coin-purse into the obi that Nagihiko had nearly strangled me with, regarding the two of them with cold eyes. “Hurry up.”

This turned Amu’s attention towards me. My heart tightened.

“Rima, you look beautiful!” she exclaimed, in the easygoing way she had. I fought back my shiver of pleasure and turned my head so that she couldn’t see me biting back a grin like a silly idiot. Much to my misfortune, I turned in the direction of Nadeshiko to do so. She beamed back at me, with pride.

“But doesn’t she?”
When I was young, I was not permitted to attend to the summer festivals that poured down the streets of Ginza. My mother would look up primly from her knitting; to the window, to my face. Muffled drums, the call of vendors and the high-pitched wailing of traditional song would rattle the windowpanes and echo softly through the air.

“Emi-san can go get anything you’d like,” my mother would say. Emi-san was the hired girl.

I knit my lips together and nodded, downcast at my book. All the while, I stole sidelong glances through the curtains, hoping to glimpse anything: the pop of a firecracker, or a demon's mask. A few minutes later, I’d look up again. “Can’t I just—”

“No, Rima,” Mother would say, in a voice that indicated that I should not ask again. “Think of what might happen, should we lose you in the street.”

“But you shan’t,” I began. “If I bring Emi-san or grandmother with me…”

“You would shake them off in the crowd,” she said. “Scamper off to go eat takoyaki, and get caught by bandits, sold to a brothel in Yoshiwara, caught up in the Sumida River’s current and drown. You would never find proper burial, and we would despair.”

Takoyaki! I often wondered if she knew me at all. Every year, Ginza put on The Love Suicides at Amijima at a makeshift outdoor theater. The Love Suicides, contrary to its name, was a domestic rigmarole about a couple of hilariously unlikeable weirdos and a background cast riddled with rational straight-men to offset their strange behaviour. Delightful! I wanted to go, more than anything else in the world. But the shadow of fear always loomed long over the Mashiro house, obscuring the sun.

Seiyo was my emancipation. Amu immediately drifted towards a fortune-telling booth, pulling Nadeshiko in her wake and begging. “You have to come with me, Nadeshiko! Otherwise they’ll think I’m desperate and single!”

“Where is their error in judgement?” Utau asked, walking in stride with us.
Nadeshiko took pity. “You really believe in this kind of thing, Amu-chan?”

“Well, that is to say…” Amu fumbled her words, backed into a wall. In an aloof mutter, “This stuff is all fake, probably, but isn’t it fun to do if you’re already here…?”

I had a sneaking suspicion that Nadeshiko put more in stock by fishwives’ fortune-telling than Amu did. She approached the corpulent fortune-teller with the air of someone who did this often. I remembered what Amakawa-sensei had said, about geisha being superstitious.

“Do not be afraid,” the fortune-teller announced, in a throaty vibrato; she reminded me of the elderly crones on radio shows and moving pictures, speaking in a voice made for projection. “I can read your fate through the passing stars, and see all of your destiny from the moment of your birth. My name is Saeki Nobuko, passing through this town for only one night.”

“How much is it?” Nadeshiko asked, already putting down a five-yen banknote.

“Expensive,” muttered Utau. “Count me out.”

“Me, too,” I agreed, turning towards Utau. “Let’s go, I want to see the puppet theatre—”

I tried to leave, but Yaya’s arm locked tight around mine. Her eyes were wide, fixed on the fortune-teller’s charts. “No, Rima-tan,” she said, wowed. “You have to do it with me.”

“Really, Yaya?” I said, too late. She hovered around Nadeshiko excitedly.

“My birth date is the tenth day of the fifth lunar month,” Nadeshiko was saying.

“And the time?” Saeki Nobuko the fortune-teller asked, in what I perceived to be a rather pompous tone.

“Dawn,” she replied. “The first hour of sunrise… so, the rabbit?”

I exchanged a baffled look with Yaya.

“I’m giving the date using the traditional system, for ease,” she explained. The fortune-teller shook out a long list of calculations and filled in the table. “This particular method is called tōdō. It combines the Chinese four pillars method with physiognomy…”

I fancied that she used the big words on purpose, to throw everybody off her scent. “So, you think this works, huh?” I commented.

Nadeshiko smiled at me, eyes luminous. “Hmmmmmm?”

I could see a graph of some kind under the fortune-teller’s brush, eight boxes revolving around a center ninth. With nothing but overwhelming joy in my heart, I heard the fortune-teller cluck her tongue.

“No good.”

Nadeshiko covered her mouth with her sleeve, daintily. I stuck my head as far out as it would go over Yaya’s shoulder, like a gargoyle on the roof of the Notre Dame, and repressed the large grin threatening to engulf my face.

“An ever-changing enigma,” the fortune-teller announced, with grave sobriety. “Like toxic mist, the woman born in the year of the water dog is a homewrecker.”
“How charming!” I exclaimed. Amu made a gack choking noise in her throat.

“I see a beautiful diplomat gifted in the arts; gentle, hating to step on toes, virtuous lover of peace and stability. Loyal to a fault, they will bend over backwards for their loved ones. They are vivid storytellers…”

Privately, I thought this made him sound more attractive than he truly was. I had always longed to marry a footstool. Toxic mist, however, was apt.

"... But to the innermost people let into their confidence, they are cruel, guarded, difficult to know. Cynical. Master manipulators, vixens of the night, coy and teasing. They will chew you up and spit you out.” The fortune-teller sounded vehement, as though her family had been slaughtered by a pack of water dogs. The people, not the animals.

“That’s not true!” Amu began, with defensiveness, as though she had been personally attacked. “It is true that Nadeshiko is a little mysterious, but she’s a good friend who does her best!”

“Amu-chan…” Nadeshiko false-choked, eyes filling with false tears.

“You have a busy year ahead of you,” the fortune-teller interrupted their moment, round glasses flashing. “You will strengthen the bonds of your social circle, and a career opportunity will show itself by intercession of relatives. A fair man from across the ocean will make you an extramarital offer by the time the snow has thawed.”

“An extramarital officer?” Amu spluttered, while Yaya cackled with glee.

“What kind of madman foreigner would voluntarily attempt to buy Nadeshiko-san?” I pondered out loud.

“Quite the eccentric, no doubt!” said Nadeshiko, taking my joke in stride. Our group broke out into a fit of titters.

As we sniggered, I could see the fortune-teller rotate the chart suddenly, and with concern. It reminded me of Mother, when she saw a broken string of silk in a long sheet on the looms. Unconsciously, I took a step closer, worried.

“What is it?” I said, in my soft voice.

Her black eyes bored into Nadeshiko’s, curt. “You will not live to see your twentieth year.”

The villagers chattered around us alongside the distant thud-thud of the matsuri drums, far too close to my ears. Amu froze. I slunk forward, relinquishing Yaya’s arm, transfixed.

“You will die in a land far from your home, with blood in your mouth,” she rasped, the sing-song voice of prophecy, shaking claw pointing to an upper-right square. Two stars were marked in black. “Your parents have made enemies. The sky will rain metal, and you will drown in the earth’s embrace.”

Had I less respect for Nadeshiko, I would have snidely remarked that this sounded more fairy-story than fortune. It took all my self-control not to laugh off melodramatic death predictions at the hands of a corpulent old bat.

“My parents?” said Nadeshiko, timidly, but I did not see any fear in her face; only mere interest, as though she was watching a stranger’s fortune. “I see.”
“I recommend you to marry early,” said Saeki Nobuko, briskly, “To avoid this terrible fate. A reckless woman is a buoy, adrift in the ocean.”

“The man with the extramarital offer, perhaps?” she joked, eyes twinkling through glazed clay skin. Nobody responded. My shoulders eased only just. Surely I was not the only one who thought this all rubbish.

“Thank you very much, Aunty.”

White hands resting at her sides, she bowed forward, gently, like a willow-tree bending its boughs under the weight of snow.

“Excuse me, Yaya,” I said brightly, elbowing my way around her.

“Hey, Rima-tan!” she whined. “I wanted to be next! You don’t even believe in this stuff!”

“Kindly do mine next.” I smoothed the front of my borrowed kimono, prettily. “I should very much like to know what sort of unlucky men I am enslaving.”

I knew for certain that Amu must be making a very exasperated face as I gave the fortune-teller money from my purse. “I was born the sixth of February, in the eleventh year of Emperor Taisho.”

“How fitting,” Nadeshiko observed, “To be born as the icy winter wanes.”

“How fitting,” I shot back, “To be born when bloodsucking insects breed and multiply.”

Though my kanji left much to be desired, I could read the upside-down characters for metal and rooster, the animal of my birth year, which Saeki had marked down on a fresh chart. The New Year had come late that winter.

“The time?” the fortune-teller prompted. I felt as though she had several nasty premonitions from me without it; unlike with Nadeshiko, she looked rather disapproving.

I had to pause to remember, peering at my own nail beds. My mother did not speak of my birth often. “The afternoon,” I said finally, without conviction. “She missed tea-time.”

The fortune-teller stared at me, unimpressed. “Which is?”

“Half past four o’clock in the evening.” I recalled Nagihiko’s brass-faced clock with its mysterious symbols, slowly. “The hour of the… the monkey.”

The fortune-teller seemed to expect this, for she started speaking at once, with a hearty sniff. “The metal rooster, born under yin wood. An elegant girl, no doubt, pretty and soft-spoken…”

“Yes,” I replied, matter-of-factly.

“… Difficult to get rid of, stubborn, like weeds choking a garden. Greedy and clinging, smothering mothers, they rely on others to prop them up, to lift them towards the sun. They crave attention, and the material lifestyle.”

“Oh,” I said.

“They can be insecure, but not you, I’m afraid.” With dislike. “You have an acute sense of your self-worth that rises from within. With your competitive acumen, you will use it to trigger a bidding war amongst suitors. For a girl of low birth, your bride-price will be an unprecedented number. Your marriage will bring wealth to both your parents, and accomplishments to your
Inaccurate,” I said, coolly. Were they here to hear it, my family would rejoice for what sounded like the end to financial strains. Yet how did Saeki Nobuko know that I had a bride-price, rather than a dowry? “My family is in business, not peasantry.”

Saeki Nobuko raised her voice over me. “Low in circumstance, the poorest of situations, no name, no title. But yin wood, the flower, endures.”

My frown deepened.

“It is born in dirt and rises towards the light of the sun, bearing countless trials with every passing season. But so long as its roots remain in the earth, and the rain continues to fall…”

“… It will someday bloom.” Nadeshiko’s voice chimed over my shoulder. I twisted around to stare. She smiled back at me, prettily.

“It’s beautiful,” said Amu, easily touched. “And true for all of us, isn’t it?”

“I think it a load of waffle.” That was me. I was still remembering the metal rain.

Yaya spoke in a deep, tremulous voice. “Such sharp thorns on such a blooming rose, Rima-chan!”

I held my fan in front of my face, demurely. “To keep bugs away.”

“I could be wrong,” Nagihiko piped up, “But I believe rose prickles are to stop larger animals from eating the flower.”

“You are wrong,” I said. “It is to keep bugs away.”

Nagihiko exchanged a glance with Amu. “Um, alright. Shall Yaya…?”

As the fortune-teller robbed us of our money, the sun sputtered to its end on the eastern horizon. As twilight fell, shopkeepers began lighting the little lanterns strung across their booths and hanging from shop awnings. Sundown was our sign. With reluctance, we made our way back to the pavilion where Sanjō was directing students every which way, like the military dictator she was born to be.

“You three!” she barked, immediately putting a taloned hand on Yaya’s shoulder. “This way. You are late.”

From the choir, Utau jerked her head at us, a scoffing I told you so. Amu and Yaya shot me a miserable look over their shoulders as I ducked and scuttled away to the koto section, finding this all a terrible bore and hoping it would be over soon. As I squashed my feet under my rear, Yamabuki-san on my left whacked me with the handle of her koto. “Be careful, you oaf!”

“Why bother to tread lightly around an ox?” I said, being friendly and sociable.

Yamabuki’s eyes were framed with long black lashes, permanently narrowed in a sneer. She always drew her eyebrows on too high, making her look perpetually shocked. “Don’t get so uppity,” she said, eyebrows agog, “Just because you happen to be friends with Fujisaki and Hinamori-san. When she sees how well I pluck the strings, our eyes will meet across the stage, and she will surely drop you in an instant, like moldy rice…!”

“Who?” I asked, bemused.

“What?”
“Which one?” I repeated. “You said two names.”

She opened her mouth, and then shut it, not knowing whose arse to kiss first.

“Fujisaki-senpai would not do such a thing,” a timid voice spoke behind me. “She and Hinamori-sempai are kind.”

It was the first koto in our section, a girl younger than us. Something about her straight, shiny hair and very large forehead spurred a memory, but I could not pinpoint it.

“Far too kind for the likes of Mashiro-san, with all her airs!” Yamabuki was brought back to life on the fuel of dissidence. “But then again, Hinamori-san has always liked her projects. It is why she remains at the bottom, while I, Yamabuki Sāya, continue to be a ray of sunlight in this abominable prison of a school…”

“You’re the girl from before,” I told the timid voice, recalling Nadeshiko’s father’s fan who had gone to see his show in Ginza.

“Hatanaka-san,” she said, at the same time I said “Haganaki.”

“Oh,” she added after me, glumly. “Yes. Let’s all do our best today, for the dancers and festival-goers.”

“Alright,” I said, oblivious to work ethic bolsters. Yamabuki-san did not take kindly to being told to do her best.

“You have a lot of gall, for a first-year girl!” she huffily repositioned her koto. “It should have been me or Mashiro-san in your place—”

“Please do not name-drop me,” I said. “I don’t know you.”

“—and I have a mind to believe that Sanjō-sensei only gave you the position because your father was rich enough to pay for lessons, or because she feels sorry for you.”

“Sanjō-sensei doesn’t feel anything,” I said, from my vantage point in the peanut gallery. “Her bosoms are made of metal, and absorb all the shock impact.”

Marimo shot me a shy look of gratefulness. I raised my eyebrows, not intending to defend Hatanaka in the slightest. Before Yamabuki could retort, a hush fell over the small makeshift stage. Sanjō made a furious hand gesture from behind a curtain. Hatanaka, seeing it, made a sharp twang on her koto, signalling the rest of us.

I was proud of Yaya and Amu more than I was of Nadeshiko, if truth be told, because I knew that such things came naturally to Nadeshiko. Indeed, there was a rather empty, dull look in her eyes through her smile as she wove in and out of the dancers, as though she could do this in her sleep. I studied her face curiously in between koto notes, what little I could glimpse. She was smiling, but her chin was moving ever-so-slightly on a rhythm off from everyone else’s. She was rehearsing another dance in her head simultaneously.

Yaya’s face was alight with joy. Hands aloft; her eyes passed mine, and I raised my eyebrows in a snooty impression of Yamabuki next to me. Her grin widened before she turned again, her back to me.

When the simple rotation finished, there was uproarious applause. “More!” a voice called. This was expected, of course, because every matsuri worth its salt had music enough to fill the entire
night. We obediently started a second time, from the top. My eyes moved from person to person, bored and seeking stimulation.

Hatanaka-san looked more in her element than Yaya did. Where I found the koto strenuous, she handled it like a friend she could never tire of speaking to. She was no less than thrilled to be playing a second repetition. Her eyes were on the dancer’s feet, but Nadeshiko’s most of all; but this made sense, I thought to myself, with some humour, because Yaya had jumped off-step once at the beginning, and had caused Hatanaka to be a beat late. There was something steady about Nadeshiko, for those who didn’t know her, comfort in her consistency and competence.

The fourth applause was smattered, and more than enough for me. Placing my koto in the rest position, my entire row shuffled back slightly on our knees. The four bon-odori dancers dispersed in a row, bowed, and took several steps back to seat themselves further up the stage— all except Nadeshiko.

The last reverberating strings of Hatanaka’s koto faded into the lone sound of a single drum, which continued to patter out a steady rhythm. Nadeshiko was alone. An anticipatory prickle began at the back of my neck. Ah! So this was the performance Nagihiko had been talking about. The one he was so sure I would like.

She turned to face the world with the rotating, precise grace that only a buyo dancer could have, opening the wooden wings of her fan away from her body slat by slat. Two chords sounded from Hatanaka’s koto, sharp and tanging in the still air. In confluence, the music was the characteristically bare, eerie. I thought of lonely mountain passes, or wide expanses of desolate moors.

The fan cast a shadow over her glinting eyes. She gazed out into a point beyond all of us, with the air of a sailor’s wife watching the sea. Her wrist lost its strength, and her hands came to life, like rock turned to water.

The fan was a single leaf falling from a tree. It grew to a whooshing gale that picked up Nadeshiko’s dangling sleeve in its wake, and then the safety of a sliding door, lovingly closing in front of her face. I watched, mesmerized. The fan slipped behind her back as she turned, sleeve covering her mouth, concealing a secret. Her eyes slid to the side, as though she was meeting a secret lover. She took one, two, three tentative steps towards my side of the stage.

Hatanaka looked elated, and although I saw her fingers pluck the koto strings with precision, her eyes were full of Nadeshiko. I felt rather embarrassed looking at all.

“Why is she even looking at you?” Yamabuki hissed in my ear, with vitriol. I turned my attention back to Nadeshiko’s face too late, only to see the tendons of her neck and the grey shadow of her jaw. She swung back around, fan outstretched mere feet from me— in a quick, fluid movement, she tossed the fan from one hand to the other in an arc over her shining head.

The audience barely contained their thrilled gasp; a few of the savvier observers applauded. Evidently, this was a show of technical skill. I leaned forward ever-so-slightly, sucked in by flashy acrobatics. I believe the entire stage held a collective breath as she turned the edge of it from hand to hand, waiting for it to happen again.

She used the fan to shield her eyes once more as she gazed out upon the audience. It was so self-aware when Nadeshiko did it. She was wearing a faint smirk now, alien on the mask. I felt small, and deeply grateful she was not looking my way. As she extended her fan forward to flutter down in front of the audience, I saw her right hand slip behind her back, imperiously.
Amu, seated just behind her trailing hand, took the folding fan from her obi and proffered it forward. *Two?* She brought them both out to view, mirroring each other, like sisters; they both fell from the same tree before meeting again, flush to each other. She flipped one in front of the other, now with a jaunty little smirk indeed, flipped one over the other mid-air, falling perfectly into her waiting hand. The audience *ohhhed*, and there was a few claps.

Together, the fans were back to being falling leaves; they fell discordantly, Nadeshiko twirling them both on her index fingers. Her kimono glowed bloody under the red lantern-light, and the shadows made her look menacing. I was frightened, and the slightest bit taken.

She flipped one fan back over the other again, and then the other— turned, and then threw her first fan in a spin up towards the overhead lanterns, catching it with the other fan that lay flat. I had never seen Japanese dance move quite so fast before. Like before, in the dormitory, she was a moving picture, fluid, taking the boldest and mannish steps I had ever seen her take outside my company. How *dare* she?

I grew to regard the two fans as extensions of her hands, like the rippling fins of a betta fish moving fluidly with every exhale of the water’s current. They swayed every which way, like the reeds at the bottom of a riverbed, like the breathing of a great beast. So much that it surprised me when she carelessly tossed it back behind her. Her wild movements stopped, as though she had been caught.

I would later learn that in this part of the kabuki play, the character Nadeshiko was dancing sees her audience of samurai retainers fall asleep under the influence of drugged wine and realizes that it is safe to reveal her true self. But at the time, I only saw Nagihiko’s face turn over Nadeshiko’s sloping shoulder, like the sun rising over the mountains in an ugly grimace, eyes red-rimmed and full of hatred. I felt a sick thrill, and checked the faces of everyone around me, paranoid that anybody would notice. They did not. Of course they wouldn’t.

He flicked the fan away from his face, as though a bothersome fly. If I thought some of his movements mannish before, he was most certainly a man, now; he strode downstage like a calculating villain, tail-end of his kimono slithering like scales on the floor, and my heart fluttered to the beat of the drum. If Nagihiko’s secret was safe, *surely* there was no harm in indulging in a bit of my own dramatic irony. It was strangely exhilarating, to see Nagihiko show an emotion that was not placidity.

The drums stopped. Hatanaka’s koto screamed hollowly against the silence. Nagihiko’s shoulder joint cracked audibly, fan flung away from his body like a warrior’s sword. Several classmates sitting on the edges of the stage who looked rather horrified. Had I not known what Nagihiko was like out of the public eye, I might have been taken aback, too. As it was, I was only surprised that Nagihiko— secretive, reclusive as he was— chose to air this part of himself to everybody, hidden in plain sight.

His lips pressed together, cold and furious. He swept towards my end of the stage, soft-footed. It was the first time I noticed the silk pattern in the weave of his kimono— alternating diagonal triangles, glimmering under the light. Reptile scales, hidden under the floral embroidery.

His fan was raised as though to slap his invisible enemy. Like a fool, I picked that moment to lock eyes with him: wide, brown, still brimming with brutal animosity. Knowing full well he was trying to frighten me, I clutched my koto and maintained eye contact. Was he succeeding? My heart pounded like he was, and I had the violent itch to stagger to my feet and stamp him out tooth and nail, as though he was a spider in the bathtub and not my arrogant classmate inwardly having a laugh.
My lip curled. His teeth bared, and for a minute, we were directly opposite each other; a snake that was and was not a woman and an invisible pinprick, separated and united by a fourth wall of observation.

The koto’s notes puttered off, and he dragged himself with a weary grace back to centre stage in a way I had only seen when he woke up tired in the mornings. He seemed to compose himself, settling back on his knees, fans poised. The koto’s notes stretched out to a tremble, before stopping.

Silence. Yamabuki Sāya looked aghast. Hatanaka, enamored. Similar expressions were mirrored around the edge of the stage. I realized I was still clutching the neck of my koto nervously, and relinquished it.

The applause began slow, unsure. It grew to an overwhelming roar.

“Nadeshiko, that was amazing!” Amu gushed afterwards, face alight.

Yaya made a murmur of agreement. “You looked like an ogre.”

“Apt,” said Nadeshiko, smiling. “I was dancing as one.”

“Eehh?!” Amu squawked.

As we walked, Nadeshiko leant forward eagerly, so that we could all hear her. “The character is a princess named Sarashina,” she explained, “Who lures a young nobleman into drinking with her during an autumn foliage-viewing. He convinces her to dance for him, but when he and his courtiers fall asleep, she reveals herself to be the ogre of the mountain pass and comes close to killing them. It is an unusual role, most agree, in that one must alternate the demure movements of a woman with the male, aggressive stance of a monster...”

“Does one, now!” I said, with fervent interest. “I suppose art imitates life.”

Nagihiko’s eyes were dark and intense, and I often got the impression that they were staring right through me. I raised my eyebrows back, relishing in the shared secret.

“Does Rima-chan fancy me so violent? How hurtful!”

“I liked it,” I said, bemused, “There is no need to be so hysterical.”

She hit me, a playful sock to the arm that hit like a hundred bricks and rang of panic. Stoic in my pain, my arms went limp as noodles.

“Nadeshiko, don’t hit her!” Amu exclaimed, exasperated. “She’s only trying to tell you her true feelings from the heart, isn’t she...?”

“Yes, Nadeshiko,” I nickered. “My true feelings.”

“Rima has higher standards than the rest of us,” Amu explained, plaintive. “So if she says she liked it, it must have been really good!”

I caught myself half-nod, before becoming cross with myself. Back when we were younger, Amu would often force us into situations in which Nadeshiko and I were forced to interact and then attempt a balancing act, seeking out things we had in common. She failed in every regard, but now, to her delight, it seemed that she had found ways to get us to triumphantly reach concord.
“I mean to say, I am not nearly so prideful as to not admit when somebody has done a right job of it,” I said, stiffly. “I liked it, and I shall say nothing more on the matter.”

“You flatter me,” said Nadeshiko, softly. “In saying so. I’m happy.”

I fell into an embarrassed silence. The crunch crunch of our sandals on the earth was an ephemeral sound, punctuated quickly by Yaya’s piercing voice, saving me. “A tanabata tree! Look!”

I followed her finger to the towering bamboo plant, already tied with endless bunches of paper. A little boy was carefully tying a slip of paper to one of the highest branches of the bush, held up in his father’s arms. I recognized three Seiyo academy students, Hatanaka among them. Her friend was a bright red, and it sounded as though she was getting egged on.

I zig-zagged closer to an adjacent hydrangea bush, as though I meant to admire the flowers. Their conversation drifted over to me on the hot summer air, clear as crystal.

“… It’s still technically tanabata, you know? The festival of lovers. If you write it down, Orihime and Hikoboshi will surely hear your prayers, and make Souma-kun notice you. After all, they’re in the same situation, aren’t they? They can only meet under these specific circumstances…”

“What are you wishing for, then?” Hatanaka’s voice.

“Better sewing,” came the response from Sentimental Sentinel, glumly. “My stitches are all crooked and my parents aren’t real pleased with me after the letter they got from the teacher last autumn… What about you, Marimo-chan? You haven’t filled out your slip.”

Marimo mumbled. I moved closer around the edge of the hydrangea bush, and pretended to be inspecting the blue-and-pink mottled colouration a little more closely. Marimo? In my mind, those fuzzy balls of moss one finds in freshwater lakes rose to the surface of my mind. I imagined Marimo’s huge forehead rolling along the bottom of a lake, hair swishing every which way in the currents.

“What are you looking at over here, Rim—AH,” Amu cried out, as I stepped on her foot. Hatanaka and both her doltish friends turned to us, surprised.

“Mashiro and Hinamori-senpai!” Hatanaka said, kindly, and bowed— overly-formal, and just right, in my opinion.

Sentimental Sentinel hissed, “You know them?” Sometimes I forgot that Amu was a bit of a Florence Nightingale celebrity healer, and that everybody knew her name.

“Hi,” said Amu, clearly uncomfortable.

“I liked your O-bon performance,” said Hatanaka, politely. There was no fanatic fervor in it, but it was meant nonetheless.

“Thanks…” Amu mumbled, embarrassedly. “Um, you did well, too. I guess.”

I chose to stay silent, but it was me that Marimo turned to, tentatively. “Mashiro-senpai, um, I know you’re busy with your friends, and all… but I have to go on for choral in a few minutes, and I was wondering if I could ask your advice on something?”

Amu turned to stare at me. So did Yaya and Nadeshiko, who were over by the tanabata tree, fussing with their own little slips of paper.
“I’m not an Agony Aunt–” I began, huffily.

Amu shoved me forward, hurriedly. “We’ll wait up for you at the goldfish booth, O.K., Rima?”

I looked helplessly ahead as my friends skipped into the distance, hooting and hollering. The two of us stood in front of the sky-high bamboo plant, muffled drums in the background. The stars twinkled. Marimo played with a strand of her stick-straight hair, looking at the ground. I stared at my own cuticles, picking at a hangnail.

“Um…” Hatanaka began, nervously. “I don’t mean to be so forward, but…”

Silence was my territory; I would let her struggle if she wished.

“I know this is very rude, and I don’t mean to imply anything, but, in regards to you and Fujisaki-senpai…”

It suddenly occurred to me that Hatanaka-san might be attempting to guess the very secret that I was supposed to keep. My face hardened even further, stoic, stubborn. She would get nothing from me.

“Are you… are the two of you lovers?”

A cicada screamed, and a mosquito buzzed right by my ear. I tried to slap it, and hit myself in the head. “Huh?” I said, stupidly.

“I know, I know,” said Hatanaka, miserably. “I know the two of you are girls, but you know, I-I had to ask… I hear that some girls… well, Nadeshiko especially…” Marimo’s ears went bright red. “I wasn’t really sure, but the two of you are so close, and she speaks so highly of you!”

Was Hatanaka trying to make fun of me? I jerked my chin up, arrogantly. “No,” I said.

“Oh,” said Hatanaka, struggling to make something of my laconic response. “In that case… well… you see, I kind of admire her a lot. I never gave much thought to Fujisaki-senpai before, I suppose… not as much as other people… I mean, she is my upperclassmen, and she’s very beautiful. I never thought much more than that. But when I saw her dance, it surprised me.” Her eyes widened. “She’s so… mysterious at Seiyo, but when she dances, I feel as though I can understand her feeling, exactly. Her body is a type of music, in itself.”

I did not know why I was listening to this blather so closely.

“In fact, it made me really want to work hard at being a musician so much more. I was hoping you knew a way to have my feelings reach her?”

I pretended to think about it. “Say them,” I suggested.

Marimo paled. “I tried! You saw me, Mashiro-senpai!”

I did not remember this.

“Oh,” said Hatanaka, struggling to make something of my laconic response. “In that case… well… you see, I kind of admire her a lot. I never gave much thought to Fujisaki-senpai before, I suppose… not as much as other people… I mean, she is my upperclassmen, and she’s very beautiful. I never thought much more than that. But when I saw her dance, it surprised me.” Her eyes widened. “She’s so… mysterious at Seiyo, but when she dances, I feel as though I can understand her feeling, exactly. Her body is a type of music, in itself.”

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“I congratulated her, and tried my best to tell her how much I admire her family’s work. But somehow, it never comes out right, and she never acknowledges anyone seriously. I’m not used to saying my feelings so much, so I don’t think talking is going to work at all… could it be…” she looked down at her tanabata slip, and back at me, delighted. “Of course! I should write a letter, shouldn’t I? If it’s so formal as a letter, she’ll have to understand me. You’re good at this, you know, Mashiro-senpai? Thank you!”
I stared at her, as though she had pronounced me Royal President of the Duck Committee. Finally, I managed, “Much obliged.”

With love, she smoothed out her slip, and began writing in looping syllables. Shyly, she did not stop me from looking over her shoulder. I wish my feelings will reach Fujisaki-senpai!

There was something about the wholesome way she went about it that made me feel like a nasty, world-hardened person. While I was here, I might as well ask Orihime and Hikoboshi myself for something— although I was not the superstitious type, there was something inspiring about Marimo’s overarching piousness that made me believe it would come true if I put my wish to ink.

I thought of Nadeshiko— of the Nadeshiko that Hatanaka must see, the laughing sylph with a song in her heart, a skip in her step and a story in her heart. I thought of the Nagihiko I knew; the sulky, stubborn boy, reptilian and rash. I looked up at the bamboo, and saw the closest slip of paper at eye-level. In the earnest kanji of a young man’s hand: Hikoboshi-sama, bring me a wife as radiant as a goddess! I stifled a snort. Hikoboshi’s name was spelled with the same hiko as Nagihiko’s, and the hoshi of Utau’s surname. Male star. No identity: just sex.

I thought my father, and his letter. I thought of the headlines, and Yaya, and the island of Taiwan.

Peace, I wrote. I meant it.

“There you are!” Amu said, as Yaya tried and failed for the umpteenth time to scoop one of the goldfish. “What did that girl want?”

Yaya, net splashing noisily in the water, did not see the irony in teasing me. “Has your fanclub expanded, Rima-tan? Do girls want to confess to you as well?”

I was not skilled at lying on the spot, and my eyes unconsciously drifted to Nadeshiko’s aristocratic profile, reflected an eerie blue from the light of the water. “It was… koto… stuff.”

“ ‘Koto stuff?’ ” Amu echoed, a little suspicious. “Isn’t she really good, though?”

Amu was normally not so quick to catch me in a fib. As I cast around for a backup, perhaps the gods were smiling on me after all. An excuse manifested itself in Yamabuki Sāya, sauntering by, flanked by her cronies.

“Yamabuki said some nasty things to her in the koto section,” I said, without feeling. “Money can’t buy class. I told her as much.”

“Oh, I thought I saw that,” Amu sighed, giving Yamabuki’s retreating back a bit of an exasperated look. “It was really nice of you to comfort her, though. Yamabuki Sāya used to intimidate me, too, before I realized that her… how do they say it? Bark is worse than her bite.”

“That may be so, but I still do not care to have her teeth in my neck,” I said, peering over to watch the colourful goldfish twist through the water, like glittering orange coins. “Yaya, even if you catch one, how will you take it home with you on the train?”

“In a milk bottle,” suggested Yaya, making another vain swipe.

“Catch it, and set it free,” Nadeshiko suggested. “A goldfish may remain beautiful in captivity, but in a river, it may one day become a fearsome dragon.”

“Is this a metaphor, or are you just that delusional?” I asked, caustic.
Nadeshiko gave me a soft smile, and, with a jolt, I realized it was slightly mournful, pained. Did she know Hatanaka’s feelings? Was that why she smiled so sadly?

I was interrupted by a piercing shriek. “I got it!”

Yaya held her net aloft; a golden fish flopped in it, splashing water onto my nose.

“Oh, well done!” the shopkeeper said, clapping his hands. “That will be… two thousand yen in total!”

Goldfish swimming in a cup, Yaya’s savings depleted in their entirety, I took pity on her and paid for her chilled noodles. We all sat on the town wall and slurped loudly, legs swinging— all except Nadeshiko, who somehow managed to absorb the noodles via osmosis. I watched two little boys chase each other in oni masks with amusement, while some older boys strode past the booths, chatting idly.

Amu suddenly sat up, cheeks red. “Hey… a-aren’t those guys from Kouen?”

“Wha?” Yaya said, noodles falling out of her mouth.

“You know, from the boy’s school, the next town over!” Amu cast her eyes all about herself, suddenly self-conscious. That was nothing on Nadeshiko, who hopped off the fence like a twirling maple seed, fan open and in front of her face. “Oh,” she said, more high-pitched and breathy than usual, “I just remembered, I dropped my purse somewhere earlier.”

“Don’t look at them, Yaya, they’ll see you!” Amu whispered loudly, flustered.

“Hi!” Yaya said, waving.

I slunk off the wall like a kicked cat, leaving my bowl. “I’ll help you look for it,” I told Nadeshiko, glad of an excuse to get out of socializing with Neanderthals. “I think it was back at the goldfish booth.”

We did not linger long enough to see whether the Kouen boys made first contact. Nadeshiko turned to cut between a takoyaki booth and an advertisement for a local business, and I followed without thinking.

Between the slats of wood and canvas, I caught her sleeve in the darkness. “What was that all about?”

“I know them,” said Nagihiko, breathing audibly. His voice was timbrous again, reverberating in the small space. “We’re friends.”

“Do they know?”

“One does,” he admitted. “The others don’t. I decided against letting the others know in such a context. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“A safe move,” I said noncommittally, inching around him. Our obis rubbed against each other, cotton twill on silk. “But you should have known there was a chance you would see them, in coming out here in the first place.”

“I know.” He turned in tight circles, red dim and glimmering in the low light. I wondered if this goldfish would ever make it up the river to become anything, never mind a dragon. “But Mother thinks nobody knows me as a man. How could I say no?” He grabbed my shoulders, eyes wild,
fierce. “I won’t cloister myself like a nun out of fear that something might happen! I have a right to enjoy myself as much as any other.”

I stared up at him, trying, again, to see what Hatanaka must see. It did not work with his jaw set mannishly and shoulders up; all I saw was a serpent with a thorn in its side, thrashing on itself. I did not let go as quickly as I should have. “Calm yourself,” I told him, evenly. “Nobody saw a thing. And anyway, nobody would think you a nasty boy who breaks-and-enters with a waist like that.”

It was difficult to see in the darkness, but the mask might have smiled. “Even so, I can’t hide from everybody all evening.”

I squared my shoulders, letting go of his hands to brush a loose curl off my shoulder. “You won’t have to.” Simply. “You are with me.”

He tilted his head. “Even more so, then.”

It was warm in here. I suddenly did not know what to do with my hands; I fixed my hair further, and felt like Amu spotting a bloody Kouen boy.

“Your mother was so focused on making you appealing to creepy old grandfathers that she never bothered to teach you anything a real woman learns.” My voice had transparent disgust; I could not help it, every time I was faced with the luxury of Nagihiko’s upbringing. “Any gentleman worth his salt can read the atmosphere and see a woman whose heart is closed. Watch me.”

I squared my shoulders, raised my chin haughtily, and let my eyebrows fall into their natural rest position. I regarded Nagihiko coldly, arms crossed.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?” he asked, with a smile.


I squeezed back out from between the booths, and strode unblinkingly towards the takoyaki stand, where the tangles of octopus’ legs were being rolled in sticky batter. I stared at a boy perhaps a few years older than the two of us, thinking murder. “Excuse me.”

The boy only caught a glance of my face, before looking away in a hurry. “Sorry, go ahead.”

Men could not abide by a frozen-looking woman, I had learnt very quickly. They liked to look at pretty faces that were open to their fantasies; they wanted blank slates, like Nadeshiko, an ornamentation that would laugh without prompt.

My face melted, and I smiled, voice syrup. “Thank you.”

“You look awfully young to…”

I held up a hand, and stopped the conversation. I returned to Nagihiko’s hidey-hole between the stalls with a skewer in my hand, and proffered the end with nothing short of smugness. “Any comments?”

“Many,” he said, amused. “That poor man fell for you in an instant, and you let him crack his head open on the rocks below.”

I expected him to take an octopus ball off the end with his fingers, but he leaned over and bit it off with his mouth, canines sharp, grinning.
“Nagihiko!” I said, a little loudly. The takoyaki maker froze, confused. Nagihiko pulled me by the arm, deeper down the line of stalls, chewing.

“You are asking me to make myself emotionally unavailable,” he said, wisely. “I might not have believed it to work, but with undeniable evidence…”

“The minute I spoke nicely, he thought he could talk to me,” I added, scoffing. “Me! Unbelievable. You see?”

I coaxed him into easing half into the light of a lantern and dropping the smile for me. It was not easy. Even when at rest, he had a natural, friendly curve to his lips, and his eyes were half-shut, as though smiling.

“You are still raising your eyebrows,” I said, finally. “Why?”

“They sit heavy,” he said, hesitantly. He relaxed his face and allowed them to drop over his eyes, and immediately looked hardened and determined. I could see why he had been trained him to hold them higher, where they did not look as masculine.

Carefully, I put my two index fingers to the deep corners of his mouth, and tried to turn them downwards. I checked over my own shoulder, even though it was innocuous; instead, I felt his lips pull up against the current.

“Stop it,” I told him. “Be emotionally unavailable.”

“I’m trying,” he said, mouth opening in a laugh. “Do it again!”

His mouth froze where I set it this time, and he opened his eyes at my request. The whites of his eyes grew larger, and I could not help but look pleased with myself. I folded open my little compact, pleased. “Look.”

His heavy eyebrows furrowed together like caterpillars again, mimicry of a woman’s sadness. “I look like Princess Sarashina!” he said, in disappointment. “The beast, not the woman.”

I thought this very delusional and stupid of him to say, being blessed with good bone structure and skin like ceramic. Even with an icy countenance, he looked a little like Utau: beautiful, but untouchable. I decided against saying anything to the contrary, and instead only shrugged. “Shall we?”

“Where are we going?” He tilted his head, cutely.

“Head straight,” I admonished, with a glower. He began walking in a straight line, gazing at me in incomprehension.

“Head—” I said through grit teeth, grabbing his jaw and forcing it upright. “— straight! We are going to enjoy ourselves, boys or Frog Choir be damned.”

“Frog Choir?”

The way Nagihiko acted, one would think enjoying himself was an alien activity. As we walked down the bustling, lantern-lit street, shoulder-to-shoulder, I caught him staring at me nervously like a dog who wondered if he was misbehaving.

“Would you pretty misses like to have a look at these?” a nearby shopkeeper called to us, mistaking my careless glance for interest. Nadeshiko jumped, skittish.
I elbowed the cardboard padding of her obi, hissing. “Why are you so jumpy? You’ve gone on jolly romps all over the countryside, if Kouen is anything to judge by.”

Nadeshiko hunched her shoulders up and played with her own fingers mournfully, like a woman strumming a harp. I reached to disentangle them, but consoled myself by slapping her hand instead.

“I was hardly acting a woman while sneaking out, was I?” she said, in a low voice. It blended into the men’s murmurs around her. “And that aside, I was alone.”

I took her sleeve and leaned over the shopkeeper’s wares with mild interest. It was full of different types of seals, from official documents to simpler motifs, such as teapots, and family crests.

“The best in Kansai,” the shopkeeper said, proudly. “Not only men use them, nowadays. Even women can be artists and sign bills.”

“Don’t act like I’m the obstacle, here,” I whispered, pretending to admire a seal with a man’s name on it. “Just admit you’re terrible at having fun.”

“I can have plenty of fun,” Nadeshiko informed me in a stage whisper.

“Looking at something for a man, Miss?” the shopkeeper inquired, noticing me looking. I put the stamp down, quickly, but Nadeshiko grabbed the bait before I could hurl it back into the sea.

“She’s trying to find a gift for her boyfriend,” Nadeshiko said.

“It’s for my creepy uncle,” I said, loudly.

“See how shy and filial she is about it! Uncle, indeed!” Nadeshiko said proudly, tittering behind her sleeve. I stared at her, aghast. A snake’s beady eyes stared back at me, teasing.

“Does he need an official seal, or is this for personal use?” asked the shopkeeper briskly, rifling around in a drawer underneath his stall.

“I think I’ll look around some more,” I said, without emotion. Fire-hot bugs crawled up my neck.

“No, I think this is a good idea,” Nadeshiko said, earnestly. “You said he needed one, and it will demonstrate that you are a businesswoman of taste, who thinks about his future.”

“The young lady is right,” the shopkeeper said, angling for the sale. “A seal is a gift that lasts forever, and a man will need several throughout his lifetime. They are works of art in themselves.”

“I could be wrong, but I think he needs one for mid-level documents, such as bank signatures…” Nadeshiko stood on her tiptoes to look at the selection. “Help me out, Rima-chan, which one…”

“What is the gentleman’s name?” the shopkeeper asked me, winking.

“Nagihiko,” Nadeshiko responded, without missing a beat.

“Is it, now?” I asked, through gritted teeth.

“Oh, yes,” said Nadeshiko vaguely, fingering the seals. “Wouldn’t a round one be nice?”

I stared at him, for several moments.

“Maybe,” I said, slowly.
“Go on, you know what he’d like better than I would,” Nadeshiko said, taking my shoulder. I raised my eyes, surprised. There was no sardonicism, or private joke. She meant it.

“… Round…” I agreed, softly. “I like this one.”

My fingertip touched the black side of a lacquer seal. A crane in flight was enameled on its side, wings spread. There was calligraphy on it, too, though words I could not read.

“A nice choice,” the shopkeeper said, admiringly, although with a wink. “Is the lady angling for marriage? A crane represents…”


I could see Nadeshiko cramming her hand down her obi (uncouth) for her purse, although in her overelaborate joke, she had not given herself an out to do so. I began stacking coins on the counter, smug, before I realized I was financing his double life. *Dammit! Foiled again, by Fujisaki machinations—*

“Nagi, like a calm or lull, that so?” asked the shopkeeper, taking the seal from my hands. “Unusual name, that boy of yours.”

“For an unusual fool,” I demurred, staring at Nadeshiko. We could both take joy in a charade. Nadeshiko loved the mask, and I loved the farce. *What a pair,* I thought, with a bite of something acrid. *Two liars.*

In these days, the makers of seals would carve them right there, before our very eyes. The seal-maker did so, knife glinting in the light of the lantern, before carefully wrapping it up in brown paper and tying it with twine. When it was done, Nagihiko tucked it into her obi, like a secret.

“You follow me, this time.”

I followed without thinking, one foot after the other. I had to trot to keep up with his long stride. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

We wove our way in and out of a rapidly-thickening crowd of people. In the distance, the chorus of the Seiyo girls’ choir drifted over us, cutting in and out as though through faulty signal. I could only catch snatches of chorus, amid flutes:

... *The rainfall moon, hidden by clouds*
*When I must go to be a bride, who shall I go with?*
*Alone, I hold a paper umbrella*
*If I don’t have an umbrella, who shall I go with?*

I nearly bumped into the back of a man’s haori. Nadeshiko put a concerned hand on my shoulder. “Oh!” she said— with sadness. “We’ve only caught the end.”

“What is it?” I hissed, standing on my tip-toes. “I can’t see— this clod is blocking my view.”

I moved in front of Nadeshiko. There was nothing in front of me but a thicket of tall people. I could hear the drums, and the piercing voice of a narrator. It was the puppet show.

I turned to Nadeshiko, eyes shining. *He remembered?* “It’s—”

*The Love Suicides at Amijima,* we said, together. I stopped early, embarrassed.
“Pick me up,” I said, imperiously. “I wish to see.”

Nagihiko leaned forward. In shadow, his face looked roguish. “Oh? And what will Miss Mashiro give me in return?”

“A debt repaid,” I sneered, putting my arms around his neck. His attempts at cowing did not faze a stone-cold woman such as I. “Up.”

Although willowy, I correctly identified a quiet strength to Nagihiko. He put one arm under my knees and another against my back and picked me up quickly, like a limp doll. He was careful to keep my legs pinned together, as to spare anyone a flashing by merit of being carried like a corpse.

“The poor seal-maker will be so confused,” Nagihiko murmured, leaning me comfortably against his shoulder. I sat ramrod straight in his arms, one leg crossed daintily over the other. “We look like…”

I stared pointedly at the puppets, face pinched and angry.

“… A father lifting up his troublesome toddler… ow.”

I flicked his face. “Shhh!”

I watched at rapt attention as the two lover puppets trundled over bridge after bridge after bridge. The workmanship was exquisite, although the narrator a little shrill for my taste. It quickly became clear that Nagihiko had seen it before. His eyes did not wander, but he mouthed the words to the narration silently, and his face shone with expectancy.

The two puppets bounced along, looking for a place to kill themselves. Finally, the man-puppet removed its little scarf, alongside a painted stream.

“No matter how far we walk,” a man’s lone voice cried, “there’ll never be a spot marked ‘For Suicides.’ Let us kill ourselves here.”

The female puppet’s voice said something incomprehensible across the murmuring crowd—something to do with the plot details we had missed, of debt and obligation and someone’s wife.

“ ‘We may die in different places’, ” Nadeshiko mouthed— and to my surprise, her eyes were wet with tears, despite us missing all the lead-up. “ ‘Our bodies may be pecked by kites and crows, but what does it matter as long as our souls are twined together? Take me with you, to heaven or to hell.’ ”

I was placing the safety of my fragile body in the arms of a sentimental mawk. I could not help it; I stifled a giggle, burying my face in the soft silk of Nagihiko’s shoulder. Warm, alive, he moved with every breath.

“You’re missing the suicide,” he quietly informed me. I looked up, just in time to see the puppet dastardly miss its lover’s throat with the katana. I snorted.

I paid for the snort after the bunraku show’s finale in the form of a lighthearted spat. If Nagihiko took a snort during a lover’s suicide so personally, I would hate to see his mother’s reaction.

“It’s romantic—” Nadeshiko took pains to explain to me, face screwed up as though she was trying not to cry. “It is cruel because they are two parallel lines, destined never to touch. Yet it always ends on a note of hope, that Amita Buddha will allow them to be together in the next life.”
“You’re a real conservative, you know that?” I said, snidely. It was dark over our heads, and neither the moon nor lanterns lit our path back up to the school. I narrowly missed tripping over a rock. “The writer himself wrote it as a black comedy. The two leads are dolts, and the entire cast a load of straight-men. He can’t even stab her proper, for God’s sake.”

“Because his hand is shaking!” She buried her face in her kimono sleeve. “He is seized with emotion—”

“I feel right sorry for his wife,” I said. “Imagine getting dumped for a shallow trollop with no spine.”

“Mashiro-san.”

“Do not presume yourself superior to me, Fujisaki-san, for all your highbrow tastes,” I continued, with disapproval. “The love interest is a glorified call-girl.”

“Mashiro-san.” Nagihiko shook the metal bars of the school fence. It rattled in place. “We’re locked out.”

We stared at the gate glumly for several moments, as though it would open with our sheer force of will. “How did this occur?” I finally said, very slowly, searching for blame.

“It locks at curfew,” said Nadeshiko, with guilt. “This is my fault. If we had not…”

I felt a warm drop of water hit my cheek. Seconds later, another. A quiet thrum began in the distance, growing into the shaa-shaa-shaa of a downpour. Cold points hit my head and shoulders.

I raised my head dourly to the sky, as though silently cursing the dragon that caused the rain, or however the legend went, and stamped my foot. A raindrop fell into my eye. “Agh!”

I sank to my knees in front of the school gate, leaning my head against the cold iron. Something about this seemed too contrived, just too perfect. Of course we were locked out. Of course it rained! I was being punished, for having such a wonderful evening. My mother was right. My body would be washed away by the currents of the Sumida River, never to find burial.

A scarlet shadow crossed over my head. The sound of the rain turned to isolated plinks. I looked up to see a bright red paper umbrella, behind Nadeshiko’s mildly concerned countenance.

“Where were you hiding that thing?”

She patted her left rib, below the hard obi padding. I understood. “It was supposed to rain today.”

She slowly sat down next to me, paper umbrella balanced on her thin shoulder. I swallowed my pride and scooted closer to her, to avoid the dripping. Nagihiko’s body was skinny, but he had layered and tucked enough to seem curvy, comfortable.

“Somehow,” I said, and my voice was dense and cloudy with sarcasm, “We are always stuck out after dark.”

“You needn’t worry, this time,” Nadeshiko said with the modesty to look ashamed. “There is a teacher patrol that circles the gate at midnight.”

“Delivered into the hands of Sanjō? I am forever in your debt…!”

“You forget,” Nadeshiko’s eyes glimmered by the light of the moon. The rain pitter-pattered
merrily onto the grass, well into its stride, now. “The teachers have all been drinking, no doubt, and shall be sleeping like logs. It will be my mother’s secretary who does the patrol.”

Shion. I remembered her name. I mulled this over, sneaking glances at him.

“Is this true?” I finally said, coolly.

“I have been attending school here a long time, Rima-chan.”

I decided that Nagihiko would not lie to me, just to prolong his inevitable murder at my hands. With no options, I slumped down, pulling my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around my legs. The raindrops dripped off the waxy rim of Nadeshiko’s umbrella.

Nadeshiko watched them with me. She began to hum under her breath, softly.

“Alone, I hold a paper umbrella. If I don’t have an umbrella, who shall I go with?”

“A stuffed straw-dummy, perhaps?” I said, not taking kindly to the sound pollution. Nadeshiko’s voice was high, cloying.

“Shara-shara, shan-shan, rings the bell. The jostling horse will get drenched.”

“Bully for the horse.”

“Please hurry, horse; the dawn comes. From underneath the reins, you look back; I hide my face with my sleeve. Even if my sleeve gets wet with my tears, I can dry it, and it will dry.”

“My sleeve’s not wet with tears,” I said, snidely. “It’s wet with summer monsoon. Let’s do something else.”

“What does Rima-chan want to do?” She thought it very excessively cute, when she spoke in third-person to my face. It barely squeaked by on tiny, childish Yaya, never mind a five-foot-three snake with a proboscis nose.

I lolled my head back, watching the wooden supports and painted flowers rotate above my head. "Do you remember the story you told me? Of your father's troupe on the boat..."

"Of course." Nagihiko's voice was fondly nostalgic. "It's a memory I cherish close to my heart. I did not have much time to spend with my father."

"I want to hear one of the dirty jokes."

His shoulders sagged, and he turned his face modestly from mine, with the daintiness to feign embarrassment. "You still insist on this!"

"Yes."

"I couldn't," Nagihiko murmured, more to his sleeve than me. "A well-bred young lady like you shouldn't be defiled by things like this."

This was so patently false that I wondered why he bothered to say it at all.

"How lucky," I said, prissy, "That such a weighty decision is not in a pair of hands as low as Fujisaki-san's. That was an order, not a request."
The rain dripped. Nagihiko stared out onto the town sprawled below us, and raised his eyebrows, quietly.

“What do you call someone who can’t get enough, no matter how many times they do it?”

I became rigid, staring straight ahead of me. “What?”

He repeated himself. “What do you call someone who can’t get enough, no matter how many times they do it?”

“I don’t understand…”

“A loose woman – or an old person visiting the cemetery.”

I got the general jist, but not the specifics. Did old people visit cemeteries quite a bit?

Nagihiko smiled sunnily back at me. "Someone who gets lucky underwater? A fisherman, or Urashima Tarō. This sort of thing."

Urashima Tarō was a popular children’s story, about a man who received a river dragon’s wife out of gratitude. I cracked a tiny smile. "Another."

“I don’t know,” said Nagihiko, lying poorly. “I don’t remember any more.”

“Another.”

He swallowed, and I saw the pale protrusion on his throat bob. “What… what dribbles juice when you press your fingers into it?”

His tone clearly conveyed that he, at least, knew as well as I precisely what this was meant to evoke. I was too frigid to blush, but I did feel something odd twinge inside me— a thrill of foreboding— the sudden realization that nice boys and girls did not speak of such things.

“…”

“A ripe peach.”

“Ah,” I said, softly. I was too jaded to be embarrassed, but there was a strange lump in my throat. I understood why Nagihiko swallowed so nervously.

“What did you think it was? Rima-chan, I don’t know if I wish to see this side of you… it may ruin my becoming image of your gentle personality!”

His face vanished behind his sleeve, coy and female once again. Her eyes twinkled above the swathe of red. “You know, in Gion, a geisha-in-training wears her hair in a manner that is called a split-peach hairstyle. And with the red fabric peeking through, it is supposed to evoke the image of...” and then, deadpan. “A ripe peach, I suppose.”

“A ripe peach,” I repeated, hollowly. “What did you call it, before… first flower of the month?”

“Peaches,” she said, dangerously soft: “Or figs, or shellfish, or caverns.”

“Well, perhaps if it belongs to a mountain that is old, rocky and inhospitable,” I said, with transparent disbelief.

A strange noise escaped Nagihiko’s mouth, halfway between a repeated yelp and a snort. It took a
moment to realize that he was *sniggering* like a dirty boy in a mud-puddle— there was no sleeve over his mouth now. I could see his teeth and red tongue glinting in the moonlight. “*Hahahahaha!*”

I had once fancied Nadeshiko humourless, or only a fan of hiragana wordplay; I wondered what that me would say to this wild boy in front of me, laughing at crude body jokes. A wellspring of mirth grew inside of me, like a geyser. I had the modesty to turn my head away when I grinned. However much I stared determinedly at my right shoulder, I could feel Nagihiko’s eyes on me.

“You are too much, Rima-chan.”

“And you,” I murmured.

Perhaps only a few minutes later, I added: “I have one.”

“You do?” She sounded surprised.

“What does every woman have, that she may use to get what she wants?”

*Rima!* she said, in mock-scandal. I was too elated to correct her.

“That is not a guess,” I reminded her. “Certainly, I use it with you often.”

A blush wormed its way up Nadeshiko’s slim, pretty neck. There was silence, before she whirled on me, eyes bright.

“Her mouth!”
CHAPTER 10

Summertime in Hyōgo prefecture was slow-onset and creeping like tropical fever. Thighs stuck to thighs, cotton to flesh, legs to the backs of seats. Mosquitoes droned by nightfall and cicadas cried by day. In the in-between, nature scrambled to reclaim as much as it could while the sun hung high. Creeping vines slithered up windowpanes, only for students with shears to cut them back. Huge centipedes nested in the bathroom sinks. Cockroaches scuttled across the hallway. Snakes hid in the grass on the lawn. What trees hadn’t bloomed in springtime let loose the pollen hidden beneath the leaves, golden specks in the damp air.

We forgot all modesty in the heat. Nagihiko slept without a coverlet, chest heaving like a Victorian maid dying of consumption. Something about Nadeshiko’s skin attracted insects, as though honey ran in her veins. The raised red welts on her skin filled me with enough pity to light a candle in the window, in the hopes that the smoke would confuse them. After crushing a cockroach under my bare foot, I no longer stepped on the ground in the mornings, like a child playing the-floor-is-lava. I laid out my clothes at the end of my bed, and if not, demanded Nagihiko carry me across.

In this way, the school term drew to a lazy close. We were happy to see it go and return to our cosmopolitan abodes to sleep the summer away in siesta. All except Nadeshiko, who would stay behind with Fujisaki-sensei. Did Nadeshiko even go home for the holidays? I did not ask.

“Take care,” I ordered Nadeshiko from the platform, waving my handkerchief. She leaned forward too eagerly, as though she was preparing to clasp my arms and pull me into an embrace. I gripped her thin hand and shook, as though we were cutting a business deal.

“You, too,” Nadeshiko said, hand cool, silky. “Remember to exercise, or your ankles will get even fatter.”

My grip turned to ice, and I cut off the circulation in her fingers.

I would like to say that we looked a vision of Japan’s young ladies on that train platform. If anyone
had been out to look at us, they would have only seen a gaggle of red-faced, sweaty children with dust up to their knees, lugging suitcases and trunks and hatboxes behind them. Utau’s face was puffy with hay fever, but her tongue was tragically in working order (“Yeah, I don’t like pollen, so I look like this. What’s your excuse?”). Amu was lost in lethargy, gazing at the machinations of the station ceiling. Yaya had gotten off a station before ours at Yokohama, greeted by a kind-looking man with slicked back hair. And I was…

I was re-reading Father’s letter and inhaling the air of Tokyo Central Station. The rattling of the tram and the chiming of the clock outside permeated over the sound of a million conversations. It smelled like tyre rubber, train exhaust, and the barest hint of crisp salt from Tokyo Bay. *Home*. I folded the paper up so that it wouldn’t get infected by miasma.

I must be hallucinating. A little walking children's clothing catalogue, doe-eyed and pin-curled, burst through the throng and onto Amu's arm. Shirley Temple was tailed by a slim, pretty woman wearing a pair of spectacles and a man with a giant camera around his neck. Amu lived but a fifteen-minute’s train ride from the station, so her family picked her up in person. Her mother thanked us for taking care of her with smiles and sunshine. Utau and I watched, as the family of four vanished into the throng, the picture of domestic idyll.

“Who’s meeting you?” Utau asked, checking the train schedule with a troubled expression. My gaze found the map of the train and streetcar system through Tokyo. I traced the path up from Tokyo Station over to Shinjuku the west in an S-shaped squiggle.

“Probably Emi-san,” I said, referring to our hired girl. If she was still with us, and hadn’t been fired by one of grandmother’s fits of bad temper. “And you?”

Utau stared at the map, and tapped right where we were— Tokyo station. “Our offices are here, in Nihonbashi,” she said. “Guess I’ll walk over and tell them I’m here. See if I can’t get the company car.”

“I’m here.” I pointed to Ginza, several inches to the southeast. “Close.”

“Yeah,” Utau agreed. “Sanjō lives around here, I think.”

“Scary.”

“Yeah, the Sanjōs…” Utau shrugged, voice controlled. “… Well, they’re bureaucrats now, obviously.”

I did not understand what she said, or why it would be obvious. I preferred to think that my teachers didn’t have lives and histories outside of Seiyo. I already knew far too much about Fujisaki- and Amakawa-sensei for my own comfort, I noted, disgruntled.

To my surprise, Utau walked me out to the gaping east entrance of Tokyo Station and stayed with me. “It’s not safe for a girl your size,” she said. She surveyed the crowd coolly until I spotted my mother’s servant.

“My escort,” I said, pointing to her.

“Not hard to miss, is she?” Utau demurred, raising an eyebrow.

Emi caught sight of me the same time I did her. Raising the free hand that was not holding a brown bag of rhubarb, she yelled in broad commoner’s tongue:

“*Ojou-chaaan!*"
I held out my luggage expectantly for Emi to take. She was too busy hailing a rickshaw to notice, balancing the bag of vegetables on her knee and whistling with her other. The cart-puller wheeled into the gutter, immediately identifying me as the little mistress. Blissfully, he took my suitcase and hat-box.

Emi bounded in after me, peering at me sideways with her permanently amused smile.

“**Kususususu!**” she cackled, hiding her teeth with her yukata sleeve. “You’re all dusty! You’d better change before tea, or your mama’ll never gimme the end of it.”

I looked down at my once white stockings, now brownish from Seiyo’s dust, and wished for a parasol. The sun shone directly into my squinting eyes, and the rickshaw lurched. Still better than the tram.

“**Kusukusu,**” I said, using the nickname my grandmother coined as a sarcastic allusion to the way she cackled at everything. “Please pull the shade up. I do not want to go brown.”

Emi attempted to balance the vegetables on her lap and pull the oiled paper cover over our heads, a two-handed job. I leaned back against the rickshaw seat with a sigh, crossing one leg over the other. A shadow passed over my face.

“Is Mother in a tiff?” I asked, jostling to and fro, yet remaining rigid. Emi sniggered again, swinging her feet inches from the floor.

“The ojou-sans are very busy these days!” Emi remarked, cryptically. If anyone overheard Emi badmouthing her mistresses, she would be out on the streets with the other droves of unemployed, searching for work that did not exist.

“It’s a silk factory,” I said, forgetting not to discuss affairs with servants. “They go out to Saitama once a month to inspect and do inventory. How busy can they be?”

“Not just the silk factory!” Emi was gleeful that she had crucial information over me. “They should think of your future, Little Miss. Doncha ever worry what’ll happen to you?”

I closed my eyes. Before me, I saw the mechanized silk reels of our factory. I recalled tuition fees, and remembered my situation.

“**You should worry about yourself,**” I said, peering around the oiled rickshaw cover. I caught a glimpse of the Wako building and its adjoining clock tower as we breached Ginza Crossing. Its large white face read ten to four o’clock. Teatime.

I held my hat to my head as I disembarked from the rickshaw and onto the busy street without assistance. Several shiny black automobiles wheeled down Chuo Road, no doubt carrying the elite to their summer abodes. A delivery boy on a bicycle gawked at the sight of me and narrowly missed knocking over an old lady on the street. Ignoring them both, I strode forward. I looked right into the brass peep-hole of my black front door, from which my grandmother and I so loved to spy. Empty.

**Home.**

The Mashiro terraced house was tall but narrow. Squashed by a butcher’s shop on one side and a department store on the other, it nonetheless wore its brass cornices and rod iron sills like crowns. It boasted chipped Edwardian mouldings as though the old King himself was still alive and well.

I strode into the sunlit entryway without ringing the bell.
Its interior gave the impression of living in a boxy china cabinet. The tall windows faced onto Chuo Road to let the light and prying eyes in. Even in the entryway, Grandmother and Mother cherished their things: a narrow mahogany coat closet, two mirrors on opposing walls, a dark table adorned with scrollwork, balls of clear resin with flowers trapped in them, little animals carved from jade, porcelain figurines from England of shepherdesses and ladies and cowherds, a tall Chinese pottery umbrella stand, a coat rack draped in silk and cotton and wool, a floor tiled black-and-white like a chessboard, and a vase of pink peonies overstuffed into a paltry amount of water. Where a normal home might have a Buddhist shrine to a departed relative, we had a turn-of-the-century photorealistic painting of my grandfather. He hung irreverently on the wall in a thick gilt frame. From his smug vantage point high above everyone’s head, he regarded any incoming guests over his monocle with disapproval.

I stopped to look at Grandfather today. His jaw was set, face hidden behind thick moustache and fading ink. I sometimes saw him in Mother, as more lines appeared around her mouth. I never saw any in myself.

Home.

“Kusukusu, the peonies are wanting water,” I ordered. She appeared behind me, lugging my suitcase and wheezing.

She snickered at my airs. I smiled at the mirror, patting my cheeks.

“Is Mother home?”

Emi couldn’t answer. A thin little bell tinkled through the house.

“Kusukusu!” a woman’s voice called.

Emi dropped the suitcase at my feet, sticking her tongue out at me with glee. The bright orange mirage bounded off through the adjoining door. Thunk-thunk-thunk. Her noisy socked feet thudded up the twisting staircase, circling up and up like a main artery.

Hopping up the stairs with my suitcase, I stopped on the second-floor landing by Mother's study.

“...To get changed for tea...” Mother’s voice drifted through the door.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Emi’s heels clicked.

I continued my pilgrimage up the carpeted stairs, all the way up to my little third-floor bedroom.

Home.

Mother had Emi occupied, and I was certainly not going to heat water for a bath myself. I sponged my face and legs off using a bit of water in the dish on my vanity, combing the sweat of travel from my fringe. I left my uniform, and all its memories, in a black, crumpled heap behind me.

“I cannot stay long,” my mother said, stirring her tea. Her hair hung lank on either side of her face in a razor bob, as stick-straight as mine was churning waves. Amu expressed awe at Fujimura-sensei, the short-haired teacher who smoked cigarettes, but I always fancied Mother to be the real modern girl. She dressed as pragmatically as she dared, bare-faced in pressed silk blouses. She did the accounts herself with an abacus. She smoked when the men in the room did. She had no striking looks, but no ugliness, either. She was simply there, a wooden piece of furniture in a room
I was not permitted to enter.

"I am taking supper with the overseer this evening. There looks to be a strike again," she said, more to herself than me. "On top of it all, peak cocoon season is about to begin, and last year was poor yield thanks to the pébrine outbreak, so we will have loans to pay from last fiscal year as well as this one…"

She rubbed her temple, staring right through the chinaware. I nibbled on a finger sandwich.

"The English are not buying silk like they used to," my mother continued in a mumble. "Down by half since the market crash. They prefer to do business with the Chinese. For three hundred million pounds in investments, Hell, so would I. The best bet is the domestic market, but in this awful recession…"

I took a sip of my lukewarm tea. Outside, a bush warbler landed on a thick, leafy branch, chirping.

“… And then, in the thick of all this, I get a letter from school, saying you’ve sneaked out.” She frowned at me, like a boss giving an employee a performance review. Rima Mashiro, daughter at this company for 16 years. Sneaks out, sets off fireworks and is altogether hopeless. Liability on profits. 3/10.

“Do you have anything to say in your defence?” Mother added, sternly. I now think a normal parent might have doled out a strict punishment, solitary confinement, perhaps. But Mother (when present to preside) was a strong proponent for the right to a fair trial. I mulled over my options.

_Uh, no._

*May I ask the charges for which I am accused?*

*I did it for love.*

*I have a defendant’s right to counsel under detention.*

“A classmate was going to run away,” I said dispassionately, deciding that the less outright fabrications, the more convincing the fib. “We went to convince her otherwise.”

A flicker of something like concern shadowed behind my mother’s tired eyes. “Run away? Do they mistreat you at Seiyo?”

I thought of the rattan cane, and a chill settled over my back. Freedom was tantalizingly close. If I did well, I could finish school next year, and then I could return home for good. I could learn about the boring business of silk, go to the theatre, never pick up a needle again in my life. I shook my head.

“Good.” My mother swilled the tea around in her cup, as though contemplating consuming it for nutrition. She seemed to think better of it, and opened an investigation, instead.

“Who tried to run away?”

“Hoshina Utau-san.”

“Of the *Fukkatsu-sai* conglomerate? Hoshina Souko-san’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

Mother only needed a moment of consideration.
“Don’t get mixed up with that girl,” Mother said, sternly. “I remember when her mother got seduced by a penniless violinist before you were born. They’re cut from the same cloth, those two.”

“Yes, Mother,” I said, miserably.

We fell into a cool silence. The bush warbler pecked at the branch outside. I smoothed down the front of my frock, finishing the rest of my sandwich. Mother had assumed the same as we had—that Utau had tried to elope. I should have made it clear that Utau was running away with her brother, but even this was a dangerous amount of information.

“How old are you turning?” Mother asked me.

“Eighteen this coming year,” I said, jarred.

Mother drummed her fingernails on the table.

“This talk is overdue, then. Eighteen already? You barely look a day past twelve. Have you given any thought to boys?”

My eyelid twitched. I could only imagine Yaya's gravelly imitation of an adult's voice through her tears of laughter if she could witness this.

'Rima-tan, consider, just for a moment: Boys. What are they?'

'Boys,' I would say, in my best impersonation of a nature documentarian. 'Majestic, rare creatures, native to the steaming tropical jungles of Africa. They live in garbage heaps and forage for food-

After four and a half months with Nagihiko, I could not say with good conscience that I had, as a matter of fact, considered boys. I found them to be lacking. Unwittingly, the memory of Nadeshiko’s warm hands, holding mine too tightly as she argued passionately about The Love Suicides at Amijima, rose to the surface of my mind.

"Uh," I said.

“You cannot inherit the silk factory until you marry.” She closed her eyes. “If the army continues to demand the bulk of the budget, and Britain continues not to buy our raw silk, and the banks call in our loans…”

My mother was apolitical and worshipped the free market. If the government enabled the family holdings to thrive, it was doing just fine. Why she was telling me this?

“You might find yourself penniless and without anything to inherit.”

Penniless!

“Money is tight.”

The secure floor tipped to the side. I felt like Alice, falling down a rabbit hole into a Wonderland of financial insecurity. I had no brothers. I was supposed to be an heiress. I had counted on having the power to pick my husband. My blood pumped sluggishly, and I heard the sea in my ears.

As though from far away, Mother’s voice continued, “… A rich son-in-law who would pay your bride-price could be adopted into this family and solve all our problems.”

“No rich man would give up his family name to run a stranger’s business,” I said distantly, from
the precipice.

Adopting a man to be your daughter's husband was a common practice in families with unsuitable male heirs (or no male heirs at all). In the old days, it was medieval fosterage among nobility. By the time I was alive, it was mostly businesses obsessed with keeping assets in the family.

“He doesn’t have to be a Rothschild, for Heaven’s sakes.” My mother grew quickly exasperated with me. “For a man who would bring a guaranteed market, I told the matchmaker we would consider waiving your bride-price. I would accept an Englishman or American if the prenuptial was airtight.”

I remembered Father's letter, balled up in my skirt pocket upstairs. As Mother spoke, the plan wove itself into being before my eyes with a pair of needles. Both my parents, oceans apart, had manoeuvred me right into place. King-take-Queen.

“I received a letter,” I stated. “From London.”

My mother did not appear surprised at the abrupt subject change. “I see it reached you safely.”

I wondered if she was going to beg me to stay. Instead, she just sighed.

“It’s not safe here,” my mother said. “It is about time your father took responsibility for the English half of his daughter. If you finish school, and we haven’t found you a man you like, we will obtain you a visa.”

We. My skull was full of pea soup. I knew that I was considered big at seventeen, that I was heiress to a fickle industrial trade, that Japan was not safe—even this, I knew to be crushingly true. All the same, I felt like a terrified child facing a tall doorway full of grown-ups. Married. So soon?

“I don’t like boys,” I said, stupidly.

“Don’t be silly, Rima,” my mother said, now checking her watch. “Of course you do.”

As if on cue, Emi jogged in with a telephone in her hands, brandishing it in front of her with her nose facing the floor.

“That will be the sericulturist,” she said, rising to her feet and leaving her undrunk tea. “I will leave you to it.”

The only thing Mother left me to was my own devices. It was the last time we spoke at length, as she was out in the countryside for the rest of the summer, trying to keep the factory girls from striking. Ironically, she was left unaware of the girl on strike at home.

I had plenty more questions for Mother. Firstly, how dare she? Secondly, what kind of man was she going to set me up with? Thirdly, if money was tight, ought I to feel guilty for consuming small luxuries, like roast beef and new shoes? I knew better than to ask Grandmother, who was now getting old and crotchety, nor Emi, who was not privy to such things.

At least Emi and Grandmother could leave the house. Emi was in and out of the door like a one-man circus with lists of things, juggling grocery bags and meat parcels. She stayed when she could, cracking jokes and bringing in ridiculous things to make me smile. On more than one occasion, she burst through the front door, holding a black stray cat up by the arms and hollering.

“Look! His name is Yoru, and he eats old tuna from tins!”
Thoroughly spoilt, I decided that if nobody was going to communicate with me, I would order as many things as I liked. I sent Emi out with lists. She returned cheerfully with anything I demanded. I learnt that there was a shaved ice stand on the corner of Chuo Road, and that if I sent Emi out with a coin, she could run back with a cone before it melted. As July dripped on, I found myself with paperbacks wrapped in twine, oranges and cakes, skeins of raw silk from the factory.

It was on one of these lazy afternoons in August that I received my first gentleman caller. I was stretched attractively out on the cool tile floor of the entryway, fanning myself and eating madeleines from a tin. It was too agonizing to stay anywhere but the ground floor: the hot air rose.

The little bell on the inside of the doorway tinkled more loudly than it usually did. I twisted my head around. Grandmother was out taking tea with her gambling addiction support group. Emi was puttering about in one of the back rooms somewhere; the pots were dimly clanking.

“I have it,” I announced, heroically getting to my feet. “Why is the milkman so late today?”

I decided that anyone inane enough to ring the doorbell during the hottest time of day could stand to wait on the stoop and deep-fry a little. I dragged a footstool right up to the door, clambering up to peer through the peep-hole.

Within the fisheye lens stood a tall boy in black maybe a few years older than me, shining hair combed off his head. His face was in sunlit profile. If I wasn’t mistaken, he was admiring the blooming astilbes on the front walk. Definitely not the milkman.

I pulled back the deadbolt and opened the door, leaving the door chain on. Through my two-inch field of vision, I squinted up. The mystery man was wearing a formal black kimono, which could not have helped the heat. Two family crests stared at me from either shoulder. Upon closer inspection, he seemed to be breathing a little heavily, as though he had been jogging.

“Rima-chan!” the boy said in an out-of-breath tenor, putting his hands together and grinning at me. “It’s been a while!”

I stared at him. Then I shut the door.

Who the hell was that?

I contemplated the deadbolt before removing the safety, allowing the door to fall fully open. Was I hallucinating?

“Pardon,” I told his family crests at eye-level, politely. “Are you here to do a kendo demonstration?”

What were those crests supposed to be? Some sort of trailing flower?

“Y-you know, a nice girl would just call me handsome out of politeness and just be done with it…” he said, scratching his cheek and half-grimacing down at me.

“Nagihiko?” I asked, stupidly.

“Of course,” said Nagihiko, a bit stung. “Didn’t you recognize me?”

“No,” I said. Then I pointed. “Hair.”

He touched the stiff, waxen wing of his hair self-consciously. I could now see that it had been slicked back into what looked like a short, boyish cut with clean lines. Nagihiko reached behind
the nape of his neck and pulled out his ponytail, from where it was evidently tied low and tucked into his underrobe.

Behind him, the street seemed a little more lively than usual. There were quite a few women out in kimono today, and what sounded like a shrill, elderly voice shouting indistinctly. Nagihiko’s eyes darted to his back.

“Would you like… to come in?” I said, looking around his shoulder. Very slowly and pointedly, I stood aside.

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Nagihiko faffed, slipping through the doorway and prying my fingers off the doorknob so he could shut it. The frame shook a little. “I’d really hate to intrude.”

Standing in my cluttered entryway, he looked more like the Nadeshiko I remembered with several mistakes on the part of the sculptor. Nagihiko had always been a little leggy-looking, but now he was downright tall. I used to see him eye-to-chin. Now, it was more like eye-to-collarbone.

Nagihiko hadn’t realized how much he had grown, either. There was something distinctly awkward about the way he craned his neck to look down at me, as though suddenly discovering I was a Christmas elf.

“It’s just me and the maid,” I said, flicking my eyes head-to-toe. “You’re ginormous.”

“Surely not ginormous?” Nagihiko said, anxiously. The fine lines of his cheekbones and chin were beginning to peek through his once-oval face. I had no doubt that everyone would be bemoaning Nadeshiko’s mature-looking beauty come autumn. I could practically hear Manami’s voice shrieking ‘Lukewarm and salty!’ or whatever.

Nagihiko rotated on the spot, slowly taking in every detail of the room with amazement. He stopped directly opposite the door, unfortunately finding himself face-to-face with Grandfather Mashiro.

The portrait glowered down at him, no doubt rolling in his grave about letting an Imperial Kyoto shill under our sacred mercantile roof. Nagihiko stared back at the painting with mild interest.

“Not ginormous,” I agreed, touching my own baby fat. While Nagihiko was distracted having a stare-off with my dead ancestors, I kicked the tin of madeleines under the carved bureau. “Come in. We can take tea in the sunroom.”

The sentence sounded terribly grown-up. I rode this gleeful wave of mature hostess through the parlour and into the little conservatory, opening the twin French doors with aplomb. The afternoon sun filtered in through the gabled glass ceiling and walls, catching the light.

When I was small, we had a gardener who had filled the room with gnarled tropical trees in pots with blooming orchids and cyclamens. The flowers died when we let him go, but the trees remained, stunted yet thriving. There were only two chairs set around the little tea-table. At the time, I did not find this odd; it was only ever me and Mother, or Mother and Grandmother, or me and Grandmother— never all three at once. But in the years to come, I would note that Nagihiko’s eyes had lingered on the chairs in mingled surprise before taking a delicate seat.

“Ah, you must forgive me,” Nagihiko fretted, pulling his hair over his shoulder and gazing up at the glass ceiling with wonderment. The sunlight moved over his hair in cool glints, like the surface of an ocean. “I didn’t even bring anything.”

“You didn’t,” I agreed. Emi nimbly opened the door with her foot (classy), balancing the tea-tray
on her elbow, the tiered stand in her other hand and two plates on her head. She must have assumed I was taking tea with Grandmother. When she saw Nagihiko, her face widened somewhat, into a delightedly confused leer.

“I suppose you will make it up somehow,” I continued, boredly, as though Emi hadn’t walked in. I drummed my fingernails on the table in an unconscious mimicry of my mother. “Some time this year would be excellent, Kusukusu.”

Emi turned to me, placing the tiered tray down with a clatter. Her bright eyes flicked back to Nagihiko, batted, and then returned to me with a snicker. The two plates came off her head with naught but a wobble.

As though Emi was not there, I dropped a lump of sugar into my tea, followed by a splash of cream. I stared at Nagihiko, warily.

Emi snickered. Nagihiko turned to look at her, smiling politely.

“Dismissed,” I said, curtly.

Obligingly, she skipped out, hiding her red face behind her sleeve. I took a gentle sip of my tea, eyeing Nagihiko’s wan face over the rim. Somehow, with him on my home turf, I felt… comfortable. Relaxed.

“I’m waiting.”

Nagihiko tilted his head at me, putting on his classically blank, innocent smile. “For?”

“How you are here,” I added, softly.

“I don’t…”

“If you had planned to call on me, you would have brought a gift, for wont of us thinking the Fujisakis rude,” I interrupted, helping myself to a sticky bun and sawing it in half so I could butter it. Nagihiko seemed to eye them apprehensively, as though he had never seen bread before.

“You would have come as Nadeshiko, because it is less questionable. You would not have dressed so formally. You would have telephoned ahead, or written, I suppose. There were more people on the street today, as though they were looking for something. Or someone.”

Nagihiko looked right at me. Slowly, he pulled his untouched tea forward on its saucer, gazing into its carnelian depths and carefully turning it once round. He took a tentative sip.

“What is this?” he said, aghast.

“Assam,” I said. “Hurry up.”

“You are correct,” Nagihiko said, before taking another careful sip. “I was at a marriage meeting.”

I choked on my sticky bun, and pounded my chest. Eyes watering, I looked up. “Pardon?”

“I was at a marriage meeting,” Nagihiko repeated, almost savouring my reaction. He ripped the corner off a bun with delicate care, like a monkey trying to pretend it knew how to eat. “With a girl. I am still a man, you know. Time is ticking.”

Have you ever considered boys? Boys. Boys reside in the jungles of the city, feeding on birdseed and corn. Boys. What are they? We just don’t know.
“It must have gone excellently,” I said, “For you to come running to my door like this.”

“Oh, it was splendid,” said Nagihiko warmly. “She will make a man very happy someday.”

“Humour me.” I stirred my tea. “What sort of man will she make happy?”

“One who prefers his girls teary,” said Nagihiko, with a hennish cluck. “She is the youngest daughter of a well-renowned Kabuki actor who resides in the new capital. They shoved her into the garden with her fan positioned in front of her face, so that nobody could see her puffy red eyes. I thought I would spare her the agony of my presence.” A glint of pearly teeth. “So, when everybody was busy looking at the koi, I jumped the gate.”

“What does she think to accomplish, dragging her heels to slaughter?” I remarked. “Marriage comes for us all. Better to accept it than to snivel.”

“How utilitarian of you,” Nagihiko said, dryly. “Is there not the smallest part of Mashiro-san that believes in fated love?”

“The inexorable destiny of you and Puffy-Eyes, you mean?” I enquired sarcastically in my tiny voice. Since mother's chat, I had made up my mind. “Pretending marriage is anything more than a business transaction is naïve.”

“Oh course,” said Nagihiko. I did not expect the Queen of Schmaltz to agree with me. Then, pointedly—

“But I was not asking about marriage.”

“It does not matter what I believe in,” I said, feeling hot. My heart hammered behind my ribs. *Time is ticking, time is ticking. Money is tight.*

“It does to me,” Nagihiko insisted. “If marriage satisfied everyone, we would not have mistresses. Every man who can afford it takes one, don’t they? The wife is the business transaction, and the mistress is the… ah—”

He cut off upon finding me stark white, little fist gripped around my teaspoon as though I would like nothing more than to lunge across the table and gouge his eyeballs out. The vestige of an older habit, I was determined not to let Nagihiko know that he had wormed under my skin.

Nagihiko cleared his throat, awkwardly.

“The weather is terribly hot,” he remarked, slipping his haori off his shoulders. “I may have imposed on your kindness.”

His eyes glanced up at mine, a careful up-and-down. I took his well-disguised apology at its word, putting the spoon down and uncrossing my ankles. Unwelcome prickles of heat stabbed the back of my eyeballs and threatened to burn around the rims. I stared down the barrel of my impending, loveless future, and had the urge to do something reckless.

“No imposition,” I said, re-crossing my legs so one was draped over my knee. The corner of my slippered foot grazed Nagihiko’s leg.

“You might notice that women do not take mistresses. The privilege of loving belongs to men alone.”

Nagihiko looked well and truly stumped at this. However much I might like to be proved wrong—
love was such a pretty notion, the thing of kabuki plays and fairy stories— I worried for Nagihiko’s sheltered, romantic upbringing, and hoped he would have a little acumen.

“Rima,” Nagihiko said in an alluringly low voice, leg moving under my foot as he leant forward. His hair slithered over his shoulder and onto his black breast. “Are you crying?”

I leaned into his new, long face, gazing at him vacantly through my damp eyelashes. He gazed up at me through the tiered tray with a face I knew well, of a man staring into the sun. His mouth was slightly open, and his brown eyes were wide.

“They’re fake,” I said, deadpan. “Got you.”

The sunroom door swung open on its creaky brass hinges. “Rima?”

My mother stood in the doorway, a terrifying five-seven vision in crochet lace gloves and a sweeping day-dress. Emi fidgeted behind her, holding a brimmed hat. She made a slit-throat motion.

“Good afternoon, Mother,” I said, calmly, not bothering to lean back in my seat again. I was pressed right up against the edge of the tea-table, hands braced against it.

“Who is this?” She gestured to Nagihiko’s back. My heart sank.

I stared at Nagihiko. Nagihiko stared at me. Emi stared at her own reflection in the window, and began pulling faces.

“Fujisaki-san is the brother of a friend,” I said, hiding my losing hand of cards behind an empty face. “He happened to be in Ginza, so he dropped in.”

For a terrible minute, I worried she wouldn’t buy the lie. I ought to have known better. Any child of strict parents knows that lying becomes a second skin.

“Fujisaki, of the Fujisaki house?” my mother asked, extending a hand. I felt as though we were all having a business meeting on a live wire.

“The same,” Nagihiko said without batting an eyelash, standing up to shake her hand. I gave my mother a startled stare. What did my rigid mother know of Kabuki?

“Fujisaki Aoi IV’s troupe used to buy their silk from my father’s mill,” my mother remarked dispassionately. “It shipped to Hiroshima for dyeing, of course.”

Nagihiko’s eyes widened, and I felt a jolt of foreboding. Oh, noooo.

“Pardon for the sudden question, but… the portrait in the entryway isn’t of the Mashiro-san of Mashiro Silk Holdings, is it?”

I rolled my eyes at Emi, unimpressed with the flattery. Emi crossed her eyes back at me.

“It is,” said my mother, never happy but distinctly proud. “Rima’s grandfather.”

Nagihiko turned to me, mock-surprised. “My sister never told us! Surely she would have known?”

“I cannot see how it is relevant to anything,” I said, decapitating the conversation.

A hush settled over the sunny little room. I got to my feet, admiring the floor all the while, and bobbed a little half-curtsy.
“We will take our leave, Mother.”

I felt Nagihiko’s dark eyes on my sticky back all the way up the open-well staircase. The heat was suffocating by the third landing, but Nagihiko stubbornly refused to loosen his kimono.

“It’s warm,” I said, grateful for the short sleeves and breeze under my skirt. I wiped the back of my neck with my handkerchief. “Who is looking?”

“You,” Nagihiko said. I could imagine his face taking the shape of the mask I called *distress*: eyebrows pulled together, brows embracing, eyelids pulled up, lower lip out. “That is my worry.”

I took a few dainty steps into my bedroom. Nagihiko flirted with the doorway, uncertain. I beckoned him towards me.

“You have scruples in my childhood home,” I needled. “How comforting.”

Nagihiko glanced up at the moulded ceiling, and back to my eyes. Lifting his kimono in one hand, he glided round the rocking-horse and dollhouse on the floor. He took a fluid seat through the cloud of disturbed dust and frowned at me.

“Well, I’m Nagihiko today, you see.”

My features settled into a strange expression. I picked up a round music box, assuming Nagihiko would be the type to like such things.

“Mother isn’t old-fashioned like that. She cares little of my honour, so long as I demand my price. And anyway,” I added, in a low voice, “The maid is probably outside the door, making sure you aren’t r—”

“Demand your price,” Nagihiko talked over me. “Your bride-price. Like what the fortune-teller said.”

It was a strange thing for him to recall in such a moment. I turned over my shoulder, thinking the same thing he was: *if Saeki Nobuko could know this without being told, what else did she know?* *You will die in a land far from your home, with blood in your mouth.*

“Oh, come now,” I said, reading Nagihiko’s eyes. “It was a lucky guess.”

His eyes left mine, leaving me frustrated at lack of insight. He still seemed a little fidgety.

“What about your father?” Nagihiko added, anxiously.

“Hm?” I said, absently twiddling with the key.

“I don’t think any father wants to think there’s been a man in his daughter’s room.”

I raised my eyes from the gilt, having the pride to look affronted. “Firstly, you aren’t a man, so jot that down.”

Nagihiko mockingly mimed plucking an ink brush and poised his pinched fingers over an invisible sheaf of paper before him.

“Secondly, you shan’t worry. He lives…”

I trailed off. My fingertips worried at the metal.
“He’s not here,” I murmured.

Nagihiko’s joints cracked as he got to his feet. His breath on the back of my neck tickled the baby hairs.

“Did he give that to you?”

Even the nice way he said it felt like a crowbar cracking me open. Nonetheless, he stood at my mercy, so I felt it well-mannered to be an honest host.

“Yes.”

I pointed to the wide-eyed English doll in the china cabinet, dusty lashes framing wide blue eyes. “That, too. And the dollhouse.” My nails scrabbled in the grooves of the music box. “This, also. And the rocking-horse, and the pearls on the bureau.”

“So little Rima-chan is spoiled.” Nagihiko’s smile came back. I thought of Amu’s doing the same thing — slowly at first, and then like the sun.

“My father did the same thing when I was little. I think he felt sorry for leaving me alone when he travelled, so he tried to make it up to me.”

I put down the music box. My shoulders relaxed, though my jaw didn’t.

“It doesn’t.”

“No,” Nagihiko agreed. “But when I grew older, I could look at the situation through his eyes, and understand that a hollow gesture is preferable to the agony of doing nothing.”

“Doing nothing is preferable to the insult of the thing.” My voice cracked.

Nagihiko put a hand on my shoulder. It was not authoritatively planted at the junction between neck and scapula, like a father would, nor condescendingly steering my elbow. Instead it grazed the rounded curve of my upper arm, less an order and more a suggestion. I looked up to tell him off, but found a friendly face, frowning in innocent concern instead.

“Sit down, Mashiro-san,” he said, soothingly. I let him guide me into the armchair, hands still clutching the music box with white fingers.

“Perhaps this is out-of-line—” he began.

“You’re out-of-line.”

“But I asked you, last spring, for your loyalty.”

“I gave it freely,” I reminded him, from my throne of authority.

A soft flump of knees hitting Oriental carpet. Nagihiko sunk to his knees before me like a daimyo’s retainer, with the sort of aggressive air that suggested he might put his sword before me if he had one. His hands braced against the wool, and his hair slid off his shoulder as he leaned forward.

“As I did mine,” he said, mannishly. “I have pride, you know. You have not used me in any way to repay the debt I owe.”

I deeply enjoyed Nagihiko at my feet on his knees, and couldn’t help but straighten my back a little, staring down at him.
“Debt? Do you refer to the burden of concealing your sex?”

“I do.”

I thought back to all the strange little kindnesses— the yukata, dancing to my koto, cool hands on my back, making ink. A debt? My stomach sank.

“How do I repay it?” I asked, stiffly. “It’s an inconvenience.”

“Confide in me,” Nagihiko said forcefully, from the rug. “I troubled you, with the talk of mistresses. So, confide in me.”

For a fake girl, he was terribly arrogant. Confide in me, he says, to absolve himself of guilt. Lay yourself bare for my peace of mind.

“No,” I said— tried to. Instead, I pulled my knees to my chest in the chair, pressing my chin into the tops of my knees, and opened the music box. The rusty, click-like notes settled into the dusty room like they belonged there. I narrowed my eyes at the rotating ballerina figurine in its centre, as though this was all her fault.

I closed it, and the last high C clanked out to dismal nothing.

“Fine.”

“My father does not care that you are standing in my room because he is a foreigner,” I said without passion, clutching the music box to my breast and feeling the comforting, cold stab of metal. The blackness of my eyelids was blissful.

“He was stationed in Tokyo as a diplomat, and married the daughter of a textile magnate. A year later, he was recalled to London. … Showing,” I added, bitterly, “Just how meaningless alliances are.”

“Mashiro-san…-”

“You told me to confide,” I said, opening my eyes. “I am confiding. As I was saying. Did you know that diplomats cannot legally marry Japanese nationals?”

“I didn’t,” Nagihiko said, averting his eyes again.

“He was recalled to London, with nothing to hold him back,” I repeated, with vehemence. “And left us here. He did not even stay long enough to see me born. I don’t even know what his face looks like. So, you see, my mother is a mistress, and ruined for it. And I am, as the fraud said, lowborn. How convenient for you.”

Nagihiko’s eyes flicked back to me, settling back into seiza at my feet. The confused mask settled easily into his features, like distress, but wider eyes and an open mouth.

“How so?”

“Your mother would not throw a well-born girl in with her son, but a mixed-blood bastard is disposable enough.” The air sucked between Nagihiko’s teeth at the rude word. I did not mean to, but all the resentment at Fujisaki-sensei came bursting forth like water from a dam. “You could do whatever you like to me, and get away with it.”

It might have not been the best idea to insinuate Nagihiko was a philanderer, insofar as he had been
rakish at worst and a gentleman at best. To my immediate regret, I saw Nadeshiko’s warm eyes fill with tears.

“That’s cruel, Rima-chan!”

Her hands bunched at her own hakama. I could barely see the arrogant boy there seconds ago, nor whether the tears were fake or not. Curse the mask.

“Just because I could doesn’t mean I will. Should I think the same way my parents do, always? Is that how you see me—my mother’s arm?”

I started to talk, but Nadeshiko was still going.

“I don’t,” she said, teetering on the edge of a fury she was not used to. “I don’t think of Mashiro-san that way. A lady is a lady, no matter blood or circumstance.”

I did not know what to say to this, and could only look at him, aghast, and mutter something indistinct. Nadeshiko turned to the mirror and immediately began dabbing at her pink eyes with her sleeve, looking flustered.

It was not Nadeshiko’s fault she did not like me and regarded me as her debtor. But it was also not my fault that she happened to have a reptile for a mother.

Apologizing did not come easy to me. I cast my eyes about for anything else to give in repentance. Spotting a glittery object, I began to inch it towards her before Nadeshiko turned to smile at me.

“No need,” she said, cheeks pink. “If I did whatever I wanted to you, you would gouge my eyes out and give me a terrible scolding.”

I was a debtor, but I felt rather chummy nonetheless.

“If I did whatever I wanted to you,” I said, imagining pouring bathwater over her head when she started going on about poetry, “You would be sopping wet most of the time.”

“What?” said Nadeshiko.

The bush warbler from a few days ago called out in the silence. A piercing voice came through the propped-open window.

“Nagihiko!” a woman’s voice called, familiar, from countless school speeches. Nagihiko froze, still pinkish, and began stuffing his arms through his hakama.

“Mother,” he said. “I have intruded long enough, I think.”

He took my hands in his. This time, I let him.

“I will see you on the train?”

He would. But I dreaded the sheer thought of it.
• Shibuya Station was an extremely minor stop on the train line in 1937. It should have been Tokyo Central Station, the major transportation hub. This has been adjusted from Chapter 1. Oops.
• Everybody's ages have been pushed forward a year, because my timeline was skewered. Rima is seventeen. Utau is eighteen. Yaya is sixteen. This has been adjusted from Chapter 1.
• A sleek new UI update! (lol) Enlarged chapter headings, font switched to Baskerville, and added support for Mincho Japanese font display on Mac OSX.
• Made the "Notes" section resemble footnotes in a pre-1960s publication, even though a lot of them are a bit Translator's note: Keikaku means plan. I'm preserving them for authorial integrity.
• Quickly whipped up some page dividers!
• Altered the translation of Rima's name, which was, frankly, a clusterfuck. I'm now using the standard Chinese-language translations across the board.
• Went in and replaced single quotes (" ") with typographer's quotes (“ ”) where applicable, because straight quotes are, to my displeasure, unintelligible in Baskerville.

Quick-posting this one, warts and all, before I run off to the coast for the weekend. Thank you for your patience! Glad to be back.
The morning I was to leave for school, Emi and I sat in the back of a sloping convertible car to rural Saitama. The skies smothered me, the cloying summer humidity made no better by our escape from Tokyo.

If I asked you to picture a factory in your head, you would likely imagine some tower-laden monstrosity in the middle of a metropolis, belching smog onto the cobblestones of Dickensian London. Factories like this would soon dominate the skyline. For now, the centre of all the Mashiro wealth was a plain, brown longhouse. If it were a person, it would be a monotonous girl with a huge forehead and no talents.

When I was little, I had pretended that my little inheritance was a giant corpse. Her innards gutted of anything interesting, only the metal bones remained: the steel rafters, the great wheels that reeled the silk thread, and the two rows of looms that served as the beast’s double spinal cord. All her employees were unmarried women between the ages of thirteen and thirty. The Depression had hit farming families in the country worst of all – or so I would learn, later. At the time, I only wondered why their faces were all so pinched. In my crepe day-dress and duster, I suddenly felt like Marie Antoinette ascending the paddock to the guillotine.

A broad hand appeared on my shoulder, bangle glinting from the overhead electrical lights (implemented upon the realization that lighting would extend productivity well past dark in the winter months.)

“Good. You’re here,” my mother said over the shhh-shhh of reeling silk and the clatter of the shuttles. There had been an attempt to dress softly, I noted. The single bracelet. A floaty bias-cut dress under the armoured overcoat. She guided me up the stairs, and together we rose beyond the grey drudgery of the looms and vats to the mezzanine floor.

Waiting for us at the top of the stairs was an unremarkable man in a hilariously impractical all-white three-piece suit. Silly man, I thought to myself. Factories are dirty.
“Hotori-sama,” my mother said, hand still on my shoulder. “My daughter.”

At first glance, I had dismissed Three-Piece-Suit as being old enough to be my father. Upon closer inspection, he looked a little younger. There was only a vague suggestion of lines. Thirty, thirty-five? Too foppish to be the overseer. And why did I know that name?

“Pleasure,” he said, with a vague sort of smile. “How did you like the car?”

Every girl from a certain age and a certain station has been coached on how to behave during a preliminary marriage interview, of course. The short answer is to mimic Nadeshiko’s finer public persona as well as you possibly can. The long answer is: talk as little as possible. Don’t show your teeth. If you must laugh, titter behind your sleeve. Be modest. Do not meet anyone’s eyes. Try not to sneeze. Or breathe. No jokes. No dropping a frog into the unlucky boy’s drinking glass. Answer in only yes or no and bows, and the occasional closed-mouth smile if you’re feeling lucky.

I caught Mother’s eyes, begging for another explanation. I tried to channel Nadeshiko’s indomitable coquettishness.

“Yes,” I said. That wasn’t the answer to the question. I hastily tried to cover it up with a bow, but he noticed; his eyebrows flew up a little, politely.

I had the idle fancy to sabotage this whole thing. I mustn’t think that. He wasn’t bad-looking, after all, he just wasn’t… my type.

The Utau of my mind’s eye looked at me, unimpressed. ‘Yeah?’ she said, flipping a ponytail. ‘So what is your type?’

Boys young enough to step on, I supposed. Or old men with a large fortune at death’s door, or…

Without even trying, a vivid fantasy entered my fevered brain of a beautiful woman with dark hair and a cloying smile, swooping in to save me from all my money troubles and take me for long car rides with the top down, to the opera, comedy shows, even, perhaps, just for Nagihiko’s sake, a kabuki performance or two. She would have to find me uproariously funny, obviously, and want my opinion on everything…

“… State of the art,” my mother said, briskly, gesturing to the looms below us. “We employ half the women of Saitama and find that there is no shortage of workers.”

Three-Piece-Suit Hotori-sama stroked his clean-shaven face at this, inspecting the silk. He was not at all what I had expected (a lecher off to make a child-bride of a seventeen-year-old) but quieter; pensive. He asked insightful questions. He took interest in the massive industrial looms, commenting on how efficiently they could spit out a full skein. He took little offense when the rotund mouser, nicknamed Mister Stupid by the factory girls, rubbed up against the legs of his three-piece suit and meowed like a death rattle. He expressed gentlemanly concern over my presence in the boiler-room where bubbling vats boiled silkworm cocoons to death.

“Surely the young Miss would rather wait outside, for the sake of her nerves?” he said to my mother.

Ridiculous. Hotori-sama and I were both more than capable of watching a pupa boil to death before it could open its wings. I saw it in his eyes.

Emi and I waited outside.

It was less a meeting, in the end, and more a tour of the mill between two business partners. Emi
and I lagged behind Hotori-sama and Mother. Given I was to be marrying him, I imagined it might have been nice to let me at least walk astride.

“Would it be alright to see the threads after dyeing?” Hotori-sama asked, straightening his tie with a watery smile. “I would love to have a small sample to bring home to my wife.”

I straightened up. His wife?

“Oh of course,” my mother said, gesturing to the next room where the barrels of boiling dye were kept tended to. The last room was where the fine thread was balled, and the long yards of fabric rolled for shipping. As a child, Emi and I used to throw them at the wall and shriek when they bounced off, throwing fine silk thread all over the place until we were tangled up in it, like insects in a multicoloured spider’s web.

Hotori-sama, like me, seemed overwhelmed and a little indifferent to all the colours. Trusting (or so I speculated) in the taste of a lady, he turned to me.

“Which colours do you like?”

His wife?

I was breaking all the rules of a good marriage meeting. Why must he ask my opinion? What did it matter, anyway?

“I have an unrefined girl’s taste,” Nadeshiko might say. I could hear the inflection perfectly, and could mimic it, if I wished. “But this one makes me think of you...”

My eye passed over a dianthus-pink spool of thread. The colour was quite literally called nadeshiko-iro. It was prized by embroiderers for its cold undertones, like a bruise.

“I lack an eye for these things,” I tried, faking humility.

“Nonsense,” said Hotori-sama. I glimpsed a fatherly twinkle in his eye and thought I saw what his children must see: the indulgent spoiler, not the businessman who watched silkworms boiled alive.

I pointed to the Dianthus pink. Once my finger was out, I couldn’t rescind my decision.

I added casually, “What sorts of colours does the wife of Hotori-sama like?”

I looked at Mother pointedly, looking cross. I was nobody’s mistress. Was she hoping he’d file for divorce? Was Mrs Hotori on her deathbed as we spoke, croaking out her last breaths?

“I could not tell you,” Hotori-sama said, with a bit of an ironic smile. “A woman’s heart is an ocean of secrets, is it not?”

I privately thought that a woman’s heart was only an organ that pumped blood. I gave a polite, Marriage Meeting titter behind my leather glove.

“Now, was it only this one...” Hotori-sama mused, taking two balls of it off the cubed shelves. “Or were there any others?”

I paused. I looked at my mother. Then to the shelf.

Then a violent red-orange, the kind of colour Emi wore, but I couldn’t. My eyes darted down the little cubicles, seeking out anything that called to me. A chartreuse that reminded me of Seiyo’s damp grass in spring, a soft off-white that reminded me of my yukata. I was dizzy. The lilac, for
Nadeshiko, again. A turquoise, like the sea in Tokyo Bay.

The red, the green, the white, the purple. I pointed to them all, and he got down two spindles of each. To my utter indifference, he handed me half of his spoils, with a strangely fatherly smile.

“Take them,” he invited me. Then he turned to my mother, and took out a long, leather book. “Let me write you something for these.”

“Please,” my mother said, crisply. “A gift.”

“I insist.”

They went back-and-forth like this for some time, and eventually settled on a vastly lowered price in a gesture of goodwill. I stood there, Emi hastily taking the skeins of silk thread from my hands and stuffing them away, like a monkey. What was happening?

Finally, the strange, quiet Hotori-sama with a wife and a three-piece suit tipped his hat to me and my mother, as he stepped into his car.

“It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said to me. “You ought to meet my son.”

His son! That was it. He was canvassing me for his son.

He turned to my mother.

“Think about my offer, Mashiro-san,” he said, eyes roving over the silk mill. Our big, ugly factory shrunk to a sparrow in the viewfinder of a gun, ready to be shot. I decided that I didn’t like him.

“I fear that soon, we may need parachutes more than silk.”

There was no time for a sit-down lunch. I would take the four o’clock train back to Seiyo Girl’s Academy instead of the morning nine o’clock, which meant I would be arriving after dinnertime. For the first time, my mother found time in her busy schedule to monitor every step of my transfer into Fujisaki-sensei’s talons, either personally or by proxy. I wondered if it was because I had blossomed from a burden into a bargaining chip.

Emi belted my black skirt tightly around my waist as my mother smoothed the middy shirt flat against my collarbone and turned to cope with my hair, which was gleefully beginning to swell up in the humidity again.

“Emi, a ribbon,” my mother said, holding out a hand with a sigh.

“I didn’t like Hotori-san,” I said, staring at my own lashes.

“Hotori-sama,” my mother corrected me, sharply. “He’s a viscount. It doesn’t matter if you like him.”

I puffed out my cheeks. Emi was packing for me, throwing things haphazardly into my suitcase. A stacked pair of wooden boxes lay in the middle of a handkerchief, which I already knew to be my packed lunch and dinner to eat on the train. Cress sandwiches for lunch, I guessed, and beef wellington for dinner.

“As it happens,” my mother continued, with a roll of her eyes, “You are lucky. The Hotori family is aristocracy, and they have only one son, who will inherit it all. You lack rank to be suitable.”
She finished off the plait with a length of ribbon around my head, and I grimaced.

“Why bother, then?”

“A good businesswoman networks as much as she can, even if the meeting seems to have little immediate usefulness,” said my mother. “Besides, he’s interested in the mill. Don’t ask any more questions.”

A suitcase was foisted into my hand, and then into a rickshaw, where I sat cheek-by-jowl between Emi and Mother all the way to Tokyo Central Station.

I handed Emi my suitcase and hat-box. To my mild surprise, my mother tucked a loose, sun-bleached curl behind my ear.

“Safe trip,” she said.

Then, more meaningfully. “Behave yourself.”

The train car seemed emptier than usual. The sky faded from periwinkle, pink to blood-red as the train roared through the dusky fields of Aichi Prefecture. I gazed at Emi across from me, swinging her legs happily, feet inches from the floor.

She caught my eye, frowning. Perhaps a stay-over from childhood, Emi did not like to see me brooding.

“Something bothering you, Miss?”

I blinked, turning away from the sky outside. “Why should there be?”

“Your face is all scrunched-up and frowny,” she said. Then, with a bit of a wicked grin this time: “Is it that boy?”

“What boy?” I said.

Emi goggled back at me. “The cool one! The one who visited you! You let him into your room! And now they’re setting you up with someone else! Kek!”

I mutinously recalled the mix of helpless anger and exhilarating smugness that Nagihiko making declarations brought. It made me cross all over again.

“I’ll box your ears if you tell Mother,” I said.

“Shan’t, then,” she replied, promptly. “She’d box my ears too.”

I pressed my forehead against the cool window. My brains rattled around in my skull from the train’s shaking.

“What’re you going to do with the thread, Miss?” Kusukusu’s voice in my ear, again.

“My own business.”

“But you brought it with you,” the brat pointed out, slyer still. “Has your embroidery improved so much?”

I focused my gaze on the diminutive little orange figure opposite, gleefully chowing down on a rice ball. She caught my eye, and smiled, toothy.
“You could make a craft with it,” she said in a sing-song to herself, hopping from note to note. “Do-you-remember? The thread balls we used to make as children?”

“That was a long time ago,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, softly. “It was.”

"I liked those," I said. "We would put rude messages in them."

"Some of them looked good," Kusukusu informed me, with some degree of mirth. "But I think you only wanted to make them to throw them."

"Of course," I murmured, absently. "What else are they for?"

The knot of dread in my stomach grew only worse as we lurched into the empty station by cover of nightfall. The train was nigh-empty; it was only me and a small-town businessman getting off at this stop. The stars leered down at me. In Tokyo, I was as large as I liked, on roads and walks made for me. In the countryside the sky gaped from horizon to horizon with no buildings to punctuate its breadth. I did not care much for feeling small or insignificant.

“Shall I leave you here, Little Miss?” Emi asked me tentatively. She dismounted under the weight of my worldly possessions: a silk hat-box, a needlepoint carpetbag with my immediate travelling necessities, and the considerable suitcase that held most of my clothes.

“Are you stupid?” I said. “Help me take my things up the hill.”

Kusukusu gnawed her lip, casting her eyes about the crisscrossing tracks. She delicately covered her mouth with the hat-box.

“It’s really late,” she said, muffled. “And dark. The last train is in a half-hour. If I’m late, your grandmama will be really mad.”

“I can’t very well carry these things myself,” I said sourly.

But Emi was right. It was dark. As I searched for something to convince Emi otherwise, another solution appeared in front of the post-office window: a vague male-shape with a bag over his shoulder, handing something to the train ticket-taker.

“You,” I said, “Boy.”

He turned over his shoulder, with the air of someone who was used to being addressed by gender only.

“Ma’am?” he inquired, tipping his hat a little and standing up straighter, as though trying to look older than he was. The smile was pure insecurity. The empty letter-bag slung over his shoulder jogged my memory: it was Sōma-kun, the boy who delivered everything up to Seiyo from the post office.

“Are you able to take my things up the hill?” I said, gesturing to the suitcase, the hat-box, the carpet bag.

There is a certain kind of man, as I had demonstrated to Nagihiko, that will drop everything to help a small, pretty girl. I called it the helplessness-to-beauty ratio. Sōma-kun was not one of these men. I don’t think he noticed I was a girl at all: his eyes were fixated on the bags. I made a split-second assessment.
“They’re somewhat heavy, so if you cannot manage, I will ask someone el…”

“No need!” He picked up the heaviest suitcase with a salute. “Leave it to me! Man, this weighs nothing.”

I repressed the urge to roll my eyes, and instead delicately handed him the hat-box. I decided that because the challenge of the thing was the reward, I didn’t have to waste breath thanking him.

I didn’t waste any breath at all. Sōma was evidently not struck shy by the presence of girls, either. It was as though I was a fellow construction worker.

“Lucky you caught me out this late,” he said, whistling through his teeth. “Was just returning from a last-minute telegram run up to Seiyo Academy. D’you go there?”

“Yes.”

“They’re usually for Fujisaki-sensei. Tonight, it was for another teacher, though. And extra of the Evening Post, ‘course. Everyone’s glued to the papers these days. It sure does get your blood pumping, doesn’t it?”

“Mm,” I said.

“There’s gonna be all sorts of work, now, even here. Hell, I might not be here much longer. I wanna get out there, serve, y’know?”

“Ah.”

“They say we’ve taken the coast of China already, and Shanghai by next month. I wish I could have been there to see it! But what I really want is to get up in one of those planes…!”

“Oh, the one Princess Chichibu got to ride in,” I murmured, absent-mindedly. “The kamikaze-go, Mitsubishi Ki-15…”

“Yeah!” Sōma-kun interrupted, excitedly. I glanced up from my dirt-staring, surprised at his fervour. “Yea-ah! Eleven thousand feet in the air! Ninety horsepower! You know the Ki-15? Woah, you don’t look the type!”

“No,” I said. “What are we talking about?”

“The kamikaze planes! They’re all out over China as we speak!”

“China?” I asked, bleakly. Sōma seemed to realize the extent my ignorance.

“Japan declared war on China a whole month ago,” said Sōma, nonplussed. “You really didn’t hear about it?”

He put down my carpetbag, (“Mm,” I said) reached into his letter bag, and unrolled a newspaper. In the dim twilight, I made out:

THE FULL STORY ON THE DEMILITARIZED ZONE PEACE PRESERVATION CORPS MUTINY

Its sub-headline:
“I don’t know what this means,” I said, but the sinking feeling in my stomach did not need a translation.

Sōma himself had to read the headline again (or pretend to read?) to make sense of it, but when he spoke, the note was final.

“The Chinese slaughtered us,” he said. For the first time, I saw his eyes in the darkness, glittering with sadness. “They went after the Japanese families in Tongzhou district. Who does that? Based only on where they’re from…”

There was no us or we—Sōma was being overemotional. I had nothing in common with the now-dead Japanese but an identical passport.

The single gas lantern on the awning of Seiyo’s main building twinkled over the hill in promise of rest. Though summer was ending, a few cicadas stubbornly screamed on in the bushes. Sōma’s eager face swam before my face in the darkness, waiting for an answer.

My eyes returned, passively, to the dirt.

“I see,” I said. “My bag, please?”

To Sōma’s credit (and Kusukusu’s disservice), he insisted on walking me right into the foyer and through to the little administration office.

(“There’s been some weird guys hanging around this summer,” he warned me. I was too tired to point out that nobody was going to attack me in my own school, unless Fujisaki-sensei counted.)

I gazed around Fujisaki-sensei’s assistant’s office, liking it lesser still after my third time here. As though remembering the unconscious memory, my back muscles tensed, and my shoulders hunched up around my ears.

Sōma’s real motivation for walking me through Seiyo wiggled out of the woodwork—or rather, it leapt up from her desk to rumple Sōma’s hair, smacking him playfully across the cheek.

“Kukai-chan, you wicked boy,” Shion crowed, losing roughly three years in appearance. “What are you doing wandering around in here? Your mother will be missing you for dinner.”

“Haaaah?” he scoffed, rubbing his jaw as though willing stubble to grow there. “She can spare me for one night! Besides, the little miss challenged me. I bet her I could carry her stuff all the way up Seiyo hill!”

He thumped my back. I coughed.

Shion had me initial next to my surname on the roster to indicate that I had arrived in one piece. The surname of every girl in Seiyo Girls’ Academy was beneath my hand as I signed. My friend’s names all leapt out at me, all ticked off by Sanjō’s handwriting. The name Yuiki was left blank. My heart sank.

“Shion-san,” I said, looking at the list. “Did a Yuiki-san sign in this morning?”

Shion paused through her laughing with Sōma, leaning over to read the sheet upside-down.
“If it’s not on there, I’m afraid not, Mashiro-san,” she said, sympathetically. “Perhaps she’s arriving tonight, like you?”

Emi had said the last train was departing in half an hour. I doubted it.

The room was the same as I had left it at the beginning of summer: splintery floors, fragile curtains, two stripped beds, and one wooden seiza-desk (my knees ached). The beds seemed closer together than I had first noticed. Barely an arm’s length—less than that. If I really stretched my short arms, I could probably caress Nadeshiko’s face in her sleep.

Which meant she could rip my face off in mine! I braced my body unsuccessfully against her bed, trying to shove it closer to the door.

Nadeshiko had come and went. The smell of camellias lingered, and a flower arrangement had been left ominously next to her bed. The roar of multiple faucets and ghostly voices echoed from the end of the hall. Everyone must be washing up for bed.

I peeled off my sweaty stockings and washed up in the bathroom. Then I flopped back down on my bed, wrapping my hair around me like a shawl.

I was bored. I wondered what made Nadeshiko think she was so important as to simply vanish, especially after her hoity-toity speech about loyalty and other dishonesties. Then, I wondered why Yaya wasn’t at school when I missed her so sorely.

The black-and-white headlines stole into my mind by the glow of the oil lamp, mocking me. *Japan declared war on China a whole month ago!*

But Yaya’s mother and little brother were subjects of the emperor. They were safe from the rapacious Chinese soldiers over the ocean, and Yaya was the daughter of a diplomat. It was something stupid, I thought, like she threw a tantrum and hit her head so hard she got a concussion…We’d laugh about it when she came back, and she’d stick out her tongue and scratch the back of her head…

“Y-You didn’t, Nadeshiko! Tell me you didn’t!”

“Oh, dear,” a dark mirage said smugly, sweeping into the room with aplomb. “I only said that I have a friend who admires Hotori-san, and that he ought to meet her.”

“That’s not true at all, no way!” Amu spluttered after her, wet fringe sticking to her forehead. “D-don’t say it like that! I don’t admire him—I don’t even…—what kind of dumb, cheesy…”


“Men have such pliant egos. A few white lies, a bit of flattery here and there…if it’s disguised under what seems like the purest of intentions, it will nurture a man’s warm feelings. That is, of course, if you don’t admire him? Because if you do, it’s hardly a lie, you see.”

“Rima!” Amu said with relief, zeroing in on me as the perfect distraction. “When did you arrive?”

Nadeshiko immediately stiffened and turned, as though gossip about Hotori was top-secret
information I wasn’t supposed to be privy to. I looked back with dislike.

“Not long ago,” I said, trying to appear as though they had rudely interrupted me enjoying my own company. “Whose ego is this?”

“Did you have a safe journey?” Amu said, ignoring my question.

“Welcome home, Rima-chan,” Nadeshiko fluffed, pinching Amu’s shoulder. She said it like I was her husband coming home from work, or something. “Waah, did your hair get longer since I saw you, last? It looks so much thicker!”

“If you’re going to talk so loudly,” I said, “You ought to let everyone in on the conversation. It’s rude.”

“You see,” said Nadeshiko, turning to Amu and ignoring me. “Women are such suspicious creatures. Unlike men, Rima-chan knows when one is lying.”

“I see…” said Amu, eating up Nadeshiko’s bungled thesis essay on men.

“You were lying?” I said crossly. I inspected my hair in the mirror.

“It looks thinner,” said Nadeshiko. “Have you been tearing it out?”

“Every moment in your presence,” I snapped.

“I think it looks nice,” Amu supplied, angelic of heart.

“Have either of you seen Yaya yet?” I asked, giving up on Hotori-san’s idiot son.

Amu had to think about it.

“No, now that you mention it…”

“Nothing,” Nadeshiko finished. “Perhaps she’s arriving tomorrow, for afternoon classes?”

“Maybe.”

“Oh—h, Nadeshiko,” Amu sighed, clambering over Nadeshiko’s bed to look at the dumb flower arrangement. “Waaah… it’s so pretty! I could never do this kind of stuff.”

“It’s just flowers in a vase,” I said, envious again. “If you want flowers so badly…”

“Oh, Amu!” Nadeshiko glowed back, generating their own weird, rosy atmosphere. “Do you like it? It’s…”

A loud THUD resounded through the building, and several girls screamed from the washroom.

“ONE minute to LIGHTS! OUT.” A voice bellowed. “You HAVE. A FULL DAY of CLASSES TOMORROW.”

“Crap!” Amu muttered, scrambling off the bed and waving both her hands at us. “Gotta go, I guess.

“I’ll see you at breakfast tomorrow?”

“You better,” I muttered, as the door shut behind her.
A chorus of *shushes* rippled through the walls.

As the heels creaked past our door, Nadeshiko moved to the oil lamp on the sill without speaking, lifting its glass chimney to blow out the flame. I glanced up from my pillow, sleepily. Even her footsteps were dancing. She had the smallest stride I had ever seen, rolling from the ball of her foot to heel so she barely made a footfall.

“… It’s a begonia,” Nadeshiko finished, quieter.

She gazed at them through the threads of smoke at the foot of my bed, as though waiting for an answer to this pronunciation. I fell back onto my pillow, eyelids fluttering shut.

“Did you know,” I murmured, more asleep than awake, “That begonias mean *‘beware’* in floriography? I read it in a book.”

There was no response. Nadeshiko could have returned to bed for all I knew, or simply stood there, stricken by this information.

“Oh,” said Nagihiko’s voice, strangely high-pitched. “I didn’t know.”

My head lolled to the side, already asleep.

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Morning brought clear skies and yet another dancing lesson, much to my unending wrath. I would have been counting down the days to the end of term if being home wasn’t worse.

Morning also brought Utau, looking meaner than ever— but not Yaya, to my now-mounting perturbation.

“What happened to Fujisaki-sensei?” Utau muttered, using her height to gaze over everyone’s head.

“Maybe she died,” I said hopefully.

“Nah,” Utau said. “It’s some guy.”

“A man?” I said, with disgust.

Nadeshiko joined us then, bony wrists sticking out through her uniform’s cuffs like a colt’s wobbly new legs. There was no time to sew a new uniform in-between growth spurts, I supposed. The skirt now barely grazed her knees. True to my prediction, I had already heard the slimy moss-ball (Momino?) express flustered awe at Nadeshiko’s now-considerable height by women’s standards. I forecasted rolled-up skirts by next month.

“Our teacher’s Amakawa-sensei today,” Nagihiko whispered to me, face glowing. “From Kouen Military Academy.”

“He’s a military instructor?!” Amu moaned in dismay.

“I can’t see,” I said, in the idle hope that Amu would pick me up. I didn’t have to look at him to know who it was. Fujisaki-sensei’s old astrologer— the weird guy in the woods.

“Good morning, girls,” I heard the mild voice say. The sailor collar in front of me began to quiver with giggles. The room erupted in laughter. I hoped Amu shared my horror, but she seemed to be frowning at Amakawa to herself, as though considering it.

When the inane giggles finally subsided, the gist of it came out: in anticipation of the ball at Kouen
Military Academy in October (several squeals), we were to go over basic Meiji pair-waltzes.

Wasn’t the likes of western dancing *verboten*? I wasn’t about to complain about a change from the dragging, boring kaguras that Fujisaki-sensei insisted on, but something about it made me uneasy — as though a government employee was watching.

The second the words “I will ask you to get into pairs…” left Amakawa-sensei’s mouth, I moved quickly, lunging for Amu’s arm.

“Gah!” Amu barked, caught off-guard. “R-Rima!”

Nadeshiko had her hand raised, as though about to ask Amu the same. Upon catching my eye, he hastily lowered it. I made a nasty face at him, sticking my tongue out and pulling my eyelid down.

“Amu,” I said, sweetly, before she could catch me leering, “I want to dance with you.”

“Ah— OK! But just so you know, I’m kind of clumsy…”

“The Viennese waltz is simple,” Amakawa announced, with the self-assurance of any fairy-footed twit unaware of others’ shortcomings. “It comprises the natural turn, reverse turn, and blah, blah, blah, blah blah blah. Blah, blah blah blah…”

Amakawa-sensei was an engaged teacher. Unlike Fujisaki-sensei, who liked to stand in the corner and call out criticisms, he made his rounds to each couple, gently moving our arms around until our limbs were in the correct places. He passed Nadeshiko and Morono, clasped together, with an approving nod. At Amu and I, he paused, moving my hand more firmly under Amu’s shoulder blade.

“Your foot a little to right, Mashiro-san,” he added. “You can start with the lead, and then we’ll switch off.”

If Amu was clumsy, I was a bloated house held up by stilts. I rapidly discovered that a waltz seemed to mimic the heliocentric model. Like a pair of moons, we rotated clockwise round each other, but *counter-clockwise* around the floor.

I stepped forward while Amu stepped back. I immediately stepped on her foot.

“Oops,” she whispered. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said, swaying. There was a moment when we caught each other’s eyes and smiled at the foolishness of the whole thing. I was suddenly very grateful I wasn’t paired with Nadeshiko, who would have thought I was terrible, or Utau, who would have also thought I was terrible.

Step two was a rotate, of some kind, and then a crossing of one foot over the other. Brow furrowed, I stepped forward confidently, only for Amu’s back to *thud* against the wall.

Moomino and Nadeshiko glanced over at us from their elegant rotation. Utau gave me her familiar huffy look, and a few classmates giggled. Amu looked as though she hoped the floor would swallow her up, but I gazed back, impassive.

“Oh,” Amakawa jumped in, hurriedly, and returned everyone to starting position. “This happens when the turn is overdone. It should only be roughly ninety degrees. Let’s start again?”
“I don’t know why it has to be so complex,” Amu said an hour later, rubbing her ankle. We had come to know that after the first stupid rotation, called a set, came even more variations upon variations: two rows on either side of the room conjoined, then moving into a circle. We had all gotten along terribly, but me worst of all. I told myself it was only stupid dancing, but I was the slightest bit ashamed all the same.

“That was kind of fun,” Nadeshiko said, warmly. “It’s been a while since I’ve done a waltz.”

Amakawa-sensei had cautioned us not to worry so much about the man’s steps, as the Kouen students would be leading us. The man always led. I looked sideways at Nadeshiko, whose cheeks were still flushed, as though out-of-breath. Her eyes were still on Amu.

I went mutinously back to my rice. The others continued talking about the stupid Kouen ball. I wondered if I could fake sick. Then I wondered if I could handle everybody talking about what fun they had while I languished in bed, keeping my forehead warm using an oil lamp in case someone should check on me.

I couldn’t do it. I would have to learn how to do a stupid Vietnamese wash or whatever. If Amu was so googly-eyed over the Hotori twit, I had to see him for myself. Neglecting to mention that our parents had tried to set us up, of course.

A flurry of girls had begun to swarm around the doors like basking flamingos, indicating the arrival of Sōma-kun and the newspaper again. I didn’t pay any heed to it, until I heard one of them cry, “Where have you been, Yuiki-san?!”

I looked up, and there she was: perhaps cackling less than usual, but there nonetheless. I pelted myself directly at her gut, to which she let out a loud “OOF.”

“Rima-tan!” she gagged, putting on a brave smile despite the damage my thick skull had evidently done to her ribs. “That hurt!”

“Hm,” I said. “Where were you?”

“Let her sit down, at least!” Utau barked. Yaya swung a leg over the bench, squeezing in between Nadeshiko and I.

“Papa was busy,” Yaya said, as though this explained everything. “We were waiting on a telegram from Mama, and then he was called to Tokyo over some horrible telephone call. Then he forgot I had school.”

I looked up. To my surprise, so did Nadeshiko, glancing at me over Yaya’s head.

“And is everything quite well?” Nadeshiko asked, with delicacy.

“I guess so,” Yaya sighed, taking a clump of rice from my bowl and cramming it into her mouth.

“Your mother,” Utau ventured.

“Is well,” Yaya said brightly. Her eyes were focused on my rice. “Tsubasa, too.”

“Are you…”

“No,” I said, pulling the bowl away and delicately fanning myself. The weather was still hot for September. I wondered if the embroidery teacher would let us go outside for class, where we could take our stockings off and dangle our feet in the cool Ochi River. I would likely lose my needle in...
the grass, but that was trifling.

Yamabuki Sāya strode by behind us, flanked by two bootlickers. She paused for effect, regarding
our table contemptuously.

“I can’t believe they *allowed her back,*” she said in a loud undertone to a crony.

Sāya was always making bizarre pronouncements like this. I privately thought she thrived on the
chaos left in the wake of some of her more outlandish statements, hoping they would get her the
attention she craved. This time, however, I really had no idea what she was talking about.

“When we don’t know how many Chinese rebels are hiding in Taihoku,” Sāya continued, louder.
“It’s dangerous. And shameful.”

Utau raised an eyebrow but made no move to say anything. Nadeshiko’s eyes remained locked on
her lap. To my utter disgust, so did Amu’s, submissively following Nadeshiko’s lead.

Yaya was not clever like Nadeshiko, who could take and trade a verbal barb. Nor was she as
confident as Utau, who had the seniority to invite a disrespectful girl to drop dead. Witnessing
Yaya’s confusion hurt worse than rage or sadness. *She knows it’s supposed to be insulting,* I
thought, but isn’t sure how.

I lolled back in my seat. My knuckles went white on my chopsticks.

“After the terrible koto performance Yamabuki-san gave at the summer festival,” I said, raising my
chin to the sky and speaking to the ceiling for best possible projection, “It’s a miracle Fujisaki-
sensei allowed Yamabuki-san back *at all.* It was like trying to keep tune next to a screaming horse.
Things like this make the whole school look bad.”

Sāya’s perm whirled over her shoulder, face beet-red with fury. I stared back at her, daring her
without speaking.

There was three of them. Five of us. Most onlookers would never come to my aid. But I was sitting
across from Amu, and we were in direct view of both Kichiga- and Sanjō-sensei, still in their seats.

She *hmphed,* striding off huffily.

As soon as I was positive she had vanished into the kitchen, I got to my feet. Amu’s eyes were on
me, shining with an admiring expression I had never seen before, but I was too angry to take any
joy from it.

“Have the rest of my rice, Yaya,” I said, coldly.

As I walked away from the table, I realized someone was shadowing my footsteps. At first, I hoped
it was Amu. Then I thought it must be Nadeshiko, come to feed off my emotional vulnerability.
But as I stacked my bowls in the sink, I realized it was Utau, expression stoic as usual.

“That was stupid, Mashiro,” she said curtly, dumping her bowls next to mine with a clatter.

“Did you stalk me all the way over here just to say that?”

“Yamabuki Sāya’s the daughter of a general. That was really, *really* stupid.”

I turned to grab a broom. “I’m not scared of Yamabuki’s extended family.”
“You should be,” Utau snapped, grabbing a rag and running it under the tap. “You know why we all kept our mouths shut?”

“Because you have no spines.”

Manami squeezed in between us to put her bowl down, and we both fell into an angry silence. When she left, Utau leaned forward, in a lower voice.

“How d’you expect to help Yuiki if you’re so conceited you can’t let one comment slide off your back?”

My eyes flashed.

“You’ve been goading her all summer,” Utau continued, relentlessly. “She might seem like an easy target, but unlike Fujisaki, she’s stupid, vengeful, and doesn’t think it’s charming.”

“What does Nadeshiko have to do with this?” I said, riled by the sheer mention of her name.

“I warned you, didn’t I?” Utau said cryptically, “Back in the spring. You can’t say I didn’t.”

She turned on her heel and returned to the others, spattering me with tiny droplets in her wake.

Chapter End Notes

1. The original Mainichi Shinbun headline: 通州保安隊叛の全貌
2. 近水樓に弾丸集中
   Clumsily hand-translated by Yours Truly. If a native speaker has a better translation, I’ll be much obliged.
3. Refers to the administrative division of Taiwan under Japanese rule.

I know every fanfiction writer says this, but I would like to write a quick and humble thank you—
The patience and loyalty to this story continues to astound me, and I was so mollified to see everyone reminding me to update and expressing their appreciation on here, FFN, and my tumblr. I’m always flattered, I reread the comments about ten times, and it means more than you could ever know. I will sign off now before I get more verklempt!

Also, GUYS I HAVE FANART NOW! CHECK MY PROFILE! I AM SCREAMING?

Coming next update: Creator's Style compatibility with Night Mode? We will see...
Chapter 12 already in the works.
Danseuse

Chapter by Tsukinokimi

Chapter Notes

The ball coming out of left field last chapter was a severe editing error. It was supposed to be alluded to in Chapter 6, but like an idiot, I forgot to edit it back in! Here is my weak attempt at trying to explain it and cover my mistake.

CHAPTER 12

舞姫

Danseuse

My shoes glittered in the morning sunlight, silver thread on satin. It was my first pair of shoes with a heel on them, and my walk showed it.

“Careful!” Amu cried, leaning forward to catch me. I planted my face directly into the comfort of her bony sternum, forgetting to let go of her arms.

The catalogues had come in from Osaka. We wrote in the model number of the gown we wanted with our measurements on the order form and mailed it back to the return address. For those who ordered, they arrived at the post-office six weeks later.

I hadn’t needed to. A crêpe silk gown had collapsed to nothing in the bottom of my suitcase, and the matching shoes tucked away in the hat-box. I wondered how Mother had known—and found the money. Yaya’s father had forgotten to send one, without a wife to take inventory of school events. Amu’s mother had hand-sewn her a wine-red gown made for a much braver, older woman. Amu tried it on behind our screen, cheeks burning with shame.

“Mama always does this!” Amu wailed, inspecting the back view in Nadeshiko’s full-length mirror, trying in vain to adjust it. “She says it’s the fashion, and that I shouldn’t dress younger than I am…”

“I can see your entire back,” Nagihiko said, pointing to the area in question with a folding fan. A teasing expression twinkled in his eye. This sent Amu into a tizzy all over again.
“It’s not that weird, Nadeshiko!” Amu cried, defensively. “Rima’s is backless, too! So is Utau’s, I bet!”

It was. I had put it on, just because everyone else was doing it, but felt no attachment to the thing. I was intent on finding a pair of scissors for a loose silk thread I had spotted on the trailing sleeve.

“I just said I could see your back, that’s all,” he said. He didn’t even glance at me.

“Oh, you found them,” I said to Yaya, brandishing a pair of sewing scissors. “The thread is back here…”

“Well, I know you can see it!” Amu said, face going blotchy. “Don’t just point it out— it’s unproductive!”

Yaya’s audible snip noise at my sleeve was very loud. We both turned around to see Amu bristling. Nadeshiko sat stiff on the edge of my bed, looking like she’d been slapped.

Yaya glanced back at me, confused. Yaya spent a good deal of time being confused, of late.

I lowered my eyes back to the safety of the bias-cut silk, just in time for Amu to say, “We’ve got dance again. We should go.”

Oh, please, no. Let’s not.

“Ladies!” Amakawa’s voice rang out. “I see we all have our shoes on to practice the steps with heels, hm? Very lovely.”

My knees wobbled. The satin shoes looked very out of place with the black uniform. Then again, so did everybody else’s.

“On my count… a one, two, blah, blah blah…”

The brassy sound of Strauss whined through the room. Resigned, we began our counter-clockwise rotation with an air of weariness.

I took stock of my disintegrating friend circle. I had been wary of Utau ever since her lecture, though she had been nothing but cordial. She was currently waltzing the male role to Amu, who still seemed to be smarting for some reason. Then there was Nadeshiko, dancing with Hakenaki Mashimaro (?) again, probably at the underclassmen’s offer.

Nagihiko never could turn down an adoring fan, the egomaniac. Her chin was lifted, and her eyes were mid-laugh at something Maraschino had said. If I thought he tolerated me before the summer holidays, perhaps even fancied me his friend, it was now turning distant.

I was shamefaced enough to be sick. All I could think of were the things I had told him in confidence— incriminating things. My foreign father and worse still, my natural birth. He had said it meant nothing to him, but… My throat swelled up thinking of it. It was the feeling of holding back tears, but something spikier, with harder edges.

I swallowed and looked away.

Yaya and I, without any other choice, grabbed each other’s hands for the waltz. I thought Yaya was the man; or perhaps it was me. I hadn’t quite figured it out, but it didn’t really matter. We swung about the room, snickering under our breath. At one point, she was Amakawa-sensei, with a smug smirk on her face, wiggling her shoulders with every turn. Then she was Sanjō, refusing to
bend her legs at the knee. I pressed my lips firmly together to keep from grinning silly and lurched to the side on the end of my heel. I bumped Misaki’s shoulder, and we hurried to close the gap in the circle.

“Circle!” Amakawa’s voice called out, coaxingly. “Circle, girls! Join up right where Hinamori and Hoshina-san are!”

Circle, circle, circle. I wound up on the left, which meant, I suppose, that I was the girl, this time. Yaya and I galloped around the circle at top speed, circling and dipping under each other’s arms, quietly snorting the whole time. I caught a glimpse of Utau’s narrowed eyes, and Nadeshiko’s perturbed glance. I didn’t care. Why should I?

Nadeshiko could waste time dancing until her feet bled, but I didn’t see what good it did the rest of us. Utau was the stupid one, acting like it was harming my future to have a bit of fun with it. In twenty years, would I ever regret that my steps were not lighter, more ladylike? Or would I regret not laughing with my friends when I still could? A faceless man loomed before my eyes, dressed in a formal tailcoat against a flock of black Ki-15s roaring overhead. He held out a sake cup to me, inviting me to drink and seal my fate–

“Rima-tan, your face looks gross,” Yaya snickered.

Strauss’s lilting violins returned to my consciousness. “Oh,” I said.

“Faster, girls!” Amakawa-sensei called out, merrily. “It's a quick tempo!”

I looked down at Yaya’s Mary Janes, which were tippy-tappying at the floor.

“I hate this,” I said.

“I like this!”

Everybody else seemed to be turning inward against their partner’s chest, so I did so, arms being forced into a crossed position while I gripped Yaya’s hands for dear life. Yes. That looked right.

“And now,” Amakawa-sensei said, stopping the record needle. We all looked up, startled. I wobbled on the spot.

“Man’s part, let go of the lady’s hand with your left hand and hold it out behind you. Lady’s part, on the count of three, you will natural turn out into the fan position…”

“I hate this,” I muttered again, but obediently turned out.

“—Man’s part, release hands, reaching behind you—”

The violins began again, and Yaya relinquished me. I watched helplessly as Yaya grabbed Misaki Watarai’s waist like a farmer hauling a sack of rice. I glanced over my shoulder as I turned into the empty air, when—

Someone seized my waist, sweeping me into closed position. I looked up and found myself gazing into Nagihiko’s amused expression.

I had no time to look anything but astonished. His grip was tighter than Yaya’s via overestimation. He seemed surprised to discover that I had roughly the resistance and weight of a sock-puppet.

“And then, lady’s lift and reverse turn,” Amakawa called over the sound of the rumbling cello.
Before Amakawa could explain, Nagihiko pulled me forward by my ribs.

“Ow,” I hissed, pained more by the scandal than the discomfort. On my right, I saw Mamamoo glance up at the noise, now in closed position with Wakana. Everybody had shifted over a partner.

"— You grip securely, below the arms, and lift —"

My feet left the floor in a rush of air. My hands scrabbled at Nagihiko’s shoulders for purchase, gripping on for dear life. He whirled me in a parabola to my right, placing me delicately back on the ground between him and Yaya as though I was made of glass.

“Sorry,” Nadeshiko whispered, finally deeming me worthy of being addressed. “Lighter than I expected.”

“Are you saying I look fat?” I hissed back.

“— Like Fujisaki-san has just done,” Amakawa-sensei finished, looking at us. The rest of the class followed suit. I rubbed my ribs, avoiding Amu's eyes.

“Though I was going to say it should be more of a light bounce than a lift proper,” he added, with a bit of a smile. “Very well-done.”

*What a suck-up.* I shot Nagihiko a glare. He was too busy basking.

“From here, you begin the steps again with your new partner, starting with a simple box step and pivot…”

I hugged my sides and repressed a groan.

“Hotonoto-san,” I said, over lunchtime, “I think I see your friends waving you over.”

Amu shot me an aghast look, as though to say: *Rima! Be nice to the precious underclassmen!*

“Oh… it’s Hatanaka-san,” said Himenanda Mamoro. She bit her lip, glancing between Nadeshiko and the far table, where her friends sat expectantly.

“Don’t let us keep you,” said Nadeshiko, smiling warmly. “But if you like, you can sit with us.”

*What?* I gave Nadeshiko a look, which once again went *ignored.* Something about it gnawed at my gut. Moscato, ever-grateful, took a seat on the other side of Nadeshiko with a shy smile.

“Your dancing is lovely, for someone so young,” Nadeshiko flattered her, in a stupid voice. “I’m sure it will look lovely at the ball.”

“O-oh, no!” Moscow said, trying to be humble. “It’s all because I’m dancing with you, Fujisaki-senpai, honest! To be honest, I was hoping to ask you about that… I’m kind of nervous.”

Amu tilted her head. “About what? The ball?”

“Yeah,” Midori wheezed, playing with her rice, gloomily. “It’s my first one. But the senpais have been before, right? What’s it like?”

“It’s a conspicuous display of wealth,” said Utau huffily, getting to her feet with her empty bowl. “To make the diplomats and Minister of Education think we’re rich and civilized.”
Without another word, she left.

“Uh,” said Amu, watching her go. “… I guess.”

Seiyo’s Western-style balls were only held every few years or so. At the last one, I had been twelve, and had just settled into life at Seiyo only a year prior. It was terrible, I reflected. I was so unsure of myself. I was all baby fat and a young-looking face, which my mother hadn’t helped by sending me in some frilly thing. It had been hosted here, too. All I had done was watch Amu paw at Nadeshiko and obsess over the Kouen boys, while the older girls danced. I had sat in a corner, entertaining gentleman callers all night. Like any twelve-year-old on a power trip, it was mildly entertaining, asking them to fetch and carry.

Oh, and then that boy had tried to confess to me, as Nadeshiko was so fond of reminding me. Kirishima-kun, wasn’t it? I couldn’t even remember.

“... You see, my mother was inspired by the cotillions of Vienna,” Nagihiko was saying animatedly. “Their waltzes are nothing like the way England does it— it must be seen to be believed. They handle the women so delicately, and every movement is very tender. But Mother had the idea to implement a formal event like that at Seiyo Academy, to foster some civil, ladylike interaction between our school and the military academy in the next town. At least, that’s what I think it was…"

“And where is your esteemed mother, presently?” I asked, kindly.

“Kouen, of course,” said Nagihiko, bemused, still explaining to Manolo. “Instructing the boys. But it’s really nothing to fret over, it’s just a bit of dancing to entertain the Minister and whatever other foreign dignitaries are there from Kobe. They’re very fond of German waltzes.”

“I see...”

“The Kouen boys are gentlemen,” Nadeshiko added, with a bit of a smirk at Amu. “And quite handsome, if I can be so presumptuous. You are in good hands.”

I rolled my eyes at Yaya.


“Of course,” he said, hastily, ”Mashiro-san has more exacting standards. As she should.”

Merino giggled nervously.

“I guess...” Amu looked thoughtful. “Rima is the type of girl who’s popular with boys, but I’ve never seen one that she, uh, likes.”

The atmosphere was still tense from earlier. Nadeshiko picked at her rice.

“There aren’t any,” I said.

Mimikyu goggled.

"It’s because we never see any," Yaya pointed out, spewing rice all over the table. “You’d think we were nuns!”

“That’s not true, Yaya-chan,” said Nagihiko, mouth twitching. “There’s Sōma-kun, who brings the mail.”
The table heaved a collective, dreamy sigh.

“Don’t get your drool on the table,” I said, standing up in disgust. Even Nagihiko looked a little glazed-over. “I’m going to get to embroidery early. Amu?”

I waited imperiously for Amu to put her dishes away and follow me, but she seemed to have her eyes fixed on a distant point none of us could see, spacing out.

“Oh,” she said suddenly, glancing up. “N-No, you go ahead without me, Rima. I need to get something from my room.”

Get something from her room? Amu was the worst liar alive. I raised both my eyebrows haughtily but didn’t say anything.

The end of October staggered towards us like an old man with a crick in his back. The nights chilled. Yaya kicked up the tufts of red maple leaves on the lawn before dinner. A flock of geese flew over my head, returning from their rendezvous up north.

The onset of autumn brought out something maudlin in Nadeshiko. I would walk into our room to see her with her elbows on the windowsill, gazing vacantly at the sunlit hills.

“See anything out there?” I might ask, pulling off my middy blouse to leave only my turtleneck. I pulled out the thread ball I had started with Hotori’s silk. With my back to Nadeshiko, I would press pins deep into its surface as anchor points, more voodoo doll than handicraft.

She liked to sigh in response. Sometimes she would go “mmm,” which was my cue to go silent.

Why did I even bother asking? There was something of a gambler in me, I decided, one who liked rolling the dice to see what was in the great Fujisaki-san’s addled head.

Once, she went “Rima, come see,” and pointed to the sky.

The harvest moon, I thought to myself, deadpan. She’s insane.

“Big,” I said.

“How brightly it illuminates the grass,” Nadeshiko murmured, in an odd mood, indeed. “It seems to absorb all sadness.”

“Yes. Large,” I said.

The mornings grew darker. A week before the ball, Hīragi (the snipe) left an oil lamp uncovered and lit before she left for class. Seiyo’s wooden structure was spared the inevitable blaze. Hīragi’s curtains were not.

Some of the more religious teachers swore that the building’s amulets protecting against fire had saved us. I thought it was dumb luck. The rancid, burnt-curtain smell lingered for days down the whole hallway.

I couldn’t take it anymore. Despite the wind outside, I cracked the window open as much as its rusted hinges would let me. Typhoon season was heaving its last breaths, and I was instantly hit with a gust of sopping wet wind.

Hīragi, that absolute dullard. I wrapped my hair around my neck and shivered.
On the waving plains of Seiyo Hill, dense thickets of bush clover littered the countryside, making one last bloom before the frosts set in. The birds made uneasy noises in the boughs as they settled in for the night. There was some merit to Nadeshiko’s flights of fancy, I thought. In the setting sun, I thought I felt a glimpse of the autumn melancholy that Nadeshiko must feel so deeply.

“Oh,” I sighed.

I almost didn’t hear him approach behind me, holding the curtain to the side. His head lolled dreamily onto his hand, black eyes refracting a luminous blue.

“Longing to see, and
Yearning have I awaited
The autumn bush clover:
In flower only does it bloom –
Will no more come of it than that?”

If I had seen it written, or had time to think about it, I could have responded wittily. Instead, I stared at him.

He smiled cryptically. "From the Manyōshū," he said, and left the window.

Will no more come of it than that, indeed? My ball of thread swelled with jagged diamond patterns stitched resolutely into its surface, nursing my hopes and fears.

By the end of the week, the smell had still not gone. It was compounded by typhoon rains causing rot beneath the floors and leaking in the west wing. It reeked of something like spoiled meat, or a sewer.

You would have thought it didn't exist, from the way everyone spoke of one thing, and one thing only. Friday night began a frenzy of preparations.

“Of course, Tadase-kun speaks most highly of me,” said Yamabuki Sāya with her hair in rollers, hogging two sinks to gob on mascara. “Our fathers are friends, you know, and if it’s between us… the ball is a conducive atmosphere to…”

“The ball,” yelled Watarai Misaki, trying to zip her friend up into a dress much too small (vulgar). “Takes place within a timeframe of roughly six to seven hours, leaving us precious little time to get Hotori-kun’s attention–”

“I don’t know, there’s so many girls here that seem to be intent on Hotori-kun, I don’t know, maybe I should give up–” Amu agonised.

“… Kouen’s a castle, no lie, like an actual castle…”

“And the little girls get sent home after four hours, and we can stay late!"

“Amakawa-sensei says that my posture is…”

Seven hours? I did some quick mental math. One in the morning?

There was no need to suffer for that long. Gazing at the utter catastrophe of pins, stockings, rollers, bits of tissue, shoes, hairbrushes and miscellany adorning every available surface in our hall’s washing room, I fake-coughed.

“Cough, cough,” I said, making my eyes fill with tears. “I feel terrible.”
“Rima-tan, no!” Yaya cried, swooping down on me. “When Yaya feels sick, Mama boils ginger and water together and puts sugar in it. You have to put lots of sugar in, or else it doesn’t work—”

I swayed a bit on the spot. It was a little late to be pulling in my emergency illness plan, given that I had already dressed.

“Oh, no, Rima-chan!” Nadeshiko lamented fakely. She looked like a ghost in only her white underrobe and a pair of tabi. Why did Nadeshiko get to wear socks and the rest of us didn’t? She put the back of her hand to my forehead.

“You don’t feel warm… could it be nerves?”

“Over what, exactly?” I said, tersely. As though Nagihiko cared if I wasted away and died!

“Well, I could understand if… your dancing…”

Amu stared at me. Yaya was still railing on and on about bitter melons and hot water.

“I’m fine,” I said huffily, avoiding Nagihiko’s eye. “I’m fine. I’ll go.”

Amu bit back a meek smile as she escorted me back to my room, red dress billowing aggressively around her ankles.

She looks grown-up, I realized, though I wasn’t sure why my heart sank at the thought.

“You look pretty, Amu,” I added.

Amu jolted. “Oh—oh!” She jerked her head away, clearly embarrassed, now.

“It’s a little gaudy, but…” and then, mumbling. “So are you guys.”

Nadeshiko bowed her head in humility. I caught the smile.

“I’m going to go find Mother to tie my obi,” she said, shouldering a kimono with the longest sleeves I had seen yet. They dangled dangerously close to her feet, fading to a dark purple the closer they got to the floor. “If you three could wait for me, we could share a rickshaw there?”

The door shut. Amu was perturbed. “She is rather thin, isn’t she?”

“Who?” I said.

“Nadeshiko,” Amu said, looking at the now-dying begonias. She spoke in a hushed voice, as though Nadeshiko’s ghost was breathing down our necks. I had never heard Amu say anything critical about Nadeshiko. Was all this huffiness over a comment about a dress?

I had endured far worse at the wrong end of Nadeshiko’s tongue.

“I haven’t ever seen her with that few layers on,” Amu mumbled.

Yaya re-phrased it in childish, more blander terms. “I don’t think she’s got anything under there!”

“Oh,” I said, stupidly. Then, remembering myself, I added: “Yes. She looks like a malnourished child without her clothes on. Can you two put my hair up, since you’re standing there?”

It was deliriously agreeable to sit on Nadeshiko’s bed while Amu and Yaya (but mostly Amu) fretted over the thick braids, trying to stuff them into something resembling a low chignon. I was almost disappointed when Nadeshiko floated back, rolled up in silk like a sausage casing. She had
answered my sock question. Instead of shoes, she was wearing a pair of lacquered geta.

“How will you dance in those?” I asked, rudely.

“The way I always do, I suppose,” said Nadeshiko, unsmiling. She hadn’t said it very sharply, but I suddenly felt hot and ashamed of myself. I slunk behind Yaya, putting on my cape.

“It’s raining out, too,” Nadeshiko added. She looked straight at me.

It was bucketing. It was five-thirty on the dot. Girls everywhere were screaming, bracing themselves under umbrellas and shawls and newspapers and hands. Yaya and I huddled together on Seiyo Academy’s front stoop, rain drilling onto Yaya’s umbrella. Ahead of us, Amu and Nadeshiko were crouched under her bright red parasol, laughing and whispering. Her silk back caught the light every time she moved, illuminating the pale cherry blossoms embroidered on its surface.

They looked good together. Objectively so, like a pair of matched carriage-horses. Amu’s teeth chattered, and Nadeshiko gesticulated something with her free hand. A matching set of statues that belonged on a mantelpiece.

Then the statues spoke, ruining my life.

“Oh, they’re three-seater,” Nadeshiko murmured as an empty rickshaw pulled up the front drive, gesturing to us. “How…”

“Yaya,” I said immediately, pointing. “Look, that one’s got an empty space.”

“Wha?” Yaya whirled around, looking up and down.

“That one,” I said, pointing to the one behind us.

“I don’t-”

I stepped onto the free rickshaw and into the furthest seat, waiting patiently for Amu to follow. Yaya still held the umbrella, staring. Amu followed me, leaving Nagihiko little choice. As he stepped in, he furrowed his brow at me. What right did he have to judge?

Amu seemed conscious of being wedged between two people competing for the same thing. She looked nervously, from Nadeshiko to me.

“Ah… it’s rainy, isn’t it? It’s kind of a let-down… we won’t be able to dance in the courtyard.”

“In this weather? You’d catch cold!” Nadeshiko exclaimed, brushing her arm. The look was gone.

Were my suspicions correct? I studied the two carefully. Amu liked Nadeshiko. Why shouldn’t she? Nadeshiko had given her everything she had ever wanted. She called and Nadeshiko came, asked and received, cried and met a shoulder. She asked things out of Nadeshiko she would never ask out of me.

It was no wonder, I thought, watching the rain drip off the rickshaw’s roof. I was not warm and loving. Everything I wanted out of Amu I had to demand. I fought for what Nadeshiko was handed. Perhaps I would not have fought so hard if I had been less lonely. I thought, in the recesses of my mind—that if I was persistent enough, she wouldn’t be able to deny me. Surely, she would come to understand my feelings, like she understood everybody else’s so well. But somehow, she never
had.

But what could Amu offer a woman like Nadeshiko? She admired Nadeshiko’s prowess in the kitchen, her flower-arranging, and thought Nadeshiko walked on water. I personally did not care for fan clubs, thinking them more a tool than any source of trustworthy gratification. Maybe Nadeshiko did?

I had been so single-mindedly infatuated with Amu for so long that something odd had happened. I could not, for the life of me, understand what someone other than me could see in her. Of course, I understood Amu’s sound heart and inability to see someone suffer. Amu was Nagihiko’s only respite in a sea of cruel women.

And I am one of them.

But all they were doing was talking about Hotori-san! Absolutely dull! I began to regret my decision. I might have been happier with Yaya and Utau, talking about, I don’t know, work ethic and bath toys.

Why, why, why…!

Why did I want their attention so badly, when all they had done was ignore me!

“He was such a cute child,” Nadeshiko was reminiscing, sitting on her hands and smiling. “We’ve known each other since we were young, you know. If there was one man alive who knows everything about me…”

I gave Nagihiko a bit of a look — really? Everything? But he didn’t notice me.

“Wh— don’t tell me you like him, too, Nadeshiko!”

“Ah?” she turned back to Amu, blinking innocently. “You think I would steal Hotori-kun from you?”

“N-no, not really, but… I mean, surely guys must like you… Nadeshiko’s so beautiful.”

I found this excessively boring and leaned forward. “The Hotori family made a rather poor impression on me,” I said, determined to talk the godlike figure off his pedestal. “His father is a fop.”


“Condescended to me on my own property. Men are trash.”

“Guh-gah-wha? W-when did you meet Hotori-sama, Rima? He’s a viscount!”

She sounded like my mother. I pulled the collar of my cape tighter around my neck. The rickshaw rattled over the Ochi River, swollen with rainwater, and its roaring temporarily drowned us out.

“Interested in the business,” I said, shortly. “And vetting me for a marriage meeting with his son, no doubt.”

Amu slumped back against the seat of the carriage, staring forward with a somewhat hopeless expression. My heart panged in sympathy, and I put a tentative hand on her arm.

“What bad luck,” Nadeshiko said quietly. “It seems that everybody here is conspiring to steal
Hotori-kun from you, Amu-chan.”

“B-”

“As if he was ever a candidate,” I cut in, annoyed. “He couldn’t afford me.”

Nagihiko opened his mouth, as though to retort something. At that moment, the rickshaw rattled to a stop before a rod-iron gate, flanked by two marble obelisks. I turned to stare at my companions, as though this was their fault. This was hardly a military school. Where were we?

Around us, girls began moving quickly for the shelter of the coach-gate. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, but enough to put Yamabuki’s perma-wave in jeopardy. I knew this because I could hear her piercing voice screaming about it. All around me, umbrellas opened as though by magic.

We found ourselves in the middle of the complex itself, enclosed by a high whitewashed wall. In the rain, nothing more could be made out other than lumpy outbuildings, same as in any town.

As we walked through the torrent, taking care to step only on the stones in our path, I wondered what had happened. Riot? Uprising? Had all the rickshaws broke down? Earthquake? Mudslide? The last one was most plausible, I thought. The heavy rains would sometimes loosen the rock and earth near the top of Mount Rokko, sending it plummeting down the slope to block the pass.

At that moment, Nadeshiko’s head moved, and I got a full look at the building we were entering. I was wrong. It was a military academy.

Wakana was right. Kouen Military Academy was a castle.

The central keep rose triumphantly against the cloudy gloom of the sky, luminously shell-pink. Its lacquered roof tiles glinted a slick midnight blue under the torrents of rain. Three pagodas, one on top of the other. Four, if you counted the renovated tower at its very top safeguarding a bell. At the apex of each gable there was pendants, the same as on Seiyo, only gold and in the shape of a familiar crescent moon. My classmates hissed and squeaked like a rat infestation.

The lumpy outbuildings must have been the retainers’ mansions in its previous life as a stronghold. The river we had crossed was a natural fortification. What a…

What a waste of a castle!

Seiyo made do on much less, and we weren’t being prepared for the army. Amu pulled me forward by my elbow, tailing Nadeshiko with excited babble. I eyed the bell tower at the very top with dislike and continued to do so until we were safely in the double doors.

Amakawa-sensei stood just within the foyer to greet us. It seemed like he had hardly bothered to dress up at all. Nonetheless, several girls greeted him breathily as though he was literally an Imperial Prince, not an underpaid teacher. Did he even have rank?

Perhaps they were swept up in the setting of it all: the vaulted ceilings above our head, the blazon of the red-rayed flag above the emperor’s portrait...

… And that was it. There was nothing remotely poetic about the Kouen stronghold’s interior. Seiyo Higher Girls’ School was hard-pressed to find an unadorned surface. Any given screen or lantern-cover was hand-painted by a student, and we had a propensity to clutter. Kouen Military Academy was rough and unfinished, wood on wood on wood and plaster. It was dark, polished and raw. Nagihiko would hate it here, I thought.
I sought Nagihiko’s face to see what he thought. He had vanished, along with Amu.

I searched the crowd to no avail. All around me, girls were taking their dripping coats off and frantically fixing each other’s hair. I wondered who would take our coats, when a flurry of younger boys, no older than eleven or twelve, came scuttling around the corners. Query answered.

To my surprise, I could already hear the muffled sound of conversation and a familiar European polka, as though the event was already underway and had been for an hour or so.

But it couldn’t be the same music. It was too beautiful-sounding, too rich. I took a few steps towards the end of the foyer, ducking around and under girl’s arms.

I put my ear to the sliding door (unpainted, plain gold). It was thicker than I expected. I could hear the deep rumble of grown men speaking under the swelling sound of a full orchestra. That was unlikely. The Kouen students were boys, not men. It made terrible eavesdropping. I couldn’t understand a word they were saying.

“Mit ihm ist nicht zu spaßen…”

That wasn’t English. It wasn’t Japanese, either.

“Ich möchte nicht versäumen zu erwähnen, dass. Was ist…?”

At that moment, the screen slid open under my cheek, and a gust of warm air hit my face. I glanced up into the blue, blue eyes of the most otherwise unremarkable foreigner I had ever seen. I could finally see that they had been both having a conversation at the corner of the room in decorated tailcoats.

If I had been raised any better, I would have bowed and apologized for intruding. Instead, I simply shrugged my coat off and placed it on top of an already-teetering child. If they were going to open the screen and catch me mid-eavesdrop, I might as well walk in.

“Excuse me,” I told the two of them, stepping up into the vast centre room. I turned to politely close the screen behind me. In the screen doorway, I saw the wan, pale faces of my classmates clustered in the darkness of the foyer.

“Mashiro-san,” Manami hissed, scandalized. “You're just going to walk in there by yourself?!”

Ah—h. They were afraid to enter, because boys. I shrugged and turned around.

As I stepped into the vast hall, the conversation quieted. All dividing screens had been removed from the centre of the keep, so that it was open to the fifteen-foot-ceilings in full ancient glory. I could almost see the shogun of past at the far end of the room, commanding his legions and legions of retainers.

But then my fantasy image turned, and I realized it was actually Fujisaki-sensei, in a black, formal kimono. She was merely doll-sized from my vantage point. She seemed to be engrossed in conversation with a smaller girl, who was in stark white paint and plum-red lips.

In that moment, her head looked up in my direction. I broke eye contact.

Between Fujisaki-sensei and I stood a dozen adults and what must have been at least a hundred students, give-or-take. The older Japanese men were in what looked like full military regalia. The glinting epaulettes and the sparkle of gold braiding on the Imperial Officers was more beautiful than anything Nadeshiko could devise from her closet. Like a magpie, my eyes focused greedily on
the military badges held by multicoloured ribbons with nothing short of delight. Now that was a proper prince’s attire, not whatever Amakawa-sensei was wearing. The Kouen students dulled in comparison and blended into the background.

“Show-off,” I heard a Yamabuki hiss behind the screen. Idiot, I thought. I wasn’t showing off anything.

With Amu and Nadeshiko gone (to canoodle?), there was hardly anything I could do to entertain myself. I claimed my territory in the middle of the far wall, where it seemed alright to do so. The foreigner’s wives seemed to be happy to do the same. They were both conversing rapidly in not-English with their light hair waved tightly to their skulls.

As I stopped moving and folded my hands, the conversation began again, a little halting and embarrassed-sounding. This really was so pedestrian. Somewhere in the alternate universe, the Rima who had pretended to be ill was reading Brontë by lamplight and listening for Kichiga-sensei’s monitoring footsteps. I envied her. No, I didn’t. Maybe a little.

The rest of the girls joined me, braver ones first, shy ones last. Utau, Watarai Misaki and Yamabuki had no problems, though Utau looked deeply displeased at doing so. Wakana hung back, as did Marino, the large-foreheaded girl who thought Nadeshiko was God’s gift to humanity.

Where was Nadeshiko! I turned towards the screens, calculating how I could slip out and search for the two of them. But at that moment, Fujisaki-sensei clapped her hands together. The hidden orchestra stopped.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” she called out, opening her fan and waving to get everyone’s attention. Her face glowed like a beacon under the lantern-light. Every eye in the room moved to her, rapt. Even the delegates, though they couldn’t speak Japanese, stared in fascination. Unlike Nadeshiko, she was truly in her element in a room full of men.

“In honor of the German delegation joining us from the consulate in Osaka this evening,” she bobbed a bow at the two foreigners and their bird-faced wives, “The students of Kouen Military Academy and Seiyo Higher Girls’ School will now perform our opening waltz.”

“She can’t be serious?! ” I heard Misaki Watarai moan near me, a little too loud. “We haven’t even practiced with them once! My hands are all sweaty.”

I pitied her partner. The two of us were in the minority with regards to our preparedness. The officers, delegates, translators, younger boys, all stepped politely to the edges of the room. The Seiyo girls, disciplined as ever, stepped forward into a clean row on one end of the space.

Surely Nadeshiko and Amu didn’t mean to miss the opening waltz?

Surely I didn’t mean to miss it? I stepped to the end of the line. Seiyo had made a docile woman out of me. A few years ago, I would have stood off to the side and watched everyone else, telling the teachers that it was boring, just so nobody would know how uncoordinated I was.

I could kiss that goodbye. A solid black line of Kouen students stepped forward, a little strange and uneven. Down at my end, they seemed to be subtly jostling each other, in some kind of spat. Just my luck, wasn’t it. I looked down the line miserably, only to see a ponytail next to Amu’s shorter hair.

The gall! I bristled, wondering when they had snuck back in without alerting me. I was not allowed time to seethe. At that moment, I heard the muffled rustling of paper somewhere, and whatever
Kouen boy had wound up opposite me in the end bowed.

We curtsied. My leg wobbled from the strain under the crepe silk. I flinched at the first blare of the brass instruments and deposited myself into the boy’s fragile hands. Why was it so loud? It had to be a semi-orchestra hidden behind the crane-laden gold screens, up on the second floor. Otherwise how could it be so clear?

I began with the clumsy steps to the basic box step, used to a firm grip when Yaya was my partner. To my surprise, my steps were lighter, more graceful than I expected.

It was brilliant, I thought, triumphantly. I could relax my legs and ease my arms. The Kouen boy did all the work of pulling, turning, pivoting, lifting. I was on air, light as a feather. Was this how Nadeshiko felt dancing buyō? A body, nothing more, nothing less. Perhaps it was more fun on your own, when there was no man to worry about. I couldn’t make faces or mimic with the stony-faced Kouen Academy student, who seemed very overly-concerned with stepping correctly and fixating on a point somewhere past my shoulder.

As we all pulled gracefully into a circle, I saw Yaya three over from where I was, and tried to shoot her a look. She was strangely absorbed in her dance, despite doing a roughshod job of it.

I turned to my other side. Misaki was whisking her partner around briskly, gazing adoringly into his eyes. Amazing.

With idling curiosity, I glanced back at my dance partner, who had been evidently staring. He jerked his head back to the point over my shoulder, flushing. I almost rolled my eyes but managed to keep my eyes in-focus. Really, how embarrassing. For him, I mean.

I was a beat late. I hurried to roll inwards, and then out, extending my hand with the expectation of changing partners. I would be rid of this strange boy soon.

If the hand was not gloved, it would have been drenched in sweat. The fabric had a curious, clammy quality to it. I whirled in a circle, my train flying out behind me.

"Mashiro-san?"

I was bobbed quickly through the air, as though the sweaty hands were frightened to touch me. Perhaps the voice was my imagination. I glanced all round me, but the only certain culprit was the face of the Kouen boy in front of me, who was now far too busy trying to waltz to whisper my name once more.

It was the sort of face that inspired no confidence. A meekly accommodating mouth, a jaw that he hadn’t quite grown into yet. One could tell that his hair was a rat’s nest when it wasn’t forcibly slicked back. Even now, a few hairs were escaping the confines. He looked obedient. Except for the eyes, which focused with intensity.

Was there ever anything behind Nagihiko’s eyes? I felt like I ought to have noticed, but all I could think is that so often they were glazed over, as though he wanted to be somewhere else. Or full of pity, like when he held the bamboo stick in his hand.

I stumbled and grabbed his shoulder harder. The meek boy laughed, as though it was funny that he was a poor dancer.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it? But you haven’t changed at all.”

What in the devil was he talking about? I box-stepped to the side, crossing my arms every which
way and… oh, how did this go…

I didn’t think he knew much, either. So intent was I on not looking stupid that it came as a surprise when the violins came to a stop followed by the unfamiliar sound of musicians putting their instruments into rest position.

My calves screamed for release and the entire underside of my foot was throbbing with pain. Who did this for fun?

I thought of Austrians waltzing until one in the morning. It was probably why they looked so bad-tempered all the time. Everybody else seemed just as perky as before, but none more than Yamabuki Sāya, who seemed to be still trying to dance from the beginning again.

“I don’t suppose you remember me,” the boy across from me said, seeming not much out-of-breath. How?

I looked at him. “No.”

“Excuse me. My name is Kirishima Fuyuki,” he said, with a dainty bow.

Kirishima Fuyuki. Before my eyes, his face de-aged. The eyes stayed intense, but the jaw softened, nose rounded, hair fell out of its unnatural state back into a shaggy mess.

… No, I still didn’t recognize him at all. But I did know the name, only because of *Nadeshiko*. She had done this. *She had set me up.* Wasn’t she the one who remembered more than me, after all? The impassioned boy who confessed his very earnest feelings for me, all but five years ago. Kirishima, wasn’t it?

No, that was crazy. Nadeshiko didn’t care about me at all. It was just a horrible coincidence. *Ugh.*

“Ugh,” I said.

“S-sorry?”

“Oh,” I amended.

Distractedly, I wondered what Kirishima’s family did for a living and how rich they were. Tuition was negligible to a well-off farming family, meaning that of all the men in this room, half were middle-class families, half were commoners, and perhaps a peer or two. The peer was accounted for in Hotori’s son. The rest was up to guesswork.

“I was surprised to recognize you. It’s a strange coincidence, I suppose.”

Most girls would like a husband like this, I thought. He was very polite, not ugly, and very, very not-over-forty.

“I think I might have seen you in Kamikawa village, during the festival,” Kirishima mused out loud. I violently flashed back to Nagihiko and I stuck between the booth stand.

“Oh,” I lied, for some reason. “No. I wasn’t there.”

“Uh… oh?”

Kirishima looked perplexed. Luckily for him, we were interrupted.

“Ahem.”
The voice was female, but the face was of some Kouen boy. I would tell you his name or describe his appearance, but to be honest, but his was the type of face you forgot the second you stopped looking. What made the sight a terrifying one was Nadeshiko’s smiling Noh mask behind him, steering his prow towards me.

“Forgive my interruption,” Nadeshiko said, not even looking to see who she was begging forgiveness from. “─san, if I could be so presumptuous as to introduce you to my school-friend, Mashiro-san…”

His name was swallowed up in the conversation before I could catch it. Nadeshiko’s speech was particularly obsequious and self-deprecating today, whether out of need for politeness or overcompensation. Whatever the reason, it was obnoxious. I wished she would hurry up, leave, and go hold Amu’s hand like she clearly wanted.

“Apologies to be so presumptuous,” Faceless Boy started. I felt terror.

Oh, no. He was speaking the same way!

“If I could humble myself to be so forward with someone I have just made the honoured acquaintance of, my dishonorable feet are causing inconvenient soreness to my foolish body, to my complete and utter regret, I wanted to say, but didn’t.”

Kirishima looked haggard. Nadeshiko's smile was frozen in place. As a rule, I didn’t listen to my gut. But tonight, it felt funny, like it was trying to tell me something.

“I suppose,” I said, proffering a hand.

A waltz would take me out of Nadeshiko’s proximity and save me from Kirishima. Two insufferable birds. One stone.

Two stones. My feet felt like they had rocks tied to them.

I could have thanked the stars when the boy in question seemed to not care for conversation at all. He lead me forward and seemed content to stare at me as we circled the floor. Why even ask, then?

As I danced— or should I say, as he danced, and I went along grudgingly— I turned over my shoulder to catch glimpses of the room. Utau was on the floor with someone, though she looked as though she couldn’t have cared less to be. One German diplomat and his wife were on the floor, too, doing a far better job than the rest of us. I wondered if they could out-waltz even the likes of Nadeshiko. Fujisaki-sensei’s face was visible on my second whirl, deep in the shadow of the pendant lights. She wasn’t dancing. She didn’t look happy. What was the old bat cross about this time? I wasn’t even doing anything with her son.

Manami, too, looked sullen on the sidelines, as did three of what I thought might be Yamabuki Sāya’s cronies. As we formed two rows, girls on one side, boys on the other, I found out why. At the end of the row was a boy who stuck out from the blur of Kouen students. He was on the shorter side, and even from a distance I could see the delicate construction of his face, the long lashes, the same vague, smiling curve to his mouth.

How different from his father was Hotori’s son! His partner was none other than Yamabuki Sāya, who gave me a dirty look as we turned in the centre of the rows. Amu was probably devastated. He clearly couldn’t be that wonderful if he was gormless enough to pick Sāya as a dance partner over Amu. Perhaps simply spineless.

“Mashiro-san?” the blob across from me asked, querulously.
“Yes?”

“Has anybody ever told you that you’re beautiful?”

“Sometimes,” I said, still looking at Hotori-san. My dislike for him deepened. I wondered what it was like to have other things going for me, like Amu, or Uttau.

When the second waltz finished, Fujisaki-sensei applauded loudest of all. Wheezing, I stepped off the sidelines. My knees were well and truly knocking together under the drapery of my skirt. _Pain! Pain!_

“Would you like to dance again, Mashiro-san?”

“No,” I said. Was he _insane_? “I’m tired.”

He offered to get me water—or sake, if I would prefer? Then he advised that I should sit down. Then three other boys in varying stages of boring began arguing with him about the merits of rest and turn order. Between words, they stole glances at me as though checking to make sure I was still listening. I was not.

I allowed one of them to help me onto a cushion (seiza, again—why?). The devil made work for idle hands. If they were going to buzz around being a nuisance, I ought to put them to work.

“You there,” I said, to all five of them. I reached behind me and subtly massaged my ankle. “That short boy over there. Is that the Viscount Hotori-sama’s son?”

“It is,” one of them responded. “Hotori Tadase-kun is his name.”

“What’s he like?” I said, furrowing my brow. If Amu wanted to pounce, she ought to do it now. He had declined a second dance from Yamabuki Sāya, and now had his back turned to me, engaged in conversation with the older men in the gold-braided dress uniforms.

This question did not please my little fan club. I could see the dilemma that awaited them: speak well, and they would look bad. Speak poorly, and they would still look bad. Say nothing, and they would still look bad, because they already looked bad.

I was informed that Hotori Tadase was kind, warm-hearted, well-educated, of good breeding, and calm under duress. He bore everything with the classic Japanese spirit of resigned acceptance. He was the leader of a sub-unit, and those who worked below him respected and relied on him.

They were equally quick to pepper his praises with innocuous little comments.

“I wonder what he really thinks of us commoners.”

“He’s timid, and not very manly at all.”

“He has too many ideals, sometimes.”

I mulled this over, continuing to stare at the back of his head. He was still listening politely to the men in the military uniforms. They had the jovial air that business partners of your parents took so often with their children in those days.

“Who is he speaking to?” I asked.

The boys looked at each other.
“Officers of the Imperial Army,” the first began. “Corporal Kusanagi’s on the right—”

“The newly-appointed Chief of Press Relations, Chief Tsukumo, in the centre—”

“— And Major-General Yamabuki on the left.”

These names meant nothing to me, so I made no attempt to commit them to memory. I would kick myself for this later. Coincidence is often crueller than fate.

A crowd of Seiyo students passed in front of me, fistfuls of their gowns in their hands, trotting after a group of Kouen students. Manami was in their number, laughing. Oh, good, she managed to find a dance partner. Where was Amu?

When the crowd cleared, a pretty girl in a kimono was across from Hotori, smiling.

Hotori Tadase turned with a big smile to greet her, and—I could not believe my eyes—raised her gloved hand to his mouth to kiss it.

My God!

I watched this whole affair with disgust. They both had the strange, overly-formal body language of people who had been friends for a long time but were conscious of their role in public.

As the girl touched her chignon and turned her neck, I recognized the straight eyebrows and long neck in an instant. How did I not recognise her? It was Nadeshiko!

Maybe she really was stealing Hotori. It wouldn’t be difficult. They looked comfortable together, faintly smiling, but eyes pained. I would have given an eyetooth to hear what they were saying. Just as I began attempting to lip-read, Nadeshiko unfolded a fan and pressed it to her earlobe, obscuring their lower faces.

Unbelievable!

“I could do with water, actually,” I said, offering my hand to be held up.

“Right aw—”

“Five cups of it,” I added. “From the well outside.”

It was ridiculous what people would do, should you only ask. They all allayed me with promises of hydration and made themselves scarce. Once more, I was alone.

I wondered what it would be like if I was invisible to everybody but women. It occurred to me for the first time that ever since I stepped foot into this golden room, men had not stopped looking at me. Even as I skirted the perimeter, weaving in and out of people, a thousand beady bug-eyes swivelled to focus on the surface of my skin. Seiyo was used to me. These men were not.

I put my hand on one of the wooden slats, next to a painted paulownia tree upon the screen. Tentatively, I tried it. It slid open a foot or so, enough for me to wiggle through.

Blissful darkness!— and a few instrument cases.

I skirted the hallway, occasionally sliding the door open to peek into the main room to look for Amu. I fantasized over how I would gleefully inform her that Hotori was feminine, spineless and snobby, and that she’d be far better off wedding a street-roamer than the son of a Viscount. But I was growing far closer to the Viscount’s son himself, who was still in boring conversation with
Nadeshiko and a group of other Kouen boys.

I couldn’t let Nadeshiko see me. She would drag me into the conversation about, I don’t know, moon-viewing, or introduce me to more inane boys who wanted to dance with me. Or worst of all, she would keep ignoring me. And anyhow, who was I to intrude on the boring boy’s club she was hosting? A man needed male friends. Or so I supposed.

I slowed to a stop as I grew perpendicular with the group.

“... Fujisaki-san really is the classic Japanese beauty,” a boy was saying. Not Hotori Tadase, thankfully for him, or I would have gone and married his stupid father out of spite. “Like something come to life from a woodblock.”

Quietly, I kicked the door open a finger’s width, only to find myself partially blocked by the broad back of one of the Germans again. Thanks to the foreigner’s considerable size, much like a tree trunk, I was easily obscured from view.

Over his shoulder, Yamabuki Saya was talking rapidly to her father, no doubt about getting snubbed by Hotori after a single dance. Her neglected friends seemed to be conspiring with Watarai Misaki on how to get his attention. But Hotori Tadase himself seemed patiently mesmerized by Nadeshiko, the performance, the moving silk-screen.

“I’ve known Amakawa-sensei for some time,” Nadeshiko lamented from behind the mask, laughing, “But I never knew that Amakawa-sensei’s lessons to future soldiers was on empty flattery.”

“Empty flattery!” one of the boys exclaimed. “That’s only if it’s false!”

“My mother saw fit to give me only her looks,” Nadeshiko lamented, fanning herself. “Don’t compliment an egg for its pedigree hen!”


“Here, then— you dance like something not of this earth. You seem to transcend form and inhabit something beyond the pale. I am safe in saying such a thing, because I know how hard you’ve worked to reach it.”

“You see?” Nadeshiko said, lightly slapping Hotori on his shoulder with her fan. “How easily he humbles me!”

The radiant smile was quite genuine. I thought again of what Nadeshiko had said to Amu in the rickshaw, about Hotori knowing everything about her. Could he know, and not mind? I was not naïve enough not to know about the appeal of young boys in the theatre. My eyes narrowed mistrustfully through the slit between the screens.

We see in others what we fear in ourselves. It is, perhaps, the ugliest self-preservation tactic known to psychology. The man who sees dishonesty and cruelty everywhere he looks believes himself justified in holding it within himself. If he allows his belief to lapse in a moment of weakness, he sees something more horrible than mankind’s faults: himself, as he is in the eyes of others.

I know this, because I saw mine on the golden surface of Nadeshiko’s fan, in every refraction of light off the silk thread. A girl of seventeen, with blotchy pink skin, a pretty dress, a wild tangle of curls pulled back from her neck. Hungry eyes. An open mouth. Mesmerized, dazzled, paralyzed by something she wanted to understand. Hiding behind a crowd of people only to hang off every word Nadeshiko spoke.
The moving pictures and soppy books would lead me to believe that the realization is passionate or pleasurable. It seizes Hikaru Genji with fervor to the point that he breaks-and-enters. It turns to cruelty and drives one to madness in the books of the English.

But for me, it was slow and sticky dread. I was standing at the bottom of a well, and the water was rising. It had slowly dripped inside me for over a year. By the time it was pooling round my legs, I had not thought to look down, and now… now….

“You would say that about any woman!” the boy next to Hotori Tadase scoffed. I nodded in agreement.

“No, he wouldn’t,” said a second. There was a ripple of polite sniggering.

“You were with Watarai-san, weren’t you?” said the first.

“Yeah,” said the second, who spoke rather blandly. “Girls in this day and age are scary… my father always says that the husband initiates, and the wife obeys. What happened to that?”

There was some muttering at this. Evidently, nobody knew what to make of us. I searched angrily for Nadeshiko’s expression, but there wasn’t any. As expected, her face was frozen in her usual slight smile.

“Nobody wants a woman that’s too passive,” said the second. “Dead fish belong on a plate. Right, Nadeshiko-san?”

Nadeshiko-san vanished behind her fan, but Naghiko’s eyes smiled viciously over the top.

“I don’t need tuna to wiggle for me before I bite into it,” he said, in Nadeshiko’s voice. “I accept any hospitality I am offered.”

I grit my teeth, and a prickle arose at the base of my neck. What kind of girl would say such a thing? I wanted to say to her, preferably as I shoved her into a lake. Do you want everyone to figure out you’re a sleazeball? Can you not even resist?

Hotori seemed to be thinking the same thing; he meaningfully cleared his throat. Nadeshiko smiled at him.

“You shouldn’t complain, Shouta-kun,” a third voice that I couldn’t see said, disapprovingly. “Mashiro-san is one of the most beautiful girls here by spades. Didn’t you see how everyone was fighting over her?”

“I don’t know about that,” said another one. “Hoshina-san could give her a run for her money, and she’s heiress to a small fortune. If I was well-born enough to get my hands on that…”

A jaunty debate broke out over who was really the most beautiful woman here from Seiyo Academy. At first, I wondered why on earth they were having this discussion when an alleged woman was standing right there. But as I eavesdropped, it came to my attention that Nadeshiko was subtly allowing herself to become part of the furniture. She backed up, closer and closer to the screen where I was crouched, listening. Her shadow enlarged, until I could practically feel the warmth of her back against my cheek through the double-paper pane.

Unfortunately, the conversation was coming back to me.

“It’s always a pity when a pretty face isn’t accomplished,” one of them lamented. “Was it that awful?”
“She dances like her feet are made of iron,” Shouta said, dispassionately. “I don’t believe she knows how. She was staring off into the distance, too, like she didn’t even want to be there.”

“Ah,” said another one, who seemed to find the whole thing very funny. “Looks like a doll, and dances like one too!”

Military officers did not laugh, but there was a smattering of appreciative chuckles at this. I couldn’t take anymore. I shoved myself into an upright position— but never one for coordination —

Three fingers went through the golden paper with a gentle pop! They sunk into the silk backing of Nadeshiko’s mauve obi.

I had seen Nadeshiko dress enough times to know that this was no reason to panic: an obi is wrapped over so much padding that I could have hit her with a ten-ton lorry round the midsection and she wouldn’t have felt a thing.

However, two key things spelled my failure in this regard:

Firstly, the paper tore. If Nadeshiko hadn’t yet heard the rip, she would soon see it.

Secondly, she was wearing her obi in the modern, stylish way tonight— wide, but no padding, like the normal stiffening board or pillow to give shape to the knot. Where she might have been numb to any pokes to the backside any other day, tonight, she was not.

Nadeshiko squeaked. A brown eye appeared through the three-inch-tear.

I ran.

Or more appropriately, I scuttled. Like a rat, or a shrew, or a raccoon-dog, or any other small, ungainly animal with no grace, no ability, no talent. Just looks. My face went hot. I violently wished for Kusukusu to be here, to make a silly face, or tell a joke to make it less awful. But a joke needs an audience; it can’t be told to an empty hallway.

I had reached the corner where the orchestra was seated. Reluctantly, I looked behind me, and slid the screen open to re-enter the room. I bumped someone’s shoulder, and was about to move, when —

It was Yaya and Utau, talking in the corner.

Of course. Of course. I had someone almost as good as Kusukusu. Yaya. Nadeshiko couldn’t attack me, or accuse me of eavesdropping, if I was talking to Yaya.

“Yaya,” I started, reaching for her arm. “Do you w…”

Yaya turned, and I started in surprise. Her eyes were full of tears, threatening to brim over, and her lip was trembling.

“Yaya?” I asked, now perplexed.

“Leave me alone, Rima-tan!” she huffed, now very blotchy-looking indeed. People were starting to stare. Nearby, Hotori and a Kouen boy with glasses were looking on with concern. Large Forehead Girl, Marimo, was goggling at us. Behind Hotori, Nadeshiko swept into view, looking panicked.

Seeing Nadeshiko, I was spurred to do exactly as Yaya asked. In shock, I turned and left.
I didn’t know where I was going. Nobody came after me. I walked, turned, dodged Saya, Manami, Haruka, Ayaka, Misaki, and a dozen more classmates. I pulled open the screen door, and promptly walked directly into the hallway. I opened the second, outside screen door without thinking.

It was a stupid idea. The fortress was built on a huge stone foundation, high up on all sides. I wasn’t expecting it to open. When it did, I saw myself facing an inner courtyard, damp with rain.

Or rather, what used to be an inner courtyard. Unlike Seiyo’s, it had been filled with cement. Weeds gasped for air. An empty clothesline, a single stone memorial commemorating some soldier, the small shrine that contained the Imperial Rescript on Education.

The rain was still hammering down from the blackened sky, running off the gables in a steady spit-stream. It was madness to stay out here, where the rain could damage my hair further, or wet the silk of my dress, or give me a cold because I had been too prideful to find my coat before stepping outside. But it was quiet here, and not full of people analyzing my every move.

I crouched down under the awning of the porch, and my legs wobbled. I took one shoe off, and then the other, and lined them up neatly next to me before pulling my legs to my chest. The damp cold settled on my forearms and made the hairs stand on end, but it felt like a cool sheet on my still-hot face.

Nadeshiko, laughing at me with stupid Hotori and the rest of them. Iron in my feet. Yaya being cross with me. I ought to have expected this. I wondered why I didn’t.

I was busy, I thought, chin digging into my knees, stomach hollow and wrenching. Too busy being jealous of everyone else to see what was going on inside me.

I wanted to cry, just to perform an action, but I hadn’t cried in years. I strained for a few minutes, but my eyes got no wetter. Then, I wanted Amu. Then I wanted my mother, before changing my mind and wanting someone else’s mother. I cycled through my wants and wishes like this for some time, until the cold well and truly began to settle inside my bones. My teeth began to chatter.

The outer screen slid open.

“Amu?” I asked my knees, wetly.

Maybe it was Utau, come to tell me how wrong I was.

“Mashiro-san?” a voice asked, awkwardly.

I turned my head. Hair, like a rooster.

Kirishima?! Kirishima Fuyuki? I could have groaned with disappointment.

“Yes?” I said, politely, as though he had interrupted me doing something important.

“What are you…” He shifted from foot to foot, pushing his hair back again. It didn’t work, and the spikes came back into his eyes. I was reminded that he wasn’t un-handsome. “I suppose you’re catching some fresh air?”

“I am,” I said, my whole face screwed up in a babyishly sad expression.

“Oh,” he said. “You might get sick out here in this weather.”

He seemed to be steeling his courage to follow this up. He was wringing his hands and furrowing
his eyebrows. I therefore stayed silent.

“Mashiro-san, if I’m not interrupting you… would it be alright to ask if you’d do me the honour of the next dance?”

He wasn’t bad-looking. Clean-cut, kind face. I felt sorry for him.

“It’s alright to ask,” I said, “But I’m going to say no.”

Kirishima wilted. I felt as though I had stepped on a daisy.

“I understand, of course,” he said, with a brave smile. “Thank you.”

“My shoes are hurting my feet,” I added. “I don’t have a lot of stamina, so I’m tired.”

He looked at me, blankly.

“I’m quite clumsy, and not good at dancing.” If Kirishima really wanted to get a piece of Rima Mashiro, he could get a piece of Rima Mashiro. Who cared? “It’s not enjoyable for me at all. But if you want to sit here, that’s alright.”

Kirishima opened his mouth. Then he closed it. He looked up at the rain, and then me, curled up in the fetal position in my backless gown. With some trepidation, he took a careful seat next to me, leaving a very hefty berth of two-and-a-half people’s widths.

“Mashiro-san, are you quite sure you’re alright…?”

“I don’t feel particularly ill,” I said, even though I was freezing. I stared at the Kouen military uniform enviously. Up close, I could see that it was a black, padded twill, with a high military collar and five gold buttons. It was belted. It looked warm.

He shut up at this, staring blankly out at the courtyard.

“Strange,” he murmured.

I raised my head from my knees.

“Only… the courtyard looks so strange, when it’s empty. We do drills out here, sometimes.”

“In th-the rain?” I asked, still cold.

“Especially in the rain,” Kirishima responded, gloomily, forgetting to be nervous around me. “Once, they had my platoon stand sentry outside the western building during a mudslide.”

I marveled at his words. All this time, I had complained to myself of the various abuses: the embroidery, the dancing, the Dragon, Kichigai-sensei being her crazy self, but they would never dream of intentionally exposing us to terrible weather conditions. We were silk moths, to be cherished for future breeding. Not soldiers.

“Gross,” I said, supplying much to this conversation.

“Yeah,” he said, sliding comfortably into an Osaka dialect without realizing. “Two of us got trench foot. I felt like I’d never get dry again, but I’m sure worse awaits us overseas, so…”

I had nearly forgotten about the Japanese declaration of war on China. Suddenly, sulking like this felt very childish. I looked at Kirishima, properly, this time.
He couldn’t be older than I was. He was the same age, at best. Seventeen. Too young to leave our little island nation and go to a strange country with a gun in his hand. If I was his mother, I would be railing at the gods.

“What’s trench foot?” I asked.

Kirishima chose this moment to recall that he was speaking to a lady. Someone with good breeding, like Hotori, or Nadeshiko, would have told me that it was too distressing for a woman’s ears. But Kirishima was not high-born enough to know this.

“If you stand for too long in mud and cold water, and it gets into your boots,” Kirishima told me. “Your feet turn really red, or blue, and you stop being able to feel them. Swells up. I think it starts rotting...”

Kirishima must have seen my wide eyes, because he hastily added, “It’s not so bad! I’ve had it. You just have to get inside and take the boot off... but nobody wants to do that, because it smells awful.”

He saw he had gone too far, despite his middle-class sensibilities, and looked aghast. Kirishima did not realize that this only added to my vivid mental image of a whole pack of boys, Hotori included, protesting taking their boots off their rotting feet because it would smell so bad.

I burst out laughing.

“Hahaha! ” My teeth chattered through my laughter. “Haha... hahahahaha...”

“Mashiro-san...” he began, as though wanting to check for the third time that I wasn’t certifiably insane. But instead, his expression softened, and he started to laugh weakly, as well. The black-twill shoulder moved closer.

“You look so different when you laugh,” he said, in pleased surprise.

I felt too sorry to tell him that most women look different when their expression changed. I knew this because the stark contrast between Nadeshiko’s Noh mask and Nagihiko howling with laughter could have been two different people.

“Yes,” I said, sadly. Thinking of Nadeshiko brought the hollow chill back, settling somewhere just above my digestive tract.

“No in a bad way,” Kirishima amended. “I like it very much.”

The chill fanned out within me. He was kind and honest. I thought of how nice it would be to have a husband like this, who said what he meant and liked you for who you were. Could I close my eyes and learn to nurture pity into a facsimile of affection? Could I learn to stop chasing the reflection of moonlight on water and be content with the sun?

Something warm covered my hand braced against the porch. It was Kirishima’s broader one, shy, but seeking nonetheless. My little hand froze underneath his as though glued there.

I wanted to laugh at myself, scornfully. Afraid of Kirishima, timid as a mouse, who I had just called kind and honest! I loathed every bit of it. I needed to go. But how could I...

“Oh, wow,” a smooth voice said behind me, though it did not sound all that amazed. “My bad.”

Utau was standing behind us, backlit by the light of the ball, like an angel sent from the heavens.
“Hoshina-san,” I said, sliding my hand out from underneath Kirishima’s. “Were you looking for me?”

“Yeah, I was,” she said, making to leave. “But I can give you two some privacy.”

Kirishima went red. *Girls in this day and age are scary*, indeed. I was beginning to think that my critic had a point.

“What is it?” I said, standing up and picking up my shoes in my hand. My hem was damp, and my hose was full of picks in it from the stone. The cold rain worked wonders on my feet, bright red through my nylons and looking suspiciously trench-footy.

Utau waited until I was out of Kirishima’s earshot.

“Poor guy,” she said in a low voice, pointing with her chin at Kirishima. “Does he know you’re immune?”

I knew full well what she meant by this and had the sense to look affronted.

“What do you want?”

“I want Yaya to stop crying on my shoulder about how cruel and heartless Rima-tan is. You need to apologize.”

“For—?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Utau snapped. “Whatever triangle you have with Amu and Fujisaki-san is none of my business, it’s pathetic that I’m getting involved, really, but if you keep treating Yaya selfishly, I’ll have—”

Kirishima awkwardly stood up and sidled through the screen that Utau had failed to close behind her.

“I… I will leave you ladies to it,” he said, touching his hand to his still-pink brow. We both fell silent until we heard the door slide shut.

“I know,” I said.

“Huh?” Utau snarled, thinking I had said something rude.

“I know,” I repeated, numbly. “I’ll say something to her.”

It would have been nice if Utau had given me some Amu-ish feedback at this, such as praising my growth or purging me of my negative heart. Instead, she dropped her hands to her sides and looked at me suspiciously.

“You okay?” she asked. I was getting asked that quite a bit tonight.

“I’ve been better,” I said, rubbing my arms and moving towards the warmth of the castle. “Where is she?”

As it happened, I did not have to look very hard. She was waiting on the other side of the sliding door (eavesdropping), wiping her nose on her glove and sniffing. I almost admired Yaya’s lack of decorum in public. I would have never cried and wiped my nose in front of a whole assembly of diplomats, but here she was, wetly blowing her nose into a borrowed handkerchief while a whole crowd of people looked on.
“Yaya,” I said, in what I thought was a very soothing voice, “Don’t hemorrhage snot where people can see you.”

“What does Rima-tan care!” Yaya wailed. Hotori-san and a boy with glasses were staring, the former with some concern. Marimo was nearby, heralding Nadeshiko, who had just stepped off the floor and out of some boy’s embrace. My stomach flipped over.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” I muttered, grabbing her arm.

“Yaya’s being kidnapped!” Yaya called over her shoulder.

“No, she’s not,” I replied, huffily.

The warmth of the room still hadn’t fully settled back into me, and my dress was still dripping on the floor. Rather than go back out into the cold, I wrestled Yaya through the closest screen again. We stumbled into the soothing sound of a darkened, screened hallway echoing with the pitter-patter of rain.

“This way,” I lead her northwards down the hallway with confidence, despite not having the faintest idea where I was going. With surprise, I found a sloping board, stretching up into a square hole in the ceiling.

I pray nobody makes the mistake I made in climbing these. The stairs in Japanese fortresses were narrow, steep, and no more than a set of skinny boards hammered into an incline. They were made for someone three inches shorter ascending in straw sandals with good grip, not weak-calved teenagers in heeled Western shoes.

“Where are you taking me!” Yaya cried, as I shoved her up it first. She clambered up it on all fours, like a monkey.

“Somewhere quiet,” I said, annoyed. “Where I can hear myself think.”

To my surprise, Yaya clammed up at this, stopping at the top to wait for me. I was glad I was still holding my shoes in my hand. The wood was decidedly unkind to my already-abused stockings.

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“I’m sorry,” I told the katanas.

“Huh?” Yaya said, wetly.

“I’m apologizing,” I said, offended. “You were crying because I was being selfish, weren’t you?”

Yaya didn’t hold grudges. She threw her arms around my neck and bawled into my shoulder.
“Rima-taaaaan!” she wailed. “I don’t mind! I wasn’t even angry! I’m being a baby! You don’t have to do anything!”

“Okay,” I said, patting her heaving back, “That’s a little extreme.”

“You can have all my food!”

“Not necessary. Here, let’s just…"

I was going to suggest that we go back down and see what Amu was doing, or maybe see if we could get lost inside this castle and never have to go back to school. But instead, as we returned to the narrow staircase, I heard both a lower voice and a girl sputtering. Sputtering?

I pressed my lashes up against the wooden slats of the window, peering into the corridor. A girl in a red gown. A tall man in a military uniform with his back to me. They were wrapped in an embrace, as though at any moment, an external force might tear them apart. He was murmuring in her ear. I felt inexplicable envy.

I realized, all at once, that the girl wasn’t sputtering on what to say. I grabbed Yaya’s hand and hissed.

“So much for chaperones,” I whispered. “Yaya, let’s go this way.”

“Why?” Yaya said, either missing the point or truly living on an alien planet.

Together, we went through a network of rooms. I knew that if we could just hit a wall, we could then circle the perimeter until we found a second staircase, surely, surely!

We approached a screen painted with a single orange lily, and I began to hear the muffled murmurs of conversation and Strauss music below us. We must be close to the stairwell, then. I sighed with relief and trepidation. Nadeshiko and Amu and Utau might be waiting downstairs, and I would have to find some way to keep it together.

A fuzzy, grey circle appeared on the screen, which was painted with a single, menacing orange lily. I thought it might be someone looking for us, but Yaya pulled me back. Another grey spot appeared. They both widened into human silhouettes against the rice paper. One was elegant and feminine, and I could see a fan held out in front of her, as though in defense. The other was slightly taller, bulkier, but otherwise of indeterminate gender.

Were we walled in on both sides by people? I cast my eyes around, slowly backing up and turning to Yaya with silent eyes. She stared back, not knowing what to do.

“Ah, Tsubaki-san,” a deep voice slurred on the other side of the screen.

I wondered why it sounded so off-kilter. Later, I would realize that this was how all men sound when they’re too drunk to self-moderate their words.

“I’ve been trying to get you alone all night. You’ve been avoiding my eyes. It’s been, what… sixteen years? Too long!”

Tsubaki. My blood froze. Fujisaki Tsubaki. The Dragon of Seiyo. Our headmistress. Root of all my suffering. We shouldn’t be here.

“General Yamabuki,” the voice of my headmistress said, softly. “I beg your forgiveness. I’m afraid I’ve been quite distracted tonight with all the delegations that I did not notice your presence. It’s
been a long time, hasn’t it?”

I pinched Yaya’s wrist, fearing being overheard. Leave! Leave! Leave! We could go back the other way. I would much rather interrupt the snogging students than see the Dragon’s face when she realized we had been eavesdropping on her private conversation.

“I had the pleasure of making your charming daughter’s acquaintance,” the man’s voice said. It was a nice thing to say, but not the way he said it. “You must be proud.”

I stopped, stock-still.

“Rima,” Yaya’s voice whispered in my ear. “Let’s…”

I shook my head, unable to move.

“You flatter me,” Fujisaki-sensei said, with pride in her voice. “Nadeshiko’s accomplishments are all her own.”

In her shock, Yaya bumped into the screen behind us. The wood rattled on its slides.

“Who’s there?” General Yamabuki said, sharply.

It fell deafeningly silent for the then-most terrifying ten seconds of my life.

“Oh, dear,” Fujisaki’s smaller silhouette fretted. “It sounds like something fell downstairs. We ought to…”

“Now that I think about it,” Yamabuki interrupted, shadow looming. “How many children do you have, now?”

“Just the one,” Fujisaki-sensei said, softly.

“I heard years ago that you had a daughter who died in infancy. Fever, wasn’t it?”

“You are mistaken,” she said. Her shadow was as still as a paper cutout. “It was a son.”

“My condolences,” General Yamabuki mused. I felt mildly nauseous. “The death of an only son is the deepest wound a mother can receive. To have nobody to take care of you in your old age…”

Her fingers arranged and re-arranged themselves on the fan.

“I’m afraid Amakawa-sensei will be missing me, with all there is to do,” Fujisaki-sensei said distantly. “Shall we go back down and tell him you’re here? He loves to reminisce with anyone who remembers old Kyoto.”

“Fuck Kyoto,” General Yamabuki said. The shadows joined at the arm, as though he had grabbed her.

Yaya opened her mouth to scream. I clapped a hand over her mouth and dragged her head down to my level. I breathed as little as possible; the air whistled in and out of my nose.

“I don’t want to talk to the fruit—” I didn’t know this was a slur for something else. “— who helped my mistress run off with a fucking okama. You’ve got more balls than your husband to lie to my face, not that he’s much competition.”

Fujisaki-sensei played the part of the wounded gazelle convincingly. Her voice took on a plaintive
quality, though I thought she could have disemboweled him if she wanted.

“You would slander the name of a happily married mother, for something that happened sixteen years ago?”

“Seventeen,” he growled. “You made a cuckold of me, and you’ll make a cuckold of the Emperor, withholding an able man from him so long as this war continues.”

“My son is dead!”

The fan snapped shut, and her shadow twisted. General Yamabuki grunted— she broke his grip. The fan was over her head, quivering.

“He died sixteen years ago, in the cholera epidemic of the tenth year of Taishō! Go home to your wife, Major-General Yamabuki. I have no son with which to feed your army!”

“No?” he said, breathing hard. The shadow was doubled over. “Are you sure about that? Like father, like son. If you are lying, it’s a treason charge, little Tsubaki.”

Fujisaki-sensei didn’t say anything. Her arm was still braced above her head.

To my disbelief, Major-General Yamabuki retreated, shadow melting into the floor. Fujisaki’s remained, alone.

Her head lowered into her shaking hands. She sank to her knees.

I felt like doing the same. It was Yaya who forced me to move, pulling me back through the screen. We hurried through the twisting rooms and blackened hallways without interruption, sweaty hands clasped tight. We ran into no other living soul on the second floor of Kouen Castle’s keep.
Ladies and Gentlemen... welcome to the plot.

Updates and bug fixes:

- *HUGE thanks* to nadenagi at Fanfiction.net for looking over my CSS of their own volition and making it mobile-responsive. Thanks to them, this thing is now readable on phones!
- Changed Japanese web font support to add Kozuka Mincho Pro, so if you have the Adobe International Language font package, your reading experience is about to get a helluva lot less ugly.
- Sexy newspaper headline and typewriter font additions, loading tweaks, etc.
- In the process of cross-posting to Wattpad. If I do, you can expect Wattpad-exclusive banners, heavy editing of early chapters for continuity, and possibly... a prologue?!

Night mode is still not here, because I can't friggin' figure out how to get it working without Javascript.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CHAPTER 13

Yamato

I never asked for this.

I feared for Nagihiko, hated him, bitterly loved him. I raged on Fujisaki-sensei’s behalf. I raged at her, too, for forcing me to keep a secret on threat of fraud. If I had known that I was safeguarding anything more than a family tradition, would I have still agreed to do it? Did I ever have a choice?

*My mother has a habit of commissioning a hut, and then demanding a castle.* I, too proud to listen, had assisted its architect.
If I failed my duty—if Nagihiko was discovered to be male—and if word reached the enlistment office… I spiralled downward. Would he be drafted for the incident in China? The more I thought about it, the more it didn’t make any sense! If Kouen Academy’s graduating class was not yet called to colours, why would Nagihiko, an untrained seventeen-year-old? If Yamabuki was anything like his daughter, he was probably throwing around empty threats.

“Rima-tan?” Yaya whispered, frightened. Hearing the Major-General shout had shaken her.

“We need to hurry,” I said, clambering down the narrow staircase.

“Why?”

All I could think of was that right now, there was nothing standing between Major-General Yamabuki and Nadeshiko but some social niceties. If he wanted to, he could catch Fujisaki-sensei in her bald-faced lie right now.

We burst into the ballroom, only to be greeted with the scene of a party winding down to a raucous boozefest. The pendant lamps hanging from the rafters had burned their oil down to a smoky orange. The teachers were nowhere to be seen, save Sanjō, who had a sake cup in her hand and a face redder than the Imperial flag. The translators and diplomats had raised their voices to obnoxiously drunk, bilingual volumes. Three of them were arguing. Seiyo and Kouen students were dancing and chatting in such a disorganized fashion that I couldn’t tell who was engaged and who was sitting out. The band was wheedling out something that was distinctly not Strauss.

“What time is it?” I asked, numbly.

“How should I know?” Yaya said—but at that moment, she stifled a yawn.

“Mashiro-san!” two boys chorused, coming to find me through the throng. One said, “Your water!”

I downed it in one, handing the cup back to him.

“Something stronger,” I said, frigidly.

“Right away!”

“I’m going to go find Nadeshiko,” I told Yaya out of courtesy. To my surprise, she grabbed my arm.

“You’re going to tell her what we heard?! About–” Yaya was still terrified. “About the b-brother who died? Rima-tan, you can’t!”

I forgot that Yaya had an actual brother. Her lower lip shook, and I was overwhelmed with the urge to comfort her.

“I’m not telling a soul what we heard,” I said, in a low voice. “And you shouldn’t, either. Promise?”

Yaya nodded, and grabbed my pinky with her own. We shook and parted.

As I scoured the crowd for any sight of Nadeshiko, I noted two things.

One, despite Amu’s bizarre absence, she was being excessively talked about. I felt better about being surveyed after that.
Two, I saw Amakawa visibly look both ways before slipping seamlessly into the same screen that I had earlier.

He didn’t tell us the truth either, I thought angrily. How convenient, to leave out that Nagihiko’s geisha mother was the mistress of an army general, sleeping with another man behind his back!

“He! Hell hath no fury,” I muttered to myself. Before I could finish the quote, I realised I had circled the room twice. If Nadeshiko was here, she would have shown herself.

“Utau,” I said, touching the girl’s arm. She stepped off the floor from where she had been dancing with one of the diplomats. Her already heavy-lidded eyes grew heavier when she saw me. “Have you seen Nadeshiko?”

“No,” she said. She pointed to a Kouen student’s back. “Ask Amu. She just came back.”

“Amu!” I cried with relief, descending on her. Amu handled her drink even worse than I expected. Her entire face and neck were flushed, clashing with her dress. She was missing a hairpin. No wonder I couldn’t see her earlier.

“Amu,” I said, interrupting her conversation with the glasses boy from earlier. Her marriage prospects could wait. How much time had I wasted, already? “Did you see where Nadeshiko went?”

“Wh-huh?” Amu said, slow on the uptake.

“Nadeshiko,” I repeated, urgently. How drunk was she? “She’s not here. Where did she go?”

The desperation was creeping into my voice, rising with the well-water of emotion. I felt like if I wanted to, I could let go at any moment and succumb to my despair.

“I did,” said the Kouen boy, surprising us both. He pushed his glasses up his nose. “She exited via the Eastern courtyard entrance five minutes prior.”

“I could have kissed him.”

“But I would discourage finding her unless it is an emergency,” he added, awkwardly. “She was with—”

“It’s an emergency,” I said, diving into the crowd to get to the screen. Five minutes ago? I was too late. He probably had a hand up her kimono. He was probably already ringing the military clerk call him up for a medical examination.

The one thing worse than this nightmare scenario happened: the courtyard was dark and empty.

I gazed hopelessly out at the concrete landscape. Dead in a ditch. Somewhere else. Off the property. Kidnapped? My eyes alighted on the soldier’s memorial and the small shrine to the Emperor and Empress. Impossible. The shrine was reinforced concrete and padlocked at all times. Only a nutcase would break into it.

There was nothing behind the soldier’s memorial. There was something behind the shrine. Not because I checked—but because I heard Nadeshiko’s wild peal of laughter, and an admonishing. “Major-General!”

She’s insane, I thought, as though a dose of insanity would improve the situation. It did not.
Where's the so-called princely Hotori now? I thought angrily, storming towards them—but when I thought about it, I realized that he was in no better position to do anything than I was. If Sāya was telling the truth, Major-General Yamabuki was a friend of Hotori’s father, and his army superior besides. If I held every married man in this room tonight accountable for making advances on classmates young enough to be their daughters, I...

My stomach sank.

I would be here a long time.

From my vantage point behind the memorial, I was transfixed by Nadeshiko’s laughing eyes and body language. Legs toward him, body away. Chin tilted forward, one shoulder up. His hand was firmly on her upper arm. Under the orange light, I was reminded once more of Yaya’s festival goldfish: easy to touch, but slippery to catch.

She had it under control. She could fiddle and extort grown men to her liking and had done so before. I wished I had the self-control to keep away from her.

“You remind me so much of your mother, Fujisaki-san. Two blossoms from the same branch,” Major-General Yamabuki was saying, mimicking a far more genteel nature better than Sāya could. Still, something about the pushy way he spoke reminded me of his daughter. For a minute, I almost felt pity, and wondered what living with this must be like.

“General Yamabuki has such a soft heart to think of my mother!” Nadeshiko said, deflecting to his ego like her life depended on it. Both her cheeks were dotted with an attractive plum-blossom colour, but his eyes were politely fixed on his left ear, hand braced behind him. I had seen this act before, but never quite this sloppy. Was he tipsy? I wondered if the sake was Yamabuki’s idea, to get everybody’s tongue – and reflex times – loose.

“I must say, I was lead to believe the gentleman-soldier was dead,” he lamented, taking a dainty sip. “But, truthfully… hearing you say such things gives me hope for the character of our army. I hope you’ll continue to work hard for our country’s sake.”

If I was in a better mood and the situation was less dire, I might have smiled at the way Nagihiko insincerely piled it on. As it was, I scowled. So did Major-General Yamabuki, who was evidently not getting the answer he wanted.

“I wonder,” he said, coolly and drunkenly, “If you look the same as her, underneath?”

“Major-General!” Nagihiko said, shocked, but not enough. “You’re drunk! I ought to deliver you safely back to Corporal Kusanagi.”

“You would say that,” he leered, thick fingers scrabbling at her kimono. As the fabric gaped, something hot pounded in my ears, angrier than passion, hotter than Hell.

“Major-General, I—” Nagihiko’s voice crescendo in panic. The white of her underrobe flashed before my eyes like a blaze.

“Just like your f—”

“Nadeshiko-san!”

I shouted it as loud as I could. It echoed back at me across the courtyard, flat and angry. Coming into view, I wound my hands around Nagihiko’s arm like an iron handcuff. I glanced at the Major-General like he was something on the bottom of my shoe.
“You still owe me a dance,” I said, in a voice I reserved for Amu. “The orchestra’s playing its last song of the night. Why did you leave it this long!”

I was conscious of Nagihiko staring at me with an impenetrable expression. The mask was off, but what was underneath it was no less readable. *He hates me*, I thought, still dizzy from adrenaline. I sank my fingernails into his arm, hoping it hurt. *Hate me, then, even though I’m saving you!*

I added casually, “Who’s this?”

“How rude of me,” Nagihiko said from his reverie. His arms were clamped to his chest. “This is Major-General Yamabuki, Yamabuki Sāya-san’s father.”

“I have Yamabuki-san’s daughter’s acquaintance,” I said.

“Do you, now?” said the Major-General, looking highly confused and suspicious.

“Yes,” I met his eyes mockingly. “You must be proud.”

I did not say a single word to Nagihiko the whole way back to the pavilion. As we walked into the empty hallway, he turned to me, about to say something. Ignoring him, I shoved him back-first into the golden-screened great room, storming after him with my meaty little fists clenched.

“Rima,” he said, as the violins started. Major-General Yamabuki was speaking to Corporal Kusanagi in the corner of the room, still watching Nadeshiko with red-rimmed eyes. Watching him back, I wound my hands around his neck. Nagihiko followed my gaze, confused. He could probably waltz in his sleep. Absently, as though taking a stroll, he took my hand and box stepped me backwards.

“Rima,” she tried again, wincing like she had a headache. The plum was fading from her cheeks.

“You spineless worm,” I said, savagely.

Nagihiko sighed. I felt sorry, before it was replaced by something louder, howling through me like wind through a tunnel. My hands dug into his back, and I forcefully matched his waltz-steps, refusing to look down.

“The word no needs to get in your vocabulary,” I said in a hiss, just under the sound of music. “What are you, a doormat? That was reckless endangerment. What kind of naïve fool leaves herself alone with a man? Do you know what could have happened? Do you care?”

“Do I?” Nagihiko answered, with mild interest, backing me up. He went very still, for a moment, staring at me, before swinging me to his left. “Let go.”

“What?” I said, angrily.

“Of my hand. You’re dancing it wrong.”

Still glaring, I let go. He caught me with the other one and brought me back in close. Though I was furious, I wondered if I could trick my brain into stretching this out as long as I could. To have his eyes on me alone was blissful.

“You know that I don’t have any virtue to guard,” Nadeshiko said, appealing to my logic. “I can defend myself against drunken advances.”
“Some job you were doing of it,” I said sarcastically, moving under his arm and twisting his wrist vehemently.

Nagihiko gasped in pain, and then let go, seizing my hand the right-way up. The cellos sighed. Displeased, I noted that Nagihiko had not lost his sense of grace to impairment. For a blissful musical measure, I saw our feet line up, and I found myself turning to fluid water in his hands, dancing in matched unison.

“Well done,” he said in a low, menacing voice. “You weren’t trying with others. This is the best your dancing’s been all night.”

I could have boxed his ears. I happily fantasized about open-handedly slapping him across his face. The second we were back in our dormitory room, I would grab him by his hair, force his head back and devour his mouth.

Oops. I shuddered, and the synchronization broke.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” Nadeshiko observed, misinterpreting my shudder as disgust.

“I don’t tell you anything.”

“Ah,” she sighed. “If you say so.”

She waltzed a few more measures, watching me with worry. Ironic. She ought to be worrying about herself. I wondered if I should ask him if he knew what his family register looked like, but I decided against it.

“It was kind of you to come and find me,” she finally said, but she sounded sad. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” I said, feeling like my heart was getting run through a meat-grinder. “I am holding up my end of the agreement.”

Nadeshiko fell silent at this, maybe because she knew I was right. But as the song ended and she walked me to the other side of the room, she said:

“You protect those few you count as your friends with everything you have.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“It’s something I’ve always tried to emulate,” she added, simply. “And admired.”

An apology? A confession? Or simply another cryptic, Nadeshiko observation, designed to mess with my head? No matter how much I wondered, I would never find out, so it was useless to obsess.

I wasn’t sure when or how we all piled out into rickshaws, hugging our shawls around us. I remember being wedged between Utau, wide awake, and Yaya, fast asleep on my shoulder. The Winter Triangle was rising to the northeast, heralding the frost. I wondered where the Tanabata lovers were now, pining for each other somewhere below the horizon.

The blissful thing about spending time with Utau was that she didn’t speak unless there was something to say. The stars blurred and stretched dreamily, and I felt like I would never be warm
again. It was so cold, but the rickshaw moved back and forth, as though rocking me into a stupor.

I couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment I fell asleep. I woke up at some point in the middle of the night, still in my slip and underthings, but without my dress or shoes. It took me a terrifying minute to realize that I was back at Seiyo Girls’ School – in the East Wing – in my bed with no knowledge of how I had gotten there. Like a zombie, I got out of bed and picked my way over to the other bed.

Was Nadeshiko in it? It was pitch black, with only vague, fuzzy grey shapes to guide me. In my stupor, I stretched out a hand to pat the coverlet, only to feel something warm and alive under it. My hand stopped, resting.

“Oh,” Nadeshiko sighed.

Reassured, I stumbled back to bed. When I woke up, the bed was empty. All was normal.

_Maybe things will go back to the way they were_. I had long stopped believing prayers could reach the ears of the gods, but chance rolled your number one time in ten.

The mood in the next coming weeks was a tired nostalgia. The diplomat’s ball was just the sort of tension-releasing event that would sustain most people through November. Yaya’s father had returned to his post in Taihoku and sent pages upon pages of letters and photographs, talking about what fun they would all have when Yaya returned to the colonies for the summer. I did my best not to be envious. The army was days away from taking Shanghai. The Chinese conflict would be over by the New Year. My spirits rose. Amu was suddenly breathing easier, laughing more, and stopped snapping at Nadeshiko, who in turn perked up considerably.

I hated that part.

School was tempered by the giddy knowledge that by summertime, I would be done forever. I would never have to dance another step or hold another tea ceremony. Best of all, I would only have to keep Nagihiko’s secret for eight more months. It couldn’t come a moment too soon. I wanted to be rid of my now-dangerous responsibilities, and I wanted to be rid of them now.

I hummed through literature class, swinging my legs happily and terrifying the younger girls. _You’ll see_, I thought, smugly. _You’ll learn to hate this place, too!_

I didn’t suppose I would ever see Nadeshiko ever again once I left. He knew where I lived, but Hiroshima to Tokyo was an overnight train and a transfer, and I doubt he wanted to visit again. He’d be too busy teaching dancing lessons to the younger twits at Seiyo.

With time and distance, I was certain my feelings would dry out. If they didn’t… I gnawed my lip, staring at the glossy sheen of Nadeshiko’s ponytail, swinging with every tilt of her head.

I might run into Utau and Amu, who both lived in the city. They might move away from central Tokyo when they got married, but I could live with that. I was used to being alone.

“Mashiro-san,” my literature teacher said, looking over the desk at me. “Read the next passage.”

Yaya had _The Tale of Genji_ open and was staring at me. Ugh. She pointed to the top of the passage, and I read it out in a monotone.

“Gladly would I show the world…”
“Mashiro-san,” the literature teacher interrupted. I normally liked him well enough, but today he
was irritating me. “With some ladylike sweetness in your voice, if you please.”

This was my ladylike, sweet voice! I put on the saccharine tone I used when I was trying to
wheedle something out of a man.

“Gladly would I show the world this dianthus’ beauty, if I did not fear that men would ask me for
the hedge on which it grew.”

The class giggled. At first I thought it was because I was doing a hilarious job. Then everyone
turned round in their seats to crane their heads at Nadeshiko.

I forgot that Nadeshiko and the dianthus shared the same word. I hunched my shoulders up.

“You are Genji, speaking to your beloved ward,” the teacher reminded me. If he liked Genji so
much, why didn’t he just marry him? Genji’s standards were clearly low enough; he collected
wives like stamps. “Your voice must be loving and gentle.”

Nadeshiko was three seats over, whispering to Amu. I took a modulating breath and tried again.

“‘I have kept you hidden away like a chrysalis in a cocoon.’”

Nadeshiko looked up.

“Good. Continue,” said the literature teacher, who I still was not forgiving. Eight more months, I
chanted. Eight more months.

“She answered with the verse:

‘Who cares to question whence was first transplanted
a nadeshiko that from the peasant’s lowly hedge was hither brought?’

“Great question. I wouldn’t,” I added, smarmily.

There was a smattering of laughter this time. My classmates were desperate for jokes of late. I
refused to make eye contact with Nadeshiko.

“If Lady Murasaki wanted your running commentary, Mashiro-san, I believe she would have asked
for it,” the literature teacher said, not even looking at me. “Since you have so many opinions on
Tamakazura’s conduct, you may tell us what this exchange of poems means.”

It was not often that I knew the answer to a teacher’s question. I stayed rooted to the spot.

“Mashiro-san,” the teacher said, in a voice that indicated now was not the time to be stubborn.

“Genji wishes to hoard his adopted daughter all to himself,” I said, blandly. “Because he’s
possessive and crazy. But the adopted daughter knows that men are shallow, and care nothing for a
woman’s origins and inner longings. They care only that, like a flower, she exists in the moment
for their pleasure.”

I sat down.

The teacher stared at me as though I had set my own father on fire. So did Amu. Utau, however,
looked on the brink of smirking.

“I think it is more likely that Genji is worried about her parentage being speculated over, as she is
the illegitimate daughter of his rival,” he said, slowly. “That being said, a uniquely cynical take on an oft-neglected passage. I look forward to more of your insights.”

The class laughed. Nadeshiko did not.

“You go ahead,” I said to Yaya and Nadeshiko when class finished. “I need to ask sensei something.”

“Is it about men being shallow?” Sāya said obnoxiously, bumping Amu’s shoulder on the way out. Her ho-ho-hoing echoed down the corridor.

“It’s actually about you,” I longed to say, more than anything else in the world. “Given that you are shallow and care nothing of people, I’m concerned that you’re secretly a man?”

Instead, I turned my head, gritting my teeth.

“She said,” I said, hanging around his desk. “I wanted to know if I could borrow a book, if you have it.”

The literature teacher regarded me judgementally. Women who read for pleasure were regarded as unattractively bookish at best and bluestockings at worst.

I winced at what was about to leave my mouth.

“Do you have a copy of the Penal Code?”

“The Penal Code?” he repeated. “Are you worried you are breaking the law, Mashiro-san?”

“Uh,” I hesitated. I found it a little insulting that his first assumption was criminal activity.

“You’re still a young lady. It doesn’t sit well with me to have you reading about every disgusting crime known to man.” He shuddered. “It would frighten you terribly. Why not borrow something nicer?”

“It’s not for me,” I blurted out, attempting false tears. Perhaps he would take pity on me if I pretended my family was bankrupt.

“I’m not a lawyer,” he said testily. “And neither are you. I don’t have one.”

My crocodile tears stopped short in my throat. My head fell forward onto my chest. Where else was I supposed to find out what crime I was accessorizing? I was an uneducated woman in the mountains of Hyōgo Prefecture, at least one hour’s train from any given city. What, then, was the point of literacy if my reading list was cultivated by some man?

The teacher rifled in his desk and handed me a little gold-bound book.

“Here, this is a nice read,” he said, kindly. “It’s about traditional courtship. Girls like it.”

“I hate it here.”

I looked around in surprise. My eyes landed on Utau, sitting across from us. She was staring at the two strips of dried cherry salmon on her rice with an unhappy expression.

“I know,” I said placatingly, wedging the courtship book between my knees.
“I should have gone to Manchukuo with Ikuto,” she said, bitterly.

“You don’t mean that,” Amu said, finding her voice. “Manchukuo is far. You’d miss us. And your mama...”

“I was a coward,” sneered Utau, jabbing at her rice. “I thought I could find a powerful husband and kick Director Ichinomiya out of the company, but it’s no use. Even the military is too cowardly to go up against him. Marriage would just give me another man to answer to. What’s the point?”

“Hoshina-san!” Nadeshiko said, either scandalized or sympathetic— I couldn’t tell which.

“Some women will never be made for marriage, no matter how hard the teachers try,” I said, thinking about my own situation self-pityingly.

“– Why is the army too cowardly to go up against Hoshina-san’s company?” Nadeshiko asked, surprising everyone at the table, especially me. “The army has been at odds with the major companies for years. They want to dissolve them.”

Utau looked up, menacing.

“Not dissolve them,” she said. “Nationalise them.”

“No,” I said, in a low voice. Viscount Hotori’s tour—

“Our factories have been seized by the Ministry of War,” Utau said, viciously. “Who d’you think is paying for the invasion of China? Manufacturing one-quarter of their warships and aircraft?”

“The invasion of China?” Nagihiko asked, in an are-you-sure-that’s-what-it-is kind of voice. I glared at him and resisted the urge to kick his leg. Not the time!

“Yes,” Utau replied sharply. “It’s not mine anymore– if it ever was. It’s the Emperor’s, now.”

The table fell into a gloomy silence.

“They say,” I said, clinging onto the shred of hope I had left, “That the fighting will all be over by the New Year.”

My eyes fell on Yaya, who was just poking the rice around her bowl. Utau gave me a pitying look that I didn’t like.

“No!” a girl screamed from the other end of the table. Yaya jumped. There was a clatter of dishes; several girls dropped their chopsticks on the floor, and one of the younger girls yelled in surprise.

Only one girl had a voice of that magnitude.

“Watarai-san!” Kichiga-sensei scolded, almost outdoing her in volume. “It is unladylike to roar like a wild tiger!”

Misaki Watarai staggered to her feet, cheeks shining with tears. Watarai never cried. We watched, paralyzed, as she stormed over to Yamabuki Sāya. A damp piece of paper was clutched in her hand. Like an automobile accident, I could see the collision before it happened, but was helpless to stop it.

“Your father did this!” Watarai cried, shaking the letter in her face. “I know he did–! You know Father’s too old to serve in the army, and he got called up anyway! Wh-why! A man his age can’t go to Nanking, it’s a d-d-d-death sentence– I hope the demons in Hell punish your whole family for
six generations– all because Papa printed that thing about him in the paper? Or is it because you’re so afraid of losing Hotori-san? You’re a no-good who–”

“That’s enough, Watarai!” Sanjō bellowed, appearing out of nowhere. She grabbed Misaki by the back of her naval collar. Watarai continued to lunge against her leash, knowing that when one is poisoned, they might as well eat the whole plate.

“Headmistress’s office! It is a lucky thing your parents aren’t here to hear these obscenities, or they’d die of shame!”

It took both Sanjō and Kichiga together to wrestle her away. Sāya raised an eyebrow. She took no pleasure from seeing men punitively drafted. She took no displeasure from it, either.

The minute Watarai vanished through the doors that I knew led to Fujisaki-sensei’s courtyard, the dining room buzzed alive with the sound of girls whispering.

“Poor thing–”

“But how…”

“What was printed…”

“How ugly, to shout like that!”

“Rima-tan, are you OK?” Yaya asked, tentatively. “That was horrible.”

I stared into Nagihiko’s sweet, placid eyes. He stared back at me for the first time in what felt like months. You’re next, I thought, blood freezing in my veins even as my heart continued to valiantly beat. If Major-General Yamabuki can take an old man, he can take a young boy.

Chapter End Notes

Did I... did I just update within a week? Am I on a schedule...?

ANYWAY. New chapter next Sunday! We’re on an aggressive summertime scheduled release, that’s why it’s so short and normal-sized. PICK A GOD AND PRAY. HOPE PEOPLE STILL READ THIS
Smug, clever men like to say “this conflict can either unite or divide us.” I hate this phrase. It is rarely one or the other.

Watarai’s outburst shattered us into a thousand tight-knit factions. Nobody liked Sāya—but nobody liked a traitor who dragged his feet to fight for his country. When the news began to come in about foreign interference in China, nobody liked a foreigner, either. I wondered if I counted.

I lived in fear of Major-General Yamabuki’s shadow. Why he hadn’t come for Nagihiko yet?

Was it because unlike Misaki’s father, Fujisaki Nagihiko didn’t legally exist? Major-General Yamabuki could hardly call up a boy who died in infancy, nor a girl, for a military fitness examination. No—he’d need some concrete proof of wrongdoing. At this moment, the only concrete proof of wrongdoing was three seats over from me, prettily reading out a section from an Imperial Rescript.

My question was answered the next morning, not by the newspaper, which we had collectively stopped reading, but by Yamabuki Saya’s bragging. It was hard to avoid when we were crammed cheek by jowl at a table for meal-times.

“I, Yamabuki Sāya, am now the daughter of a Lieutenant-General,” she said loudly, while her friends oohed and applauded. “Of the 10th Division Army.”

“Ooooh!” one of the sycophants said stupidly. “What does that mean?”

“He’s sailing for China this week,” she said, looking straight at us. “To kill the Tungchow
mutineers.”

I avoided her eyes, but my heart sang with relief. The now-Lieutenant-General Yamabuki wouldn’t have time to verify anybody’s biological sex an ocean away, in the thick of Chinese rebellion!

“That’s not all,” she added, loudly. “Hotori-san’s father has received a promotion.”

Several girls’ ears perked. I still hadn’t the faintest idea what anyone saw in him.

“He’s now a Count?” another girl gasped.

“He’s a Count now,” Saya said, angry at her thunder being stolen. “By order of the Emperor himself.”

“How nice for him…” one of the girls said, wistfully.

“I don’t suppose any of us would be high-ranking enough for the son of a Count,” said another.

“Isn’t it nice to dream?” a third girl said, gloomily.

I sympathetically patted Amu’s hand, knowing what a blow this must be. She wasn’t even paying attention. She was staring at something none of us could see.

The arrow thudded into the target, wobbling slightly in the icy November breeze. Several stifled oohs and aahs exhaled into foggy mist.

The physical education teacher was a retired veteran of the Kwangtung Army. You would have thought he was still trying to invade Manchuria from the way he bore down on us.

“Yamamoto,” he barked, wielding his pointer stick like a katana. “Eyes on the target, not your hands. Kusanagi, arm straight. Fujisaki…”

Nadeshiko anticipated her daily praise.

“Pity you weren’t born a boy,” he said. “You’re an excellent sportsman.”

I rolled my eyes and mimed a gagging motion. Yaya stepped on my foot.

“Is this a competition, Fujisaki-san?”

“No, sir,” he said, jaw locked.

“Correct. Not a dance, not a competition. It is discipline for your body and spirit. You need to treat it as such.”

The resident Nadeshiko Fan Club murmured their dissent at this. I basked in Nagihiko being held accountable, though I had no idea what for.

The smirk was wiped off my face when he called for the next three to come up.

Nadeshiko tugged off her glove and her chest protector. She handed her bow to Amu with a knowing smile. I glared and wondered if I would ever stop wanting people who were in love with someone else.
“Hold my jumper,” I said, holding it out.

Yaya dived forward to catch it. I loved how the winter bite of November air felt on my hot face.

“Place your footing!” the physical education teacher called. We turned to the left.

I felt the pointer on my feet, telling me to move them back. I moved them back.

“Ready your bow!”

I positioned my arrow perpendicular to the bowstring, which was nearly the same height as me. The roll of straw on a wooden scaffold was within my sightline. I dimly felt the teacher’s pointer push my elbow out.

“Raise!”

We raised the bows above our heads.

“Mashiro, higher.”

It was as high as I could go. Unpityingly, his pointer whacked my left elbow and forced it into an unnaturally bent-back position.

“Draw!”

I was reminded of the Kouen Academy students doing drills in the rain. At least they were concrete exercises to synchronize one’s activities to a battalion, not nonsense body and mind exercises with arrows. I wish I had been born a boy. What was the use in doing this?

He waited until we were in the full draw, which pulled the bow and arrow down to run parallel to one’s mouth. My arms shook under the strain of holding the bowstring back for so long.

I stared at the target, and decided it didn’t matter.

“Release!”

My sweaty fingers slipped off the bowstring. The arrow lodged itself deep into the frozen, frostbitten earth a stone’s throw from my feet. My arms locked in place, and I felt relief flood my muscles.

“Lower bows,” said the teacher. Amu’s arrow had grazed and bounced off the wooden scaffolding and was lying in the dirt. The third girl’s arrow hit the target. My arrow had been the farthest off-target, by far. When would I ever have to shoot a bloody arrow in my conjugal future? When I executed my husband?

“Hinamori, a little more concentration,” said the teacher, approaching the middle target. “Good.”

Then he walked by mine.

“Watch Mashiro-san,” he said. Was he seriously inviting everyone to laugh at me?

“Eyes fixed on the target. Posture maintained post-release.” The tension was racing away from my muscles. I didn’t feel anything, preferring numbness to the fire of envy.

“Strength can be built up,” he added. “The target does not matter. But emptiness of the mind can only be cultivated from within.”
I smiled. Onlookers assumed it was arrogance, but I was barely repressing my laughter at getting called empty-headed as a compliment.

“I don’t know why Nade-chin got a big lecture,” Yaya argued, biting into a raw radish. Whoever was on gardening duty had to beat Yaya back from snacking on the vegetable yields, not unlike a deer.

“Well, if he’s grading on empty-headedness…” I breathed on my hands and rubbed them on my legs. “Sāya-san ought to have put us all out of business.”

Amu gave me her *Rima-chan-that’s-not-very-nice* stare. Nadeshiko had the gall to look humble.

“Sensei was right. I had no discipline,” she said. She caught Amu’s eye, biting her lip and smiling. “As a matter of fact, I think I was showing off.”

I linked arms with Amu, determinedly not looking at Nagihiko. As though Amu would be impressed by stupid archery antics!

I thought of the gold courtship book that my literature teacher had given me and wondered if target practice was in there.

“We’re on dinner,” I reminded her. “Let’s go.”

“Ah, you’re right,” said Amu in surprise, watching the sun blotting weakly through the trees. “We’d better hurry. See you at dinner?”

After a fortnight of being in Nadeshiko’s heart-aching presence, being alone with Amu was peaceful. I missed her. I hadn’t been much of a good friend. I didn’t know what was going on with her at all.

One hand was stuffed under my shirt for warmth while the other gripped the fire iron. We were in the covered outdoor area where the stoves were for boiling water. Amu had the sack of rice ready.

Waiting for a pot to boil was a dull business, especially when one was feeding up to fifty girls. I stabbed the fire vehemently, and a gust of smoke flew up in my face. I coughed and rolled my turtleneck up over my chin.

“You know,” Amu said offhandedly, “The army’s trying to make an electric rice cooker, so you don’t have to boil water or use gas.”

“Sounds like an electrocution death trap,” I said. “Amu, is there something going on you’re not telling me?”

Amu jolted, as though I had caught her with her pants down. “Wha—?! No, of course not, Rima! I’d tell you, wouldn’t I? I just mentioned the army thing because, um, I heard it from someone at Kouen Academy, and…”

“It’s not that,” I frowned at the fire. “Only you’ve been so out of it. You leave at weird moments. Do you have an embarrassing illness or something?”

Amu exhaled. “Oh,” she said, relieved. “No, I’m not sick, just…”

I waited.
“Just… lots of things that have my attention right now, I guess,” she muttered, more to herself than me. “Which… oh!”

Amu leaned forward, looking suddenly coy.

“That reminds me. Do you want to see what I received from a certain someone, the other day?”

I lifted the rim of the pot. The water was still full of little bubbles, and no closer to boiling.

“Oh!” I said, blowing on my hands again. “Show me.”

Amu rifled in the breast pocket of her uniform excitedly. She unfurled a small roll of parchment and handed it to me. The handwriting had a light, airy quality to it, written vertically with a brush:

Autumn winds howl
Between us, yet
In my longing
We could touch,
I feel.

“So, what… what d’you think?” Amu said, anxiously. “Do you… do you think it’s good?”

“It’s alright, I suppose,” I said, with no point of reference to compare it to.

Amu wilted. I wondered if it was given to her by Hotori-san. Was that why she was asking me, and not Nadeshiko? Suppose she had shown it to Nadeshiko already? No, she would have blabbed her mouth off about it.

I looked at Amu suspiciously, truly wondering now why she was asking me and not her best friend.

“It sounds like something out of the Man’yōshū,” I said, feeling very intellectual.

“That’s good, right?”

“Yes,” I said uncertainly. “Professional, yet creepy.”

I didn’t want to think about some Kouen boy longing to be close enough to touch someone. Perhaps she was asking me because she wanted a good excuse to reject him. That’s me, alright, I thought with irony. Rima the man-hater.

“What would you say to something like this?” Amu asked, anxiously.

“Me?”

“In response to it. I mean, in Genji, if you get sent a poem, you’re supposed to reply…”


Amu turned the greyish colour of rice porridge.

“I- I- It’s a secret!” she sputtered. “I don’t want to tell you! It’ll colour your objective opinion!”

It was someone I hated, then. I sifted through the suspects in my head. Hotori-san? Glasses boy? It couldn’t be Sōma-kun, who didn’t know how to read.

I swallowed. A poem was just the sort of thing Nadeshiko would do. Yet, the poem was not nearly
as florid as the one I had heard him recite previously. I doubted he would send something so up-front by Fujisaki standards. Touching? No, he would have compared Amu to a tree or something.

“Write back and say if he touches you, I’ll call the police,” I suggested.

“Rima, you can’t just—!” Amu ran a hand through her fringe. “And besides,” she said, in a more reasoned tone, this time, “It has to be in poetry form.”

She really was serious about responding, then.

“Nadeshiko’s better at this sort of thing. You should ask her,” I said, trying not to sound angry.

Steam rattled free of the pot’s lid. “Water’s on,” I added.

I wanted to grab that stupid courtship book and flip frantically through it right now, but after dinner, we had to set the table. Then we had to spoon out a bowl of rice for everyone, a ladleful of oden, a slab of hardtack. My toe tapped impatiently on the floor. I could feel the twanging beginnings of a headache behind my eyeballs. It was like a koto player stringing out the Nagasaki Wandering Song on my optic nerve. And it was all Nadeshiko’s fault.

“Alright,” Amu panted, hot from the kitchen. “I think we’re almost done— hey, can I ask you something?”

“Okay,” I said, moving under the hanging oil lamp in the kitchen. A moth was flinging itself desperately against the glass. My forehead was sweaty. Disgusting.

“Is it alright if Yamamoto-san sits with us?”


“Um… I’m not sure what happened, but her and Kusanagi-san aren’t speaking anymore.”

I shrugged. Amu took it as assent.

I tried to eat dinner, but I wasn’t hungry. Amu and Nadeshiko were shoulder-to-shoulder. Yaya was on my left. Yamamoto was cold, strange, and didn’t talk. In the end, I pushed my un-eaten dinner towards Yaya, and tried to study the atmosphere between Amu and Nadeshiko, instead.

Nadeshiko always appeared relaxed and breezy, but I now knew her by nature to be tightly-wound and repressive with explosive periods of misbehaviour. There was nothing different from usual: still repressive, still tense. Like me, she was calculating the group dynamic. Unlike me, the calculation seemed focused directly at the bowl I pushed towards Yaya.

“Ah… something about the first day of winter makes me so tired,” Nadeshiko said musically, getting to her feet. “Is this what getting old feels like?”

I repressed my laugh and sneezed.

“Will you all forgive me if I retire early?”

“Aw, Nadeshiko...” Amu pouted, as though this had ruined her whole evening.
Once again, I had come up empty-handed. Exhausted, I stood up to follow Nadeshiko.

“Your tired too, Mashiro?” Utau asked, shuffling a deck of cards. “We’re gonna play koi-koi with stakes.”

I looked to the teachers at the other end of the table, chatting in blissful ignorance of Utau's gambling ring. Utau raised her eyebrows, as if to say just let them try and stop me.

“Maybe next time,” I said.

I followed Nadeshiko, grateful for the excuse to leave. She took a candle and lit the grass-paper wick off a nearby oil lamp, before placing a lantern-shade over it. It was only when we were halfway across the frozen lawn that I realized I had forgotten my jumper in the messroom. Even though it was the first day of winter, I felt quite comfortably cool without it.

“You're going to catch a chill,” Nagihiko said, breaking the silence.

“I feel fine,” I said, despite the headache still pounding behind my eyes. It was only after he spoke that I realized Nagihiko didn't chat much with me, either.

Because he hated me. I glared mutinously at his back. He entered the dormitory first and carefully put the lantern down on the floor.

“Go ahead and use the bath first,” he said, lifting his middy shirt over his head to reveal a white underrobe. He took a kimono box down from the top shelf. He hadn't been lying. He had puffy under-eyes and a dull sort of expression.

“I won't back until late,” he said courteously, in response to my expression. “I need to go over a set with Mother.”

The stars winked out the window like ice chips on a black field. I looked over at Nagihiko's clock. It was nearing the end of the hour of the Dog.

“She pushes you too hard,” I muttered under my breath, irritable.

Had he heard me? He tied his obi with that unreadable expression again.

“It’s just for now,” he said. “To tell you the truth...”

My eyes were glancing from the courtship book, back to him. Yes? Yes? What was the truth? Was he avoiding Amu because he was maddeningly in love with her, burying himself in his work?

"I got the part in a production of The Wisteria Maiden," he said, very fast, as though he had been wanting to tell someone.


“Home,” he said modestly, moving his obi around to the front so he could tie the knot. Hiroshima? "With a theatre troupe, over New Years' Break. It was the piece my father performed at his naming ceremony, so if I can do it well, I think..."

I wish I understood a shred of this, but I was too caught up in Nagihiko's uncharacteristically shy smile to use my brain.

“It's been a while since I went to a kabuki play,” I said, instead of I'd like to see you perform it. It had been over eight years, more than a while. Back when we had money. I wondered wistfully if I
could still lock down some rich dullard for income.

His face suddenly turned serious.

"I am far too unskilled for the likes of your eyes, Mashiro-san," he said. I eyed him with dislike.

"I will just have to wait until you're playing at the kabuki theatre in Ginza, then," I said, hot all over. "And ask my husband for money to go."

He gave me a look again, like the one when I asked him how he'd dance in geta. It wasn't angry. It wasn't affectionate. It was the expression a man has when you twist a knife between his ribs.

I snatched up the courtship book and left for the bath. He really was vile, I thought angrily. It took several tries with the matches to light the stove underneath the basin. Wasn't he just saying no politely? I could have died from embarrassment. Why tell me, if he didn't want me to watch? I could no longer tell if he regretted being my friend, or not.

While the bathwater heated, I scrubbed myself so furiously that little pink spots appeared on my décolletage. As I finally sank into the narrow tub, I closed my eyes, letting the water lap at my chin. Then, I grabbed the courtship book, holding it daintily just out of reach of the water.

There was an index, but I couldn't be bothered to read it. I rifled through the pages at random, reading the chapter headings. I sighed, inhaling steam and feeling my headache subside slightly.

To my surprise, the book wasn't about real-life courtship, but the classical romances of novels and the Edo period. The headings went by my eyes in a grey blur: Construction of Poetry and Verse — Performance — Martial Skill — Feminine Craftsmanship —

I found “showing off by shooting targets” easily enough (martial skill, kyūdō aptitude) but found no enlightenment on if it was a courtship tactic or simply an old-timey standard for attractiveness. I was forced to conclude that Nagihiko was just big-headed.

On female craftsmanship, there was a good deal of pontificating upon the magic of a woman’s hands, of the little cares she takes to demonstrate wifely aptitude. I couldn’t help but snicker, thinking that everything Nadeshiko did was a desperate, never-ending quest for wifely aptitude.

In classical works, the ideal woman is soft-spoken, with feminine language. She cooks well and is fond of small animals and children. She sacrifices everything for her family and dutifully obeys her mother-in-law. She is pragmatic, a stern but fair mother, intelligent and a skilled household manager. She is pretty in a gentle, unobtrusive way, but not flashy or over-decorated. Often a token of her love is a meal, a handmade traditional object, or a flower arrangement to demonstrate refined taste. In literature, flower motifs are used often in tandem with their traditional seasonal and emotional associations.

I reread the last two sentences and mutinously recalled the nageire waiting in front of Fujisaki’s office, and Amu crooning over the stupid begonias. I wondered if this was any indication of a pining heart, or just Nadeshiko trying to be a woman. Or just liking flower arrangements.

To be sure, I flipped to the section on flower language and cross-checked every flower I could recall Nadeshiko touching.

The glass cherry blossoms she always wore in her hair was transience of life, which I found utterly insipid. Begonias were unrequited love. This was all news to me, who loyally followed British flower meanings.
On poems there was a full chapter, using all sorts of Heian period books as sources and examples. But I still didn’t know if Nagihiko had sent it. Even if he had, how could I prove it was him, unless I did something insane, like break into his desk and compare brush-strokes?

I paused, and rose from the bath, dripping lukewarm water. I put the book down.

I did up my nightgown and put on a pair of tabi socks on to muffle my movements, and because it was cold besides. Finally, I pulled my wrapper on, because I was freezing cold again.

Nadeshiko’s lap-desk was a pretty thing I had long coveted, lacquered in black and inlaid with gold paulownias. It folded down from a trunk-like shape into something resembling more of a secretary desk. For convenience reasons, she had left it unlocked, which was foolish.

For a moment I simply sat on the cushion in *seiza* and enjoyed the little charade of being Nadeshiko. I’m so pretty, and elegant, and my legs aren’t going numb at all! *Think, Rima. Put yourself in her shoes. Where would she hide her brushes and paper for sending illicit love letters to your best friend?*

In the indented compartments at the back, I felt the familiar inkstone and inkstick. My fingers scrabbled at the other tiny little square compartments, finding a collection of stubby pencils, a fountain pen, and a strange square block. My hand paused on it, confused.

Upon fishing it out, I realized it was the seal with his male name on it that we had bought together last summer. I smiled and put it back.

Nothing. I lifted the back panel next, finding a sheaf of writing paper and a book. A *book*! I didn’t know Nadeshiko read. I was almost delighted to find out this little secret, until I opened it and realized it was an anthology of ghost stories from the 1700s.

*Ew! What in tarnation?*

There was a thinner book behind it with no title. I absently flipped to a random page.

*April 5, 1937*

*Weather: unusually cold for spring, but cloudless skies like the underside of a porcelain bowl.*

*On our last day in Nagoya, an old student of my father’s came to call. We could not stay long, as we needed to be at the Nagoya Station to catch the train. I should have liked to speak with him, but I suppose it can’t be helped.*

*News from the journey: Yu-san’s home life is a funny one, and I never tire of listening to it. The latest is that her father is now restricting all gentleman callers to the garden-gate. Mo-san is as jealous and insufferable, as usual.*

It took me several lines to realize it was Nadeshiko’s diary, if only because it was written in the self-defeating way of an old-timey novel. I flipped forward, trying not to feel stung. Surely *Mo-san* could only be me, however hard he tried to disguise it.

*July 24, 1937*

*The cicada calls*  
*from the tall grass*  
*In the thick summer’s air*  
*Will this love*
Last but a season?

Love, last a season? I flipped ahead two pages, trying to find more clues.

*August 2, 1937*

*I have been accused of selfishness. While that may be true, I want to chase happiness, as well.*

I officially hated him. Why must even his diary entries be vague, ominous? And why wasn’t *I* in here?

*August 30, 1937*

*Rejected. I have made a grievous mistake.*

So had I. For in that horrible moment, the brass doorknob twisted.

My limbs jerked, and my heart jumped into my throat. Should I jam the door? Or move as fast as I could? There was no time! I stuffed the diary under the ghost story book just as Nagihiko appeared in the doorway. I didn’t know if it was simply tiredness or wishful thinking, but he went a little pale.

“Fujisaki-san,” I said, furiously. My entire face was on fire, and my voice felt like it was shaking. “I’ve been ransacking this thing. Where do you keep pencils?”

“Up here,” he said, shortly. It confirmed my worst suspicions.

“Thank you,” I said, grabbing one and staggering back. I turned around and snatched *Agnes Grey* off the bedside and made like I was taking notes on my own copy. I was miserable. Did he believe me? Did he see me? Did it matter?

I was within my rights, I maintained. If he was wooing Amu, wasn’t it my business? Didn’t I not agree to keep his mother informed? And if it came down to it, *would I*?

I peeked over the top of the book. August 30’s entry was seared on the back of my eyelids.

“The bath’s ready,” I said to the quiet room. “I put more wood in before I got out, so it should be hot.”

“Oh,” he said. I hated his voice. I hated his inflections. What could I glean from it? No surprise, no love, no hate, no pity.

“Thank you.”

I watched her slender back vanish through to the bath, offended. Had Nadeshiko been rejected by Amu? I couldn’t think of anyone else who held Nadeshiko’s affections that I could see. I fell back onto my bed, head spinning. A hazy series of amorphous ideas lapped and receded.

Me, jealous and insufferable. Nagihiko, rejected in August, at the exact same time he was in Tokyo for his marriage meeting. Some other girl who lived in Tokyo must have. Utau was in Chiyoda, Amu in Shibuya. He had seen Amu without telling me, and she had turned him down. *Why? How?* How could I have been so wrong, *wrong, wrong,*

I jerked awake, drenched in sweat. The plaster of the ceiling gazed remorselessly down at me, blinding white in the morning sun. Nadeshiko’s bed was empty, as usual. And, just like last spring, the building was quiet.
I staggered to my feet, groggy. Through some miracle, I found my uniform crumpled on the floor, and a clean pair of tights in my suitcase. I found the music room before class started, feeling truly disoriented indeed.

“There you are,” Amu whispered, patting the seat next to her. Yaya and Utau looked up. Nadeshiko did not. “I didn’t see you at breakfast.”

I stayed where I was. *How could you reject Nadeshiko?* I thought wildly, staring back at her. *How could you turn down the perfect woman, who would ask nothing of you but to be understood?*

I felt sick.

“I feel sick,” I murmured, and I did. My head was still spinning. I felt a faint sense of unease, as though I shouldn’t be here. I had lost.

Sanjo focused her eagle-eye gaze on me, stern.

“Mashiro!” she barked. “What are you swaying on the spot for? Get in koto formation, please.”

Obediently, I staggered forward, glancing longingly at the back of Nadeshiko’s head. If only she would look at me! Why punish me for Amu’s actions?

“I feel sick,” I repeated. The walls and floor vanished, and I felt my brain fall through space, going pleasantly blank.

I fainted.
Voices knifed through my slumber.

“Sanjō-san says… swooned over with no warning…”

“None at all? I find it hard to believe…”

“She looked tired, of course. They often do. I promise, we did nothing to…”

I opened my mouth to tell them they were being noisy, but I could not muster it. My eyelids weighed me down, the light blinding.

Slowly, I returned to my senses. I was in bed. I felt like I had gotten kicked in the ribs. I had a throbbing headache. If I wanted to, I could go back to sleep right now.

I practiced gripping and relaxing my hands, grabbing the rough linen of my dormitory bedding. Turning my head to the left, I squinted through my lashes. Nadeshiko was not in her bed. In her place was a woman in a kimono arguing with a man in a Western-style suit and thick coke-bottle glasses. He looked splendid, like a businessman from Ginza freshly out of an automobile. Standing slightly behind her was Sanjō-sensei, glasses flashing, arms crossed.

The sun was gone from the eastern window, but the sky outside was merely the soft grey of afternoon.

“She’s awake,” Sanjō said, eyes never missing anything.
“If it is alright with Fujisaki-san, I would like to examine her,” said the man in the suit, picking up a leather bag.

I made no move to sit up as he strode towards me and pulled out his stethoscope. My favourite type of doctor was the kind that made jokes and pretended to miss my vein with the needle. If that wasn’t available, I didn’t mind the ones who treated me like a broken piece of machinery.

“What’s your name, Miss?”

“Who is asking?” I replied, haughty.

The doctor blinked.

“Dr Ninomiya,” he said. “I was called in to examine you after you fainted this morning. Do you remember?”

The last thing I remembered was Sanjō telling me to get into koto formation.

“No,” I said, shakily.

“Do you know where you are?”

My hands caressed linen. “My room. School.”

“Good. Your name…?”

“Mashiro.”

“What is the date today?”

“The twelfth year of Shōwa,” I said, sluggishly. “November… uh…”

He waited.

“How should I know?”

“We did not teach her to speak like that, Doctor,” said Fujisaki-sensei, mortified. “I assure you.”

“Mashiro-san,” he said, “I am going to ask you to take off your shirt, if that is alright.”

I struggled to sit up for what felt like an eternity. It was as though my spine refused to cooperate.

Cool, familiar hands guided me into a sitting position. I looked up. Nagihiko’s mother was helping me. In the soft afternoon light, she looked nothing like the woman who had beat me until I bled.

I fumbled my arms through the sleeves, but it was my headmistress who gently pulled it over my head. I sat there in my chemise, exhausted. She gasped, pointing to my neck.

“Doctor, look at her chest!”

My head lolled forward. I saw the pink rash on my collarbone that had been there last night.

The doctor sighed, as if this was what he expected. He checked both my arms until he found my smallpox vaccine scar. He felt my forehead and the sides of my neck. He put the stethoscope to my chest and instructed me to take deep breaths while he listened to my lungs. The stethoscope went over my heart. A muscle twitched in his jaw.
“Headache?”
I nodded.

“Muscle ache?”
I nodded.

“Chills?”
I nodded.

“Exhaustion?”
I nodded.

“Sore throat?”
I shook my head.

“Appetite?”
I had to think about it.

“None,” I said. My head was swimming. “I didn’t have dinner.”

“Diarrhoea?”
I looked disgusted, but my stomach gurgled threateningly. “No.”

“Fujisaki-san,” the doctor asked grimly. “Where does your water come from?”

“A well system,” she responded, looking pale. “Separate from the village’s. Surely you cannot be suggesting…”

“Has she prepared food, any time in the past two weeks?”
Sanjō sucked in her breath. “She was on dinner preparation last night.”

Fujisaki-sensei moaned in despair. “It cannot be!”

“It may not,” said Dr Ninomiya, folding his stethoscope, “Until I do a Widal test, I cannot give a definitive answer. She is certainly running a fever. I will need to take a blood sample.”

He took out a wooden box from his bag. I craned my neck. Two blue glass vials, corked. A silver rack on which a series of smaller glass tubes were positioned. A syringe: the size of a chenille needle, at least. Was it just me, or was it bigger than I remembered?

“You are not putting that thing in me,” I said, numbly.

“She’s not in her right mind,” said Fujisaki-sensei, apologetically.

“Completely delusional,” Sanjō added, holding down my other arm. When Dr Ninomiya wasn’t looking, she shot me a glare.

If I had more strength, I would have aimed a kick in at Sanjō. As it was, I lay there limply while the needle pricked the inside of my arm and filled with dark fluid.
Would I die in my school of all places? Would my vengeful ghost join the Fujisaki clan’s ancestors, haunting the forest on the hill? Nadeshiko would probably love that.

“Oh, Rima-san,” she’d say, reaching longingly for my legless see-through body or whatever. “How gaunt and beautiful you look in your burial kimono!”

I smiled and giggled. Fujisaki-sensei pressed her hands to her mouth. “She’s hysterical already!”

“Leave her to rest,” the doctor urged. “I do not want to distress her further.”

I saw him take Fujisaki-sensei’s arm and lead her away, speaking to her in a low voice. I craned my neck, but the plaster did not serve well to eavesdropping.

“Block off all... disinfectant... water will be...”

The water, I thought. What will happen to the poor well system? I leaned back against the pillows, listening to my shallow breaths.

Imagining water steadily dripping to the floor calmed me. The inside of my arm was still throbbing in tune to the rest of my body, even though it was bandaged up. I lay in bed, listening to the muffled voices of Dr Ninomiya and my teachers. If I strained my ears enough, the words only got fuzzier. It sounded like a creek splashing over rocks. Soon, it was raining outside.

Lovely, I thought. The well water was delightfully cool. I kicked my legs in it, feeling the steady drips down my shoulders. Why had I feared it so much? It was safe down here. Dark. Cold. I tread water, looking up. As it filled, I could simply float to the top. But then what? I thought. Where would I go?

The well was filling too quickly, and my mouth began to fill with water.

“Stop it,” I said, as though the water would obey me, but my mouth was full. “No!”

My voice echoed back at me from the bottom of the well. No... no... no...

I was drenched. My legs were stuck to each other, and my hair glued grossly to the back of my neck. When I opened my eyes, there was blackness. It was the same whether I opened or shut them.

I let out a pitiful cry. I really was dead. Why did this happen to me? I tried to crawl out of bed and walk into the woods to start haunting my classmates, but my legs were bound in place. Was I stuck in my tomb? How could they have let this happen? The first thing I would do was find Sanjō and rip her perm out.

My arms flailed wildly, groping cool porcelain. Slowly, I felt along the smooth surface, breaths subsiding. It was a pitcher. It swam ghostly grey in front of the blackness of my vision, and I could have cried with relief. Water. The moment I saw it, I felt thirsty. My tongue was coated with something thick and viscous.

My ankles were tangled up in the covers I had unsuccessfully kicked off, but now the cold was setting in. My teeth chattered, and I unsuccessfully tried to pick up the pitcher to pour myself a drink. My arms were shaking too much. I decided to simply tilt the pitcher towards me and drink out of it. What did it matter, if I was sick? The water sloshed down my chin.

The water was surprisingly hot, but my headache subsided. I wheezed for breath and felt up and down the front of my damp nightgown. Who changed me? I wondered. It was probably Sanjō or Fujisaki-sensei.
I felt a swell of confused gratitude, followed by a deeper wave of chills. Every joint in my body was shaking. I tried to bury myself under the covers, but the cold was under the covers, too, poking at me with icy fingers. If I curled into a ball and put my head under the covers, maybe I would warm up faster.

I did not warm up faster. I remembered that Nagihiko’s bed was close enough to touch. From under the covers, I stretched out a hand, feeling for it. Not enough. Half-hanging out of the bed, I grabbed a fistful of his covers and pulled. And pulled again.

After what felt like hours of tugging, I felt the whole thing come free of its mattress, slithering along the floor. Triumphant, I rolled over, cocooning myself in them.

It only occurred to me later that I might have stolen covers off a sleeping person. But this worry was for nothing. By the light of morning, I saw that Nagihiko had been moved out of my room. I was alone next to an empty bed, in sickbay quarantine.

Ironic. The room he once fought to have to himself was now mine alone.

In those coming days, the fever dreams long stopped resembling anything that made sense. I closed my eyes and saw dizzying shapes, colours, motion. I roared through wormholes at quintillion miles an hour, heard shouting in languages I couldn’t understand. I rocked from side to side on bottomless ships sailing amorphous seas and fell from vast heights.

Sometimes, I woke up. It was mostly during the night-time. I would gulp down water and return to my fevered sleep. Sometimes the water was sweet. Other times it tasted nutty, as though something had been dissolved in it.

When I woke up during the day, someone would be watching me. The first time, it was Sanjō. I was hot again and kicked the multiple layers of blankets off me.

“It’s been two days,” Sanjō said, nodding towards a bowl on my bedside table. “There’s rice porridge. If you need to go, use the chamber pot by your bed. Don’t get up to use the toilet.”

I nodded. I couldn’t have gotten up and walked the eight steps to the bath if I tried. I stared at the rice gruel. I stared at the chamber pot.

My stomach heaved. I vomited directly into it.

Shortly after I threw up, something like my cramps began, only worse. My whole abdomen was in rebellion, whether it was from lack of food, or sheer infection.

Dr Ninomiya returned two, three, maybe four days after the vomiting. I hadn’t done it again, but I could not tolerate food without gagging. As though laughing at my agony, I had a death-rattle cough on top of abdominal pain. Every time I dry-coughed, my diaphragm and entire intestine seized up in soreness.

“Give me something for the pain,” I croaked in Dr Ninomiya’s direction. “What are you, some kind of quack?”

“Is she always like this?” Dr Ninomiya asked Sanjō. “Or is it just when she’s ill?”

“No, she’s just like this,” said Sanjō, sounding tired.

Dr Ninomiya paused, evaluating me.
“The first week is the hardest,” he said, finally. “If she hasn’t improved, I’ll give her laudanum. She’s by far the worst of all of them. Have you written to her mother?”

I dissolved back to the blissful darkness of troubled sleep, where I couldn’t suffer. I hoped I could die quietly and not interrupt my Mother’s work in the factory.

I grew sick of fever dreams, if that was possible. I grew dizzy at howling through wind tunnels, the nightmares of being drowned, of lurching on ships. Rice gruel lasted a half-hour in my body, at best, and I grew sick of that too. Rather than grow thin, my stomach distended and grew painful to even brush by accident.

“This is Hell,” I uttered in a rare moment of lucidity, not caring what teacher heard me. I lacked the energy to do anything but lie immobile, staring straight ahead. I could not muster the effort to open my eyes all the way. My dry mouth formed the words, barely exuding any sound:

“I want to be well, or hurry up and die already.”

Fujisaki-sensei bloomed into my line of sight, picking the dead begonia petals off the nightstand. I stared vacantly ahead through half-lidded eyes, not even caring that she was my headmistress and I ought to be more respectful.

My chest rose and fell shallowly. Below it, my heart pounded a beat later than it should have. Thump—... thump. Thump... thump.

“You will live,” she said. “You are far stronger.”

“Than what?” I croaked.

“Than an elderly woman,” said Fujisaki-sensei, returning to Nadeshiko’s lap-desk. Her face turned away from me, into shadow. “Or an infant.”

She sat on her knees just like Nadeshiko did, back straight, feet tilted just so. I suddenly longed to hug my own mother.

These were the last words I spoke for the next two days. I was dimly conscious of the waking world in the half-collected way one remembers dreams. It was easier in the mornings. Like clockwork, enteric fever would rise steadily through the afternoon until my legs trembled and my temperature spiked. I disconnected from my vegetative body and lived only in the roar of colour when I closed my eyes.

The only thing that kept me tethered to this earth was pain. Sanjō was frustrated; Fujisaki-sensei haunted, but Dr Ninomiya was scientifically grim.

“39 degrees,” he said, watching my pupils slow to dilate when he moved the lamp close. “It makes no difference if we move her now.”

I woke up one evening to voices outside once more. I was in a perpetual state of sticky sweatiness. If I could operate a pair of scissors, I would have sawed all my hair off to stop it from smothering my neck in my sleep.

I felt immensely better—retrospectively a bad sign. I could move my arms. I rubbed my hands
against the bedspread, rolling up the lint with my fingertips. It felt good.

“... currently in such condition... unreasonable...”

“Please!” a woman’s voice begged. “I just want to see if she’s awake!”

The door opened. My eyes swivelled in their stationary sockets.

“Mama?” I said, scarcely able to believe my eyes.

“Rima?” my mother said, voice constricted. “It’s me.”

I stretched out my hand, and she took it, fingers cool and dry against my damp, hot hands. She smelled wonderful, like sweetness and springtime. It almost made me forget how much I hurt.

“You shouldn’t have come,” I coughed, trying to sit up. She held a hand to my shoulder, firmly.

“Lie down. You need your strength.”

“What about the factory, what about the overseer, you can’t leave it now, but...” I thought I might be crying. “I’m happy you’re here. I’m sorry I’m such an inconvenience.”

I was babbling, like a madman. “You should have had a son. Then I could take care of you, and you wouldn’t have to send me away, and Father wouldn’t have left us, and I wouldn’t get sick. I could marry a nice girl that you liked. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Shhh,” she said soothingly. There was silk blend brushing my eyes, wiping the tears away. “Rima-chan, don’t say such things. You’re not an inconvenience. I wouldn’t ever have you any other way. Do you understand me?”

My head fell back against the pillows. Bright lights were dancing in front of my eyes, like will o’ the wisps.

“Beautiful,” I murmured. I reached to touch one with my free hand. “See the little lights... like fairies.”

My fingers tightened on my mother’s wrist. I wanted to keep her here forever, selfishly.

“Are you going to stay?” I whispered to the twinkling white lights, swirling in mesmerizing a kaleidoscope. “Please stay, just for a little while.”

“Of course.” Her hand was brushing my bangs off my hot forehead. Her fingers lingered, and something silky slithered across my neck. “If you want me to.”

“I want you to,” I squeezed her hand, and drifted back into the sea of sleep. A whirlwind of stars trailed after me.

“She thinks I’m her mother,” a muffled voice called down from the surface of the well.

“Confusion and delirium,” a watery response echoed down through the bricks. “It’s common at this stage.”

I drifted over the roaring falls of Sandankyō Gorge. My clothes and hair fanned out in my wake, waving like pennants.
The full moon hung in the sky, framing the thin, twisted young trees of the forest in silvery white light. The mulch was coated in a thin layer of frozen dew, but my feet did not feel the cold. I glided wherever I wished, through gnarled branches, over bubbling creeks. Here in the thick forest cover of Aki Province, I tumbled and freewheeled through the thick red and orange leaves. With a skip and a jump, I burst through the tree cover and into the star-spangled sky, giddy with freedom. Doll-like lanterns of village fires sprawled out below me.

Here, I wasn’t sick, wasn’t bed-bound. I was the winter goose overhead, free to roost anywhere I wanted. I gulped lungfuls of cold air. It coursed through my heated blood. But I couldn’t waste time; I had business here. I alighted on the edge of a Chūgoku Mountain pass.

He waited for me astride a horse, in the flowing hakama and towering black hat of aristocracy. Above the rich purple sleeves, his high cheekbones carved out veins of steel, immobile in his age. He said nothing: only regarded me warily, as though he knew why I had come. So difficult to read, I thought, annoyed. As expected.

He could have shot an arrow at me and wouldn’t have missed. I instinctively knew he was one of the best archers in the Imperial Guard. I bowed deeply, forehead nearly touching my knees. When I straightened, he remained unmoved.

So be it. I needed no man’s permission to take what was mine. Walking on air, I came closer.

I brushed close enough to feel the silk brocade of the horseman’s sleeve, the sweat and heaving of the beast’s sides. But something was wrong: neither breath was making vapor, despite the cold. When I looked up at the horse’s eyes, I found empty, gaping sockets.

The man opened his wasted mouth, and a thousand black spiders began crawling out. A million thousand legs were tickling every inch of my skin. They were all over my arms, pouring out of my blood-drawing wound and vaccine scar, crawling into my ears with a horrible rattle.

I looked down and realized I had no legs. I was in the white burial kimono. I was dead. They were here to eat my corpse.

I screamed at the treetops.

I woke up clawing my still-sore throat, scream still in my ears. It was night, but the room was tinged with gold from an oil lamp on the windowsill. Nadeshiko leapt to her feet, putting her book down.

“Rima!” she cried, clutching her chest. “You gave me a fright.”

I drank her in like a man dying of thirst. She was dressed comfortably. A vertical-striped kimono in muted colours, a padded winter haori. Her fringe was mussed, but her face glowed in the lamplight.

“Nagihiko?” I whispered through my raw throat. “You look... good.”

“Yes, it’s me,” Nagihiko said, sounding relieved. “Th-thank you?”

I let him turn my pillows over, staring hazily up at the familiar ceiling. Always changing colours, plaster shadows moving with the sun.

“I was a ghost,” I said, faintly. “In the forest... and I saw... I saw your great-grand-uncle...”

“What?” he said, amused. I heard the clink of the pitcher. “A dream about that old story?”
I turned my head to the side. Nagihiko was turning the cup of water in his palm, tucking his hair behind his ear to expose the fine curve of his jaw. Beautiful, I thought, dimly. Too beautiful to lose. To beautiful to have.

“His horse had no eyes,” I said, reliving it all behind my eyelids every time I blinked. I coughed. “Spiders...”

Nagihiko sucked in his breath.

“Really?” he said eagerly, in a go-on! sort of voice. Then he remembered that he wasn’t listening to a ghost story.

“Try not to think about it,” he cautioned me. “It was probably only an opium nightmare. Drink some water.”

I licked my dry lips, which felt encrusted in dry sand. There was a startling moment of clarity, as though the clouds had parted over my fevered mind.

“Why are you doing this?” I whispered.

Nagihiko stopped mid-pour.

“You don’t remember,” he said, more to himself than to me. “You asked me to stay.”

Watching Nadeshiko’s domestic figure, I was grateful I had. In the soft light of evening, her lashes cast long shadows over her white cheeks, and the corners of her mouth deepened into a shy smile despite herself.

“Here,” she said, holding the cup out. “Drink.”

Obediently, I lowered my eyes and pursed my lips. I waited.

“Well?” I said, huffily.

A hesitant thumb and forefinger touched my face, tilting my chin up. Cold porcelain pressed against my lower lip. I opened my mouth as much as I was able, violently thirsty.

“That’s enough.”

The cup broke away from my mouth. I looked disappointedly up at Nagihiko, water dripping down my chin.

“Do you think I had to ask his permission?” I said suddenly, gazing at the door to the bath. If I closed my eyes, I could still see spiders. “As head of the family?”

“Rima-chan,” Nagihiko said, hesitantly. “I’m not sure I understand you.”

“Do you think Amu saw it, too?” I said, horrified. “Or did he let her through? Was it only me he stopped? Am I not...”

“Amu-chan came and sat with you earlier today,” he said, slowly. “Don’t you remember?”

I shook my head. My head lolled to follow Nagihiko’s progress around my bed.

“Amu-chan...” I murmured.
Nagihiko gave his typical nervous laugh. “She has a good heart.”

“We love that about her, don’t we,” I mused, feeling myself slip away again.

Nagihiko stopped.

“We do,” he said.

“You and me,” I said, eyes burning into his. “Are aloof and impossible to get close to. So we crave kindness, no matter how fickle it is. Isn’t life disappointing?”

I couldn’t hear footsteps, or even breathing. I felt like I was pushing on that bathroom door again. I intruded because more than anybody else on this earth, I understood. I wish I didn’t.

“You should ask for more,” I said, closing my eyes. I was in the well again, deep inside the earth. The rain had stopped.

“More?” came Nagihiko’s voice.

“You deserve someone who will notice how much you do for others,” I said softly, bells ringing in my ears. “And will love you for it. Not Amu. Amu will never notice. I know, because I also hoped for her… Once…”

I surrendered to the water with a shudder.

Chapter End Notes

BIG shoutout to the winter of 2015, when I caught a virus from handling money at my job and puked for 8 hours straight! This one's for you, you single-stranded son of a bitch!
Under Attack

Chapter by Tsukinokimi

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER 16

当たり

Under Attack

“The fever’s broken,” said Dr Ninomiya, pulling the thermometer out of my mouth. “I give it another week.”

My fever felt very intact. My substance had been sucked out of me, leaving a withered husk. I had tympanitis in my left ear. Beginning to end, I had lost a little under a stone. When I caught a glimpse of myself in the standing mirror, I looked like a child again. My wrist bones stuck out like Nadeshiko’s, and my head looked too big for my body.

I was ugly, but bitterly glad to be alive.

“Same as with the other three cases,” the doctor said, scribbling on a pad. “Rice gruel for the next two weeks, monitor for infection. Pneumonia, influenza, bronchitis are all common complications. Continue the school-wide quarantine, along with boiling all your water and disinfectant solution. I’ll be back at the start of next week to inoculate against further outbreak. If there are no new cases…” He shrugged. “You can expect to answer the door for your deliverymen in a fortnight.”

Fujisaki-sensei inclined her head, gratefully.

“You were very lucky,” Dr Ninomiya added, dryly. “Young ladies of this age are robust. If she’s up and walking in a few days, all the better. She’s lost considerable muscle mass.”

I was cautioned against reading too vigorously during my convalescence, in case it should “excite me.” I didn’t know how else they expected me to entertain myself. My embroidery teacher dropped off my fabric basket beatifically, as though I would actually sew with all my free time. I was urged to eat more than I had ever had in my life, now that I was unattractive and skinny.

Once my complications became clear – bronchitis, plus my ear infection – Nagihiko moved back into the room. He insisted that my coughing didn’t bother him, I wasn’t infectious, and that he couldn’t smell the stench of death anywhere.
I wondered what his rush was, until he shut the door behind him.

“A boy my age,” he said with a grimace, “Should not have to share a room with his mother.”

His eyes fell on the tangle of bedcovers at the foot of my bed.

“Aren’t those mine?”

I tried for a feeble smile when Yaya and Amu came in, carrying a bowl of persimmons. I was propped up on pillows, reading quietly.

“Sanjō-sensei said you could have visitors, if you were awake and we were very, very quiet,” Yaya whispered loudly. “Rima-tan, we could hear you yelling from your room last week, and we thought you were getting attacked!”

“Huh?” I said, left ear ringing.

Yaya raised her voice. “WE COULD HEAR YOU YELLING FROM YOUR ROOM LAST WEEK, AND WE THOUGHT YOU WERE GE-”

“Yuiki!” Sanjo hissed, grabbing Amu and Yaya by the backs of their sailor collars. “Out! Out!”

If only Yaya’s big mouth hadn’t gotten them deported. I did not realise how much of my days had been spent listening to the news, the conversations, the problems of my friends. Without Amu’s every crisis and Yaya’s every passing thought, the waking world was deafening silence punctuated only by my own self-loathing.

I anticipated Nagihiko’s returns more than I would have otherwise. Talk to me! I silently begged him, trying to transmit my thoughts without speaking. Tell me what happened today! The weather! Your stupid poems! Anything!

I couldn’t initiate without my ego smarting. First, he had snubbed me. Then, he insulted himself. Finally, I, in my stupid typhoid delusions, had begged him to stay by my bedside, and he did. It was more than my pride could stand. He must think me weak. Or — worse — in love with him.

The day after Sanjō thwarted Amu and Yaya’s attempted visit, Nadeshiko finally spoke to me.

“It’s quite cold,” Nadeshiko said, clutching her folded uniform to her neck.

“Pardon?” I asked, even though I heard her clearly.

“Cold,” she repeated, quieter this time.

“It is,” I agreed, hopefully. “And to think that December will only get colder.”

Nadeshiko looked up from her obi knot. I swallowed, excitedly.

“It is December,” he said.

“What?” Time dropped out from under me. “How long…?”

“You were abed for sixteen days,” he said immediately, as though waiting for me to ask. “Today is December the second. We go home in four weeks.”
Nagihiko reached around his neck to rub his shoulder, wincing. It was such a strangely human gesture that I stopped to watch, transfixed. Did Nagihiko feel pain?

“I’m going to use the bath,” he said. He avoided my eyes. I was dying.

“Go, then,” I snapped, pitifully lonely. “Why bother even talking to me?”

I shoved my head under the covers, pretending to be asleep. I wasn’t sure if the dull ache inside me was lingering typhoid malaise or something like a broken heart.

I had enough. I made up my mind to get out of bed the next day, gripping the painted iron headboard for help. Standing shakily on my feet, I took a triumphant step towards the bathroom.

My knees folded and turned to jelly. I collapsed.

I lay face-down on the floor, staring hollowly at the underside of Nadeshiko’s bed. After wallowing in my own self-pity, I bravely got onto my hands and knees. I felt grimy. I hadn’t taken a bath in sixteen days, my clothes last changed half then. I was sticky with typhoid germs.

I crawled on my hands and knees towards the sink basin. Between rests, I splashed water on my face and arms, before triumphantly crawling back to the floor next to my bed. I remained on the floor for another hour, failing to muster the motivation to get up onto my bed. I worked on the thread ball with my legs splayed out, unladylike.

I was still feeling accomplished that afternoon when Nadeshiko came back, wrapped in a muffler. I enjoyed seeing what the notoriously dry December weather had done to her face; her lips were looking cracked, and her eyes unnaturally red. In other circumstances, she would have probably asked me what I was doing out of bed, but she doubtlessly remembered what I had said yesterday.

I tried not to regret it, but I did.

“You’re early,” I said, chilly.

“No dance today,” she replied, looking over her shoulder. Amu’s red face appeared over her shoulder, followed by Yaya’s, like a pair of gophers.

“Rima-tan!” Yaya said, gleefully. “It’s us! You look hideous!”

“Sensei said that we could come in and see you, as long as Nadeshiko was with us,” Amu supplied. Yaya unwrapped her scarf and leaned forward right into my face, looking very preoccupied indeed.

“It’s horrible,” Yaya exclaimed, devastated. “Rima-tan’s face was so round and cute before!”

I dragged my little hands down my dry face. I could feel my swollen under-eyes.

“I don’t care how cute I look,” I said.

“That’s right,” Amu said, high-pitched. “Rima doesn’t care about that when she could have died.”

A horrified, mortal silence settled among our little party. I basked in the attention.

“Not really,” I said finally. “The Dra- Fujisaki-sensei said that it’s only babies that die from typhoid fever. Could you help me back in bed?”
I held out both my arms. Yaya took my legs, and Amu took my arms. Together, they heaved me easily onto the mattress. This launched them into a whole other discussion about how skinny I was.

“Eat a persimmon,” Yaya said, forcing one into my hand. I took a bite, only because she was pouting at me. I wished I was Tsubasa so that Yaya could be my big sister.

“We’ll tell you what you missed,” Amu cut in. “Do you… do you remember much?”

Nadeshiko was at the point farthest from the bed, sitting prettily on the chair I usually stacked clothes on. She had two boxes on her lap and looked particularly tight-lipped.

I shook my head, slowly.

“I was tired,” I said. “But Yaya said I shouted.”

“You screamed,” Yaya corrected. “Like you were getting stabbed.”

I scratched my legs and shuddered at the memory of spider legs.

“I dreamt of falling and drowning a lot,” I said. “But I don’t remember much.”

Amu looked between Nadeshiko and I, wincing.

“You were there when Rima screamed, weren’t you? What happened? Was she okay?”

Nagihiko’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed.

“Dr Ninomiya said she was running a fever of forty-one degrees at its worst,” she said carefully. “The laudanum didn’t help. Opium does odd things to the mind.”

I exhaled. Nagihiko caught my eye and looked away.

Amu smiled at me. “You weren’t so bad when I was sitting with you,” she said. “But you twitched sometimes, which was scary.”

“Sorry,” I said, smiling back.

“And you infected three others,” Yaya informed me. Amu and Nadeshiko both gave her a warning look.

“Really?” I said, impressed.

Yaya listed them off on her fingers: Hatoba, Mizutani, and Hatanaka. They were moved to the infirmary ward, but prompt inoculation capped their illness at a week and a half. I didn’t ask why I hadn’t joined them.

Hatanaka, I thought. I wonder if Nadeshiko had visited her, as well.

Seiyo had been in quarantine for a month. Delivery boys dropped all necessities – produce boxes, milk, rice, paraffin, ice – on the veranda upon seeing the typhoid notice nailed to the front door. Water was boiled, and potassium crystals dissolved into it, which explained its pink tinge and funny taste. Life went on, but it walked with a funny gait.

Amu wanted to know how I caught typhoid fever to begin with. The same question eluded me. I shrugged.
"This is one of the heaviest rainy seasons on record," Yaya pointed out.

I looked around the room, expecting it to come from Nadeshiko. I wasn’t typhoid hallucinating: Yaya had really said it.

“All the rain leached germs into Kouen’s well system, so I bet that’s what happened to ours, too.” Yaya mockingly pushing a pair of invisible glasses up her nose. We all stared at her.

“The rains have been heavy this season,” Nadeshiko spoke up. She played with one of the buckles on the case. “Do you think we– angered anyone?”

“We did,” I said emphatically. “Sanjō is ready to stab someone.”

“No, I mean…” Nadeshiko looked up. “Have we angered…”

She self-consciously touched the red cord that held her hair up. Her hand pressed against the windowpane, where I knew she could hear the distant roar of the Ichi River.

“You- you think a god punished Rima?” Amu blurted out.

I looked offended.

“Not Rima,” he said.

“Then who?”

Nadeshiko exhaled, watching her own foggy reflection in the glass.

“Who knows?” she finally said with a smile. “I’m just being superstitious.”

I glanced at Amu, only to realise she was studying me. I pulled my legs into a criss-cross.

“What’s in the case?” I suggested, if only to distract.

“Oh!” Amu said, excitedly. “Show her, Nadeshiko!”

Flipping the brass fastens up, Nadeshiko proudly opened it. It was a board with a series of crisscrossing lines across it, and two pouches within it.

“What am I being shown?” I said.

“Go,” said Nadeshiko.

“What, for asking a question?” I said, annoyed.

“Ew,” Yaya said loudly. “Don't bring out the Go board, Nade, she meant the case under it, obviously–”

Amu and Yaya hauled out what looked like a large suitcase, proudly unfolding it on the bed next to my legs.

“A portable phonograph,” said Amu, excitedly. “Yua said we could borrow it. She has a bunch of disc records, too, look--”

Inside the little pocket at the top of the suitcase were a series of large paper squares, containing discs roughly the size and weight of dinner plates.
“I’ve never seen one this small,” I said, taking another bite of the persimmon. “At home, we just listen to the radio.”

“Papa loves this stuff,” Amu said excitedly, putting the top record on. “He wants to get a radio-phonograph for home.”

“When you do, let me visit you,” I suggested wistfully, even though my mother would never let me go. I fantasized about visiting Amu on the streetcar and listening to records in her parlour while her little sister tried to sing along. We could try to follow the silly dancing instructions on the back of the record-covers, and Nadeshiko wouldn’t be there to correct us.

*If I was engaged, maybe…* I began but couldn’t finish the thought without feeling sick.

We all watched in silent awe as Amu wound the crank on the side of the machine with a never-before-seen vigour. Nothing happened.

“Ugh,” Amu said, fiddling with the needle. It popped into one of the grooves on the shellac, and a soft fuzzy static crackled from the disc. A dim, jazzy trumpet began to play.

Below her skirt, Nadeshiko’s right leg jogged, and her fingers twitched to herself as though imagining the choreography. I looked down, flustered. Nadeshiko had no business being *cute*.

“Amu,” Nadeshiko’s voice chided me over the sound of the big band. “At least play with me!”

“I’m *terrible* at Go!” Amu protested. “I lose to you every time!”

“I know.” Her eyes glinted mischievously. “That’s why it’s so fun.”

I leaned against Yaya’s shoulder. We watched them line up the little stones over my legs, balancing the phonograph between my footboard and feet. I desperately committed every detail of the picture to my memory before it slipped through my fingers. My exhausted body, still reeling from fever. My full heart. The dark December sky, full of promise. The warm light within. The Go pieces, *clink-clink-clinking* onto the wood. The crackling of the phonograph mingling with the sound of Yaya masticating a persimmon.

“Where’s Utau?” I murmured, realizing the picture was missing someone.

“Sick,” said Amu, with a grimace. “From the shot.”

“From a *vaccine*?” I was surprised.

“Its side-effects are nasty,” said Yaya, spewing juice everywhere. “Now I know why they only give it to men in the army.”

It must be truly awful if Utau was staying in bed, without her huffing and puffing that she was fine and perfectly capable of getting up. Knowing what typhoid felt like, I made up my mind to bring her something. The last of the persimmons were long-picked, but maybe Nadeshiko would take pity and make chestnut sweets on my behalf.

“Your move,” Nadeshiko reminded Amu, leaning on her hand dreamily.

“Uhhh…” Amu muttered. The record player petered out, and Amu jumped up quickly. “Oops! Let me put another one on.”

Each side could only hold about three minutes, meaning that a record was finished in six. It was a
good time-stall.

Yaya and I stopped our game of insulting men on the record-covers and turned our eyes to the game. I couldn’t tell if Amu was losing or not. Nadeshiko put down a white stone, the last in a zigzagging row of stones on the board’s points. In places, she had surrounded the black dots on all sides.

With long fingers, she plucked Amu’s black stone out from the middle of the board and put it back into her bag with a clink.

“What?” Amu barked, looking from the board to the bag. “H–”

“You’ve been in atari for three rounds,” Nadeshiko said, sympathetically. “How could I not? Please forgive my impertinence.”

“Don’t forgive her,” I said with sangfroid befitting a Hoshina. “Get even.”

“How can I?” said Amu, frazzled. “She’s ten points ahead, easy!”

“Eleven,” Nadeshiko corrected with a beam.

If I go away to the sea,
I shall be a drowned corpse.
If I go away to the mountain…

The ghostly male chorus warbled from the phonograph. Amu put down another black stone, jaw set. Nagihiko hummed along, as though he knew the tune, and placed a white stone down on the other end of the board. Amu’s body language relaxed, thinking him far away from her black troops.

... I shall be an overgrown corpse.
But if I die for the Emperor,
I will never regret.

“Wait.”

I reached out a hand and stopped Amu’s wrist.

“Cut her off,” I said.

Nadeshiko said, “I didn’t know Rima-chan played Go.”

Oh, so it was Rima-chan now, was it?

“I don’t.”

But it was too late for her. Amu’s attention turned to the bottom of the board. Nadeshiko had dotted little white groups of stones in no recognisable pattern. To Amu, they weren’t immediately menacing. But Nadeshiko was now slowly weaving them together, stitching together a united front that would soon control the board.

Amu began to place down a black stone between them, halting her hand.

“I can’t!” she whispered. “She’ll capture it. You saw her.”

“Let her,” I said. I raised my eyes to Nadeshiko’s.
“I don’t understand,” Amu grumbled, putting her stone there anyway.

As expected, Nadeshiko ignored this, chalking it up to a ploy. Good. I silently directed Amu to dive for the centre of the board. Amu was weak and passive as a player, and Nadeshiko was scheming and preferred to skirt conflict. As a result, Amu had been ceding territory from sheer low self-esteem.

“You’ve honestly never played this game before?” Amu asked nervously as I directed her to start piling her stones menacingly up against Nadeshiko’s.

“No.” I tossed my hair over my shoulder.

Sakurai Yua came back in to get her phonograph but got distracted, sitting down next to Yaya. When Sakurai wasn’t back within five minutes, Yamamoto was sent to fetch her, where she lurked in the doorway, watching the scene.

“Fighting spirit, Amu-chan!” Sakurai called out bracingly, jostling Manami and Wakana. Once those two showed up smelling entertainment like blood in the water, it was over. At least ten girls encircled our room, watching closely to see if anyone would defeat Nadeshiko.

My dominating sentiment was “I’ll kill you,” for reasons I knew not. What did I think would happen if I beat Nadeshiko at a strategy game? That she’d drop everything and fall in love with me? That my thirst for revenge would be sated? That I would regain what my ego had lost? Yes. To all of those.

I reached over and, plucking Nadeshiko’s captured stone from the board, placed it in my lap. Amu gasped with delight. A few of the girls oohed and applauded. Even though capturing meant nothing without the advantages it brought, it didn’t matter. I glowed.

Four turns later, Nadeshiko captured one of Amu’s stones.

We exchanged a look of horror. I checked my defences for cracks, mind racing.


Manami grunted in agreement. “Fujisaki-sama seems like she’s floundering.”

I re-adjusted the frills on the sleeves of my nightgown and moved over so I was blocking Amu’s access to the board. Someone made an “oooh” noise again, and someone else shouted something of encouragement to Nadeshiko.

She placed a black stone dangerously close to my territorial line.

“I’ll crush you,” I muttered under my breath.

“An admirable effort,” said Nagihiko absentmindedly, fist under his chin. He captured another.

“Rima, be careful,” Amu whispered.

“I am,” I said, coolly, but I was shaken. Why was he taking so many? Unless—

The game was nearing its close, and he was on a last-minute campaign to take all my attacking power off the board in a bid for points. A cornered enemy will fight desperately, and inflict more damage to your side than they otherwise would. Sun Tzu.

I played thick and heavy, trying to emphasize what Amu had put down on the board, but Nadeshiko
was tailing me, fast as a shadow. White blocked out all the intersections. I was going to lose.

I looked up at her, outraged. Nadeshiko’s thumb caressed her latest capture, rubbing her thumb over its polished ebony surface in circles. She raised her eyes to meet mine, black as pitch.

I was losing.

Nadeshiko was touching each intersection quietly, counting under her breath, and I suddenly understood. Unless I played like a prodigy, there was no way I would catch up.

“Good for a first game,” she said, kindly. “But I’m afraid Amu made too many mistakes in early game for you to rectify.”

“Hey!” Amu protested.

The tension was gone in a heartbeat. Everyone laughed, and Nadeshiko smiled.

Our jubilations were cut short by whispered warnings. A hum began near the door, getting louder and louder.

“Teacher’s outside!” a girl tried to say, but it was too late: Sanjo-sensei’s face was in the doorway, twisted and livid.

“I cannot,” she began like an ice-cold knife, “Believe this. Lights-out was a half-hour ago! Have you all completely forgotten yourselves?”

Nadeshiko’s smile faded.

Sanjo’s face was pale, and her fists were clenched, shaking. We began to shift uncomfortably. Wakana and Manami exchange furrowed brows.

“Back to your beds!” she shouted, when we didn’t respond. “Before I make you!”

The only sound was the thudding of feet on the floor as everyone returned to their rooms. Nadeshiko quietly tipped all the stones onto the bed and folded the board with a loud snap.

Sanjo held out a hand, stopping Amu and Yaya from leaving.

“One moment,” she said, low, menacing. “You two.”

Nadeshiko and I exchanged a look. She began to stand up. I placed a hand on her knee, pinning her to my bed.

“You’ve been in here visiting Mashiro-san all evening?” Sanjo asked.

Amu looked back at us. Yaya nodded.

“Fujisaki-san?” said Sanjo, without looking at her.

“We’ve all been in here since classes ended, Sensei,” said Nadeshiko softly.


She extinguished the light, leaving Nadeshiko and I curled up on my bed in darkness. I saw the pale circle of Nadeshiko’s face follow me to the window, where I prised it open.
A deep male voice, too muffled to hear, came in over the wind. Various bright lantern-lights roved the surface of Seiyo Hill. The stationmaster whistled and slammed a gate. Instinctively, I knew the last train of the night had been stopped, and its compartments were being searched.

“Hoshina Utau has run away!” Manami shouted down the hallway at six-thirteen that morning, as the sun was rising. It echoed over the sound of running water, of the slamming of shoe-cabinets. All bets were off. Decorum was lost. *Hoshina Utau has run away.*

Run away. Escaped. Cut it, made off. Gave Seiyo the slip. Eloped, stole, smuggled herself out, rolled in a rug. Bribed the gatemaster, stowed away in the luggage compartment. The tales grew taller, the embellishments longer.

How had she done it?

The plan was not brilliant, but it was simple. After Hatoba came down with fever, Utau must have sensed an opportunity. When the school went into quarantine, she alerted her brother. When Fujisaki-sensei was watching us sick girls, Utau had stolen her key. A police dog sniffed the key out in the dirt by the train station. But she hadn’t gotten on the train. They searched every compartment, to no avail. Was she in an overhead luggage rack? Had she taken a rickshaw straight to Kobe and gotten the train there? In a few more days, news was going to reach Tokyo newspapers.

Everybody wanted to talk to Amu and Nadeshiko, as her closest friend and the accessories in her previous attempt. Is that why they had been playing Go in Nadeshiko’s room, they wanted to know. To provide a distraction?

Amu couldn’t eat her rice. She stabbed it miserably, taking this far harder than the rest of us.

“I don’t know,” she kept whispering in response to questions. “I don’t know.”

Nadeshiko and I exchanged a grim look.

I bit my lip and took Amu by the arm. Nadeshiko took her other one. Together, we hauled her to her feet.

“There, there,” Nadeshiko told her softly, rubbing her shoulders. “She’s going to be alright. Her brother is with her. It’s not your fault.”

“Hoshina-san would tell you to pull yourself together,” I said, taking her arm in a vicelike grip. “She would tell you to stop embarrassing yourself.”

“Mashiro-san!” I got scolded.

Amu whispered something in Nadeshiko’s ear. Nadeshiko turned to me, eyes wide.

“Hoshina-san asked you to come with her?”

Amu didn’t answer. We flanked her silently. It was a foolish offer, and one I couldn’t see Utau making. She operated alone. Amu was in a precarious position. Why would she throw everything away to follow a pair of siblings to Manchukuo?

“But you said no,” I said.
“How could I?” she whispered, but she wasn’t talking to me. “How could I… my parents… my little sister…”

“That’s right,” said Nadeshiko, pale. I pulled the door open to the classroom for them. “You have your family’s face to consider. Hoshina-san…”

“Made a choice,” I finished, lowering my voice.

“Yes,” Nadeshiko said faintly. “Who could possibly ask you to go to a strange country, leaving your loved ones behind? It’s madness.”

Who, indeed? I knew their names. Someday, I thought. I will ask them the same.

Chapter End Notes

For the medical historians in the audience tonight, some interesting trivia:

- The reason her water tastes odd in Chapter 15 (besides the Condy’s crystals in it) is because the Japanese antipyretic Futin has been dissolved into boiling water, as per its instructions. (In the West it was marketed as antifebrin.)
- Hilariously, Rima missed the first widespread antibiotic (prontosil) by a mere two years, which would have easily halved her recovery time.
- The song about corpses is real. It's called Umi Yukaba ("If I Go Away To The Sea"), which was released just months previously. War songs like this one were immensely popular during the period. I've tweaked the translation. Wikipedia vastly downplays the grisly jist of the kanji, imjussayin.

I hope this chapter doesn't make it blatantly obvious that I suck at Go. Enjoy the breather before next week!
“Amu,” I plied, hauling a dry-cleaning bag into the second-floor senior dormitory. “The lorry’s here for our blouses. How long are you going to mope?”

Around her, girls were pulling on stockings or fixing obis, determined to make the most of our one day off a fortnight. I contemplated writing an open letter to Japan’s prominent psychologists, inviting them to come and observe Seiyo Academy’s schoolwide case of cabin fever after a mere seven days of confinement.

I sat down on the end of the bed. Amu pulled her sticky cheek from the open magazine open on her covers. I didn’t appreciate this, as the magazine was mine.

“You’re not even reading it,” I coughed.

“I-I am!”

“What craft do they show you how to make on page twelve?” I was still congested, much to everyone’s mirth.

“A—”

“Wrong,” I yanked it out from under her. “Come do the baths with Yaya and me. I need to clear by lungs.”

She sighed. “Is Nadeshiko coming?”

*That* would be a complication, I thought dryly.

“How should I know?” I said, but I did know. “She has dance. Or something. I dunno.”

When we went to go tell Yaya our plan, we found her with a hairpin in her mouth, trying to pin her
hair into a coiffure.

“Wooow!” Amu said, putting on a brave smile. “Yaya, you look so cute!”

Yaya twirled for us. The sleeves of her kimono fanned out around her like wings.

“Fanks!” she whistled through the mouthful of pins.

“Is the Emperor hibself exbecting you for luncheon?” I was disgruntled at the wrench in my plans.

“No, Papa,” Yaya said. She turned in a circle, dropping pins everywhere. “He and my Aunty are taking me up to Kobe for the day to eat in a city restaurant. Winter is the perfect time for sukiyaki, don’t you think?”

“No Muss be nice,” I grumbled.

Yaya looked up at me with piercing eyes.

“Will you help me?”

My annoyance melted to guilt. Like they had done with me before the ball, we helped secure her hair at the base of her neck. She hadn’t bothered with a hot iron, which was a blessing: I had visions of her frying her forehead off.

“There!” said Amu, leaning back to inspect her handiwork.

“Loogs nice,” I sniffed.

“Just nice?” Yaya frowned and touched her hair.

Amu and I looked at each other. I picked up the red ribbon she tied her pigtails with, looping it through a lock of hair and tying it behind her ear.

“Now id’s perfect,” I said.

It was funny how two people could walk together, longing for someone else. Nadeshiko had gone where I could not reach. Utau was in Manchukuo by now if she knew what was good for her. Yaya was only gone for the day, but it felt as though she was slipping away too.

I linked my arm through Amu’s. “Say the gods really are out to do us in, like Nadeshiko-san thinks.”

I pointed to the northwestern hills, where a path snaked up to the forest thicket where the shrine nestled. It was dedicated to Hachiman, much to Seiyo Academy’s pique. A martial god of warriors could not be prayed to for love and luck on exams.

“You believe that?” Amu shoulder-checked as though Hachiman was breathing down our necks. “She said it herself, she was just being superstitious!”

“I bud say they were,” I insisted, sniffing. “If typhoid can’t kill us, what will? A stampede? Thing about how many Kichiga-senseis they’d need to habe galloping all ad once.”

Amu laughed, and the sun darkened. Behind us, a shadow loomed amid a clattering racket.
The sun killer was Hotori Tadase himself. He sat astride a magnificent white horse, hair glistening like brushed metal.

“Hinamori-san, Mashiro-san,” he bowed on horseback, which looked ridiculous. I smirked against my better instinct. “Good morning.”

I coughed.

“Hotori-san!” said Amu, trying to look both eager and disinterested at the same time. “I guess it is.”

While Hotori re-adjusted his reins, I saw Amu hit herself. Without his usual throng of adoring girls, he looked smaller, more awkward.

“Where are you two headed today?” he asked politely, nudging the horse with his booted heel. The horse clip-clopped alongside us, making the noise of ten women each shaking a barrel of empty silkmoth cocoons. Remembering the horse of my nightmare, I shrunk away. This forced Amu to stand next to Hotori’s leg, which I could tell was too much for her.

“Oh, we were just... um.... bath,” Amu said, ogling his thigh. Thankfully, Hotori was an adept translator of babble.

“It’s nice to relax and get warm, isn’t it?” said Hotori.

“Id is,” I said, just to egg him on.

“Yeah!” said Amu, in a broad commoner’s accent I thought she had lost. “It’s alright, I guess.”

This was dull. I watched the glimmering coat of the horse. At first, I thought it ivory, but up close, the horse hairs were a pale beige. Its satiny coat rippled under its trotting limbs, wrapped tightly round each leg.

“Beautiful, isn’t he?” Hotori-san said, noticing me eyeing the horse. “Cremello.”

“Is that his name?” Amu asked tentatively. The horse tossed its mane, and her courage vaporized.

“No,” he laughed. “That’s his coat colour. May I give you a ride down the hill?”

He said it gallantly, but I wasn’t convinced. The horse regarded us snootily through his pale eyelashes, reminding me of Yamabuki Sāya.

“O-oh, we couldn’t,” Amu said, trying not to betray her delight. “You’re probably in a hurry.”

I muttered in her ear, “Id looks as though the horse is about do start bragging about ids father’s promotion.”

Amu turned her laugh into a hacking cough.

“Nonsense,” he said, with Count Hotori’s exact inflection. “I was going into town anyway.”

When Hotori Tadase proffered his hand to lift her up into the stirrup, I was sure she was going to swoon over. I picked at my cuticles as he waffled horsey instructions to her, guiding her hands around his waist.

“You next, Mashiro-san,” he said kindly but less interested. “Kiseki can handle three.”
I was about to inform Hotori Tadase that I would walk, thank-you, before realizing how pathetic I would look, trotting to keep up with them. Swallowing my doubt, I grabbed Amu’s hand before Hotori could offer.

Thus, I found myself clinging to Amu, who clung to Hotori, who clung to the reigns. I knew nothing about beasts of burden, but it was my impression that the stallion was a blustery poorly-trained sort. It jolted down the hill at more of a canter than a leisurely trot. As the one seated under its haunches, I winced every time its bones bounced me up and down.

Amu, perched comfortably on the dip in its back, was hanging off Tadase’s every word.

“I was sorry to hear about Hoshina-san,” he said sympathetically. His face looked genuinely remorseful, as though she had died. “Is there any news?”

When I thought about Utau stepping onto a steamship and pulling away from the coastline, holding a wide-brimmed hat to her head, I felt lighter. I wished I had an older brother to run away with.

“No,” said Amu, face drooping as quickly as she had smiled. I glared at Hotori. “They haven’t found anything else. I can only hope that means they’re safe…”

Hotori’s eyes softened when he looked at her, like Nadeshiko’s often did. They were surrounded by fragile pink skin, giving him the look of a prey animal.

“I am certain she’ll be found,” he said comfortingly. “The military police in Manchuko are good at their jobs.”

“The– military police?” Amu said, horrified. “Surely they haven’t done anything wrong?”

I pulled Amu closer to me, frowning. Hotori swallowed, and he looked ahead.

“They’ve stolen quite a bit of money from their new father, you know,” he said, in a low voice. “No doubt corrupted into doing so by her brother. I know she wouldn’t do it of her own accord. Nonetheless, something must be done.”

Amu gasped. I pressed my lips together.

“My father has a personal interest in the case,” he said, the picture of pale-lashed mourning. “Before her mother remarried, our families were close. We would have taken care of her. The way things have turned out is... disappointing.”

Kiseki lumbered down the hill and directly into the road like he owned it. I prayed for swift death. Hotori’s family reminded me of his father, the newly-minted Count.

“I believe congratulations are in order,” I said, staring through him. The effect was slightly lost with a stuffy nose.

Hotori Tadase sat up on his horse and looked at me properly for the first time.

“How did you know?” he said. “We thought we were discreet.”

Hotori Tadase was kind but dense. I didn’t know how he thought he’d keep an Emperor’s decree a secret for long, no matter how far from the capital we were.

“That’s funny,” I said. It wasn’t. “General Yamabuki sees to be telling anyone who can listen.”

Hotori’s ears went pink. “Ah,” he said, stealing look at Amu. “Well, that… that can’t be helped, I
I seemed to have shaken his confidence. It was the only thing I was ever good at. Hotori was the third man I had met who did not view me as the nexus of his attentions. I welcomed the anonymity with open arms.

The moment the horse stopped, I slid off its shiny back in a hurry. But Amu and Hotori dawdled, saying such extended goodbyes that pressed the limits of incredulity. I stood there, tapping my foot.

“I’m going in,” I coughed at Amu, nodding at the bath house curtains. I veered away from Hotori’s horse, who was pawing the dirt and continuing to snort as though giving us a manifesto. “Join whenever.”

They both spluttered behind me. There, I thought, satisfied. Birds of a feather flock together. If they wanted to speak so badly, they could.

I gave the attendant my coins, received my wooden ticket, and walked through alone. I made myself at home in one of the washing alcoves. I was almost done when Amu burst in, face flushed.

“Good heavens,” I said. I was mid-way through combing out my hair and scouring three weeks’ worth of typhoid grime out of it. “At least take your clothes off.”

Amu looked at me, eyes wild. “Wha?”

I pointed to her shoes, standing on damp tatami flooring, and her tights, already splattered with washing-water.

“Oh…”

She packed her clothes away into a cubby-hole, gazing into its depths. It was like Amu to space out at the remotest inconvenience, so I wiped my wet bangs off my forehead and continued my laborious brushing. By the time Amu finished in her stupor, I had finally, finally detangled my hair.

I stepped into the bath and inhaled the waves of steam rolling off the water, taking the first painless cough in a month. Bliss. Like I did in the bath in the dormitory, I sank in up to my nose, watching Amu from over the water like a crocodile.

“Get in,” I said, resurfacing. “It doesn’t take that long.”

“I’m coming,” Amu said, wrapping her towel around her hair. I felt a pang of affection. Ridiculous.

It was only us and a few grandmothers at that time of day, at the opposite end of the sunken square in the middle of the floor. I felt along my body, feeling every rib, with a grimace.

“You’ve put some of your weight back on,” said Amu, eyeing me enviously. It took a minute to realise she meant my chest, not anywhere else.

“What does it matter? People only look at my face anyway.”

I put my hands on either side of my face and stretched them back towards my ears, opening my mouth in a stretchy leer at Amu. She swatted a bit of water at me, snorting. On the other end of the bath, two elderly women clucked with disapproval, and Amu fell self-consciously silent.

“This is for relaxing,” I mock-admonished her. “How dare you mimic the Hotori-sama’s noble
“Horse in the bath?”

Her smile vanished at the mention of Hotori, and I grimaced at the joke’s poor landing.

“Tough crowd?” I said unhappily, hands sloshing back into the water.

“No,” she whispered. “What do you... what do you think of Hotori-kun?”

I was uncannily reminded of the poem, and her insistence on what I thought. Amu could not make decisions on her own. If she were a Queen, she would be the sort to rely almost unilaterally on the decision of a counsel.

“He is a man,” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I made another face, gagging.

“Gentle,” I inhaled through my cleared sinuses. “Sensible. Fair. But without meaning to, he puts people in difficult positions. Demanding, though he pretends he isn’t.”

I thought of the relationship he had with Nadeshiko and wondered what she’d say. The way she catered and fussed over him annoyed me deeply. That should be me—me!

“Is there any man you think highly of? At all?” Amu said, bewildered.

“Yes,” I said.

I regretted it almost instantly. I punished myself by dunking my head under water. Forget him, I chanted, blowing bubbles to the surface. Forget him. You cannot banish him from your room, but you can banish him from your mind.

When I surfaced, Amu was three centimetres from my face.

“Who?”

“Is yours Hotori?” I asked bluntly. Amu looked away, biting her lip.

“Forget him,” I repeated. “You heard Yamabuki. He’s a Count. You are the daughter of a photographer. Your parents would want someone for you who shared your values. Even if he’d have you…”

I cut myself off, alarmed. Amu’s eyes were filling with tears. Why was I saying these things? The girl in the water’s reflection was red-cheeked and wild. She shouted my deepest fears back at me:

Even if he’d have you, how could you let him settle for a manipulative woman like you!

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “Forget I said anything.”

“No.” Amu shook her head. “You’re right.”

“I think love is a moral failing,” I said. “What the Hell do I know? Go ask Nadeshiko.”

Amu turned to me, bangs escaping her towel and sticking to her forehead. She was lovely, I thought miserably.

“You’ll be honest with me,” Amu said urgently. “That’s why I’m asking you. Would you... would
you be a man’s mistress? If it was presented to you?"

The grandmothers in the corner were pretending not to eavesdrop. All I could do was sit in water up to my chin and stare in horror. I ought to have known. I never imagined this quickly.

“If he was rich enough,” I said.

Amu, who thought everyone dreamt of getting married, looked at me with despair. “Why?”

The grandmothers were leaning forward. They caught me glaring and pretended to look the other way. The girl in the bathwater’s reflection was pink-cheeked, soft looking, but I knew better.

“Can you honestly say that I would make a good wife?”

“Rima, that’s not fair, you’re so pretty…”

“Yes,” I said, blandly. “And cold-hearted, unsympathetic, averse to hard labor and disobedient.”

Amu was ready to protest. I held up a hand. My voice softened. “But I’m not like you, Amu. You like to make others happy. Don’t you think you deserve a certain future?”

“You believe Hotori-kun isn’t reliable?”

“We all answer to a man until we die,” I countered. “Do you want yours in writing, or based on his whim?”

I rose from the bath, shedding water. If only there was a better answer, for both Amu and Hotori’s sake. He was gentle. Kind. Undependable. Though I was young, I understood. We didn’t marry for love; we married for a guarantee.

And in life, there are few guarantees.

The clouds rolled in as we exited the baths, more relaxed and subdued than when we went in. I wondered if Yaya would be back soon. How very like the whims of the Yuiki family to snatch her away from school for a joy-ride, though we were mere days from going home!

“Are you going to say yes?”

Amu pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, squeezing her eyes shut.

“Don’t,” she begged. “Ask me about something else. Please.”

I trailed my hand along the cloth opening of a storefront, the side of a lantern, a notched wooden fence-post. “Fine. Are you going home for New Year’s?”

The last time we had walked through here, it had been lined with booths and lights, people and drums. I thought wistfully of how much could change between seasons.

“Yeah,” she said, faintly smiling. “Ami’s really excited. She won’t stop talking about things she wants to show me when I come home. Are you?”

I nodded. New Year’s Eve was quiet at the Mashiro house. The factory girls returned home to their hometowns, the overseer to his. The corporate world shut down for a precious three days. With no work to throw herself into, my mother would turn her attention to the household, and me by extension.
It was not my favourite holiday.

We circled back up towards Seiyo Hill, approaching the tall gate marking the town shrine.

“Let’s go up,” said Amu, suddenly.

“To bray do Hachiman?” I scoffed, blowing my nose into my handkerchief. “Do you need that much help with archery?”

“Noooo… I just… he’s supposed to be a protector, isn’t he?”

I was probably ritually unclean from bronchitis. The air stilled to a supernatural silence as we passed under the wooden gate and onto the packed earth, as though spirits occupied every square inch of space. Atheistically, I knew the real reason was the cypress and pine, walling out exterior sounds.

Out of respect for Amu’s supposing, I rinsed my hands in the fountain, but stubbornly refused to bow. My pleas to Orihime and Hikoboshi had fallen on deaf ears. I could not fathom why the other gods would have better hearing.

Amu rang the bell weakly but clapped her hands with certainty I envied. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, and I wondered what a girl like Amu wanted protection from. Hotori’s idiotic advances? The wrath of Saya? Or perhaps just a prosperous harvest, a netful of fish?

Beyond the bell, inside the oratory, a figure kneeled at the feet of the faded banners. Amu and I exchanged a confused look. I walked around the donation box and up the stairs.

The ramrod back and ponytail came into view, framed by the open doors of the shrine. I knew the back of Nadeshiko’s head like my own reflection. The thought gave me only despair.

“Rima, what are y–” Amu hissed, coming up behind me.

My heart stopped. I yanked Amu by the arm around the side of the veranda, leading her behind a wooden pillar supporting the roof.

“Shhh!” I whispered, but this was easier said than done. My inflamed airways were screaming for mercy. I tried to clear my throat against my muffler without making a sound.

Through the crisscrossing slats of wood enclosing the oratory, I could catch square inches of her face. If his mouth hadn’t been moving, I might have thought he was a wax figure of a bodhisattva in repose. In profile, Nagihiko’s breath turned to mist in front of his closed eyes. He was sitting seiza, hands clasped together around something that clinked. I couldn’t tell if he was play-acting a man or a woman today– the wool overcoat was dark, but the kimono was the colour of figs.

Only he and the gods heard the words he mouthed. I stared because I could do nothing else. Why?

What were my friends demanding from their tutelar that was so inaccessible to me? I pressed my lips together and ran my nails down the wood grain, following the grooves in the blind hope that they would lead me to confluence. How long had he been kneeling there? Was he so worried about epidemics and stupid fortunes that he had gone to appeal a god? Stupid, maddeningly sweet Nagihiko, who cared enough to appeal to divine justice on my behalf. My cheek rested against the wood, lolling to the side.

I turned to Amu with my questions, but Amu beat me to it. She was already staring at me with jubilation. How could she be happy at a time like this?
“I’ve been an idiot,” she whispered, with a look of wonder.

“Yes, always,” I whispered back. “But we like you anyway.”

“You’ve liked her this whole time,” Amu said, breathless. She looked from Nadeshiko’s clasped hands to mine, clutching the front of my coat just over my heart.

I dropped my hand hastily. Over our heads, the prayer bell tolled. I backed away until I hit the wooden pillar. My left. My right. Nadeshiko was still lost in prayer, and I was lost in Hell.

“You’re being noisy!” I hissed, erupting in hives. I wondered if Hachiman was punishing me for wiping my bronchitis germs all over the fountain, or I was just blushing.

“You like a woman,” Amu said with wonder. I scratched at my neck with both hands. Itchy! Itchy!

“Of course. Of course! That’s why you weren’t interested in Fuyuki-kun, or any of the others. That’s why you don’t want to marry! I was so stupid! How did I not notice my two best friends–”

“Am I your best friend?” I interrupted, still flushing. “Really?”

Wood clattered within the shrine. Her answer would have to wait. I shoved Amu off the veranda with both hands.

“Wh-GAH!?” Amu squawked, hitting the long grass and rolling. I dove after her, crawling into an azalea thicket like a soldier under fire.

“He’s going do hear you!” I sneezed, azalea branches clawing at my hair. Amu seemed to not care if the entire city heard her.

“But Rima!” She had reached the apex of realisation, coasting. “I can–”

“No,” I coughed through a mouthful of leaves. I did not trust myself to resist Amu bringing what I wanted within tantalizing reach. If Amu followed her heart and gave me a shred of a chance, I would throw everything away. I would disobey my mother, drain my family coffers, shame my line, ruin my pride.

I clawed a chunk of my hair free, wheezing painfully through my raw airway. “If you meddle in by personal affairs, I’ll neber forgibe you. I’ll but frogs in your bed.”

Amu’s delight turned to horror. I spat out a leaf and crawled on the dirt floor, picking up my purse.

“I habe made a mind to ignore it,” I said stiffly.

Amu continued to gawk at me. The National Frog Choir was playing its reunion concert.

“But yourself in by position. I won’d burden–”

Amu nodded at a point over my shoulder.

“Whad.”

A twig snapped. Nagihiko stood a stone’s throw behind me, clutching his haori shut with one hand. His fist clenched, one foot braced in front of the other. Then he relaxed, and Nadeshiko put a hand over her mouth. Her cheeks puffed up like a blowfish.

It must look idiotic to hear rustling and arguing round the side of a shrine, only to find your
horrible roommate’s head sticking out from under an azalea and your friend lying face-down on the grass like a corpse.

“Pfffffff...”

Amu looked up as Nadeshiko burst with laughter.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she giggled around her fingers, burying her whole face in her gloves. “Are you... are you quite alright?”

“We’re fine,” I rasped, scrambling to my feet. My head bent back by the chunk of hair ensnared by the bush. Amu tore it free, avoiding everyone’s eyes.

“What on earth...” Nadeshiko began.

“We were— foraging!” Amu blurted out, obviously rehearsing excuses while Nadeshiko was laughing at my agony. “For wild vegetables!”

“Do you even care how much wild onions sell for?” I said, mouth twitching.

“But it’s winter.” Nadeshiko was unable to resist being a know-it-all. She gazed fondly at Amu, loving the way she lied badly. I wanted to hit her.

“It’s not embarrassing to say you were visiting the shrine, you know. I was just in there anyhow.” Nadeshiko nodded over her shoulder. “You two didn’t go to the baths, did you?”

“We did,” I said, stretching my answer out to rub the quality time in Nadeshiko’s face. “We talked about boys and our love lives. Why?”

“Because you’ve both got dirt on you,” Nagihiko said.

I sneered.

“In your hair, also.”

“Let be hid her,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Rima, no!” Amu held me back by my arms. Nadeshiko pursed her lips and blew on her hands cutely while I struggled in vain against Amu’s grip.

“W-well,” Amu said, wrestling me into an impressive armlock. “Nadeshiko-san is clearly busy, doing shrine stuff, so I’ll just take Rima and go...”

Nadeshiko flinched, looking between the two of us. She had enjoyed uninterrupted invitations into Amu’s confidence for six years going on seven. Irony of ironies that my infatuation with her would push her out. Twelve-year-old Rima ought to be dancing for joy. Seventeen-year-old Rima wasn’t.

Amu took me to follow my suicidal heart. I didn’t resist, frog-marching back to the bells and down the path to the fountain. I coughed again and turned over my shoulder. Nadeshiko cut a lone figure, picking at her own sleeve.

Amu leaned over.

“You could just tell her, you know,” said Amu, fast before I could stop her. “I think when a girl speaks from the heart, something beautiful happe...”

I raised my voice.
“Nadeshiko-san!” I shouted across the shrinegrounds, breathy. My voice echoed back at me. San... san... san...

I had seen winter melons with more expression on them.

“Hurry up!” I huffed. “Are you coming? Walking doesn’td require choreography.”

Amu looked both delighted and confused. I crossed my eyes back at her. You’ll never get me alone to matchmake, you meddler!

Nagihiko loped to catch up with us, hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Did something happen?” she said, walking on Amu’s side. I pretended not to be hurt. “You two are acting odd.”

“I’b sick and dyig,” I said, offended. “Every breath I tage outside is agony.”

“No,” she swatted my fib away. “It’s something else.”

I wouldn’td let Amu arouse Nadeshiko’s suspicions further. Whatever the fortune-teller had said in truth or lie, he was a dog. He could chase a secret like a scenthound. He could hear every beat of my heart.

I said, “Hotori asged Amu if she’d be his concubine.”

Nadeshiko’s smooth face dented. Amu turned grey.

“Rima!” she cried.

I raised my eyebrows.

“So he’s getting married,” said Nadeshiko.

“What gives you that idea?” I said.

“He wouldn’t ask if he wasn’t.” She tapped her forefinger to her chin. “I wonder...”

Amu waited with bated breath. Nadeshiko gazed across the horizon at the last bloom of silver grass. There was a cold, knifelike quality to the air when I inhaled that made me think snow wouldn’t be far away.

“I always thought Hotori-kun and Hoshina-san would end up together, to be honest,” Nadeshiko said confidentially.

This was the funniest joke Nadeshiko had ever unintentionally told.

“Do you thing Hotori-kun would prefer to be lightly sautéed or char-broiled before the weddig?” I said, pulling the most exaggerated Kabuki grimace in my arsenal. “So that Utau can ead him more easily?”

“Rima!”

I looked up at the sky and sneezed. It would have had nothing to do with their suitability for each other, of course. An alliance between a business and the aristocracy was nothing to sneeze at. With Hotori’s diplomatic backing, the Hoshina conglomerate would have only grown.
But Utau threw that away the second she cut and run. I was grateful to be the granddaughter of a silk-miller. No matter how violently I disgraced myself, my family’s reputation would remain pristine from anonymity. Adopt a son. Damage control. Cover-up.

In the corner of my eye, Nadeshiko’s was speaking earnestly to Amu, voice level, hands folded. The fingertips twitched restlessly, as though she longed to wrap them around something.

“... Might consider it, Amu-chan. The world is changing. Should you not be allowed to consider your happiness? And his?”

He could not be serious. I would have never fathomed that a staunch traditionalist would suggest staying single to serve the whims of an imbecile who wished to have his cake and eat it too. I swallowed my tongue, remembering what happened the last time I gave my opinion on mistresses.

“What do you mean, times are changing?” Amu said, sliding her arm through Nagihiko’s. As though in perfect sync, they began to stroll in the roaring direction of Ichi River. I followed at a jog, coughing into my hands and waiting for a chance to wipe them on Nagihiko’s back.

Nagihiko’s sidelock fluttered to settle between their profiles. “There are cases where the sons of mistresses have been legitimized and received inheritances. If you have a child, your position would be secure.”

“She’s only eighteen,” I said, whacking rushes away from me left and right.

“That’s just a year short of when my mother got married,” Nadeshiko said.

I withheld my commentary on Fujisaki-sensei’s morals and wiped my hand on Nadeshiko’s back. She wiggled, surprised.

Distracted by marriage, I had failed to remember the children that would follow. I imagined a gurgling mass of flesh hijacking my body for its own parasitic urge to survive, clawing its way out of my womb. I was going to be sick. Maybe I could marry a widower who already had a favourite son. Or pretend to be barren. No— he’d divorce me, and then my mother would be crosser than ever.

“Rima, get back from the river!” Amu called above me. I had stumbled down the sloping banks towards the dull roar of the rapids. Its frenetic course choked on rocks and rushes, foaming in rage wherever it met obstacles. Maybe Nadeshiko was right. The river was angry.

“Is she still sick?” Nadeshiko’s dim voice panicked over the wind.

I turned over my shoulder, wrapping my fur stole around my face so nobody could see my expression. Amu and Nadeshiko had their heads together in conference; Amu was looking earnest, Nadeshiko strained, periodically looking at me.

“You ought to g–”

“You’re better at it, you go–”

“Fine,” I called back, but the river ate my voice.

I wearily climbed back up the bank and into their company, greeted by their petrified faces.

“I feld like I was going to be sick,” I said dully.
Nadeshiko paled. “Let’s turn back.”

“I’m fine.”

She turned around anyway, holding Amu’s arm to her side. I was a ghost.

“The future is already uncertain.” Nadeshiko glanced at me, as though it was my fault that the war was not yet over. “He’s a good man and wouldn’t hurt a fly. Isn’t that what any woman hopes for?”

Like he would know what women hope for.

“Why add uncertainty do more uncertainty?” I said into my fur. I sneezed. “And anyway, id means Ami won’d be able do marry at all.”

Sisters married in order of seniority. It was only common sense that the younger should not marry before the elder.

“Rima’s right,” Amu said frantically, but Nadeshiko only pushed harder.

“Hotori-kun knows eligible men of rank. If anything, he will only improve her chances of marrying up.”

“And then,” I grit, “He will leave her when she is no longer young and pretty.”

“Some men,” Nadeshiko’s voice constricted. “Prioritise about other things about a woman!”

“Woah!” Amu shouted.

My retort died in my throat. Amu looked from me to Nadeshiko. “This isn’t helping! Why are you fighting?”

Nadeshiko never raised her voice with me. My feet urged me to walk. Where would I go? I could hole myself up in my room. But Nadeshiko would return eventually and the atmosphere would be worse than before. I couldn’t leave her alone with Amu, not when Amu knew my feelings and lacked the dishonesty to keep them quiet.

A question plagued me. If Nagihiko was in love with Amu as I suspected, why would he want her to go to Hotori? Against my better instincts, I swelled buoyant with hope against the tide.

I stepped back from Nadeshiko, weaving through the grass. My heel hit a stone.

“I allowed my emotions to carry me away,” said Nadeshiko, watching the waving sedge at my feet. “Forgive me.”

“I will not,” I said.

“Rima,” Amu warned me for the third time.

“We both want whatever will make Amu-chan happiest,” Nagihiko said, not to me, but to a higher ideal. “Isn’t that true?”

“I would rather her be miserable now than wasted later. There’s more in life than–”

“Enough!” Amu cried. “There’s somebody else!”

A winter chill picked up over the silvery hills. Warmth left us in the wake of the setting sun.
Nadeshiko’s hair danced loose of her scarf, whipping into her mouth. We stood in a triangle, Nadeshiko and I in opposition over the weeping hypotenuse.

Amu pulled her handkerchief out of her pocket and blew her nose, burying her face into it and inhaling. The embroidered strawberries blew against her chin. Above the forest treetops, the moon was rising.

“You didn’t,” I said.

Amu didn’t say anything, face still hidden.

Nagihiko turned on me, but his arm reached for Amu, rubbing her shoulder.

“Somebody,” he said, sounding like a concerned father, “Had better tell me what Mashiro-san is talking about.”

Amu was still hiccupping. Her red eyes met mine, begging.

“It wasn’t Utau who asked you to leave for Manchukuo,” I murmured.

Nagihiko looked at her. Amu nodded in confirmation. A vision of a red dress rippled before me, and a start of realisation. Lovely Amu, pink-cheeked and frazzled, always uncertain.

“Did you ask him,” I said meaningfully, “Why he was at the Diplomat’s Ball?”

Nadeshiko didn’t make a sound, but the squeak of leather on my left indicated that she was likely making a fist.

“He didn’t, didn’t say. It wasn’t for me, he said, um, but—but wait. Wait! Rima, how do you know?” Her round eyes met mine. “Were you there?”

I found Nagihiko’s eyes and begged silent forgiveness. His eyebrows furrowed back, chest rising and falling.

“I went up there to talk to Yaya,” I hesitated. How had I not recognised her? Maybe I always had, but shelved it to the back of my mind, too fearful over General Yamabuki. I coughed.

The handkerchief crumpled up in her fist. Amu reddened to an impressive tint of crimson. It had always been more than an embrace, I supposed. Even if I hadn’t realised.

“Are you pregnant?” I asked bluntly.

This was the one question I could have asked her that was worse than the previous, if only because she hadn’t even considered it. I could practically feel the race to calculate, the re-evaluation of winter colds.

I caught Nagihiko’s eye. He nodded, and together we closed the triangle. We would bury the hatchet until someone kicked it up again.

“I don’t know. I don’t know!” Amu looked at me desperately as though I had the answer. “I didn’t think… I thought… I just wasn’t… I was so stupid!”

“You’d know by now,” said Nadeshiko. I blinked in surprise. “It’s been two months.”

Her arm vanished behind Amu’s back. A cool hand wound its fingers through mine like a lattice, securing me to the earth. Through all my layers of clothes, my heart was galloping faster than
Kiseki’s legs could dream of taking him.

Then Nadeshiko pulled our interlocked hands to the small of Amu’s back, pressing her forward. It would have been perfection if Amu could vaporise. I shoved the black thought back.

I understood the message: *so long as Amu needs us, we are a united front*. Lying was what we did best.

Chapter End Notes

Oof
Packing up to go home became more labour-intensive with every passing year, supporting my theory that getting older makes everything worse. It would not do to simply collect the small signs of living in our rooms and stow them away in our suitcases. We had to fish out stockings wedged between the bed-post and the wall, pick out hairpins stuck in the floorboard gaps, sweep the dust settled on the sills. We returned books and magazines to their rightful owners and settled our debts. Our meant mostly Yaya, who owed me fifty sen.

We scoured the hallways with hot lye, disinfected the taps, scrubbed the grout, stripped the beds, washed the sheets. Then we loaded our suitcases and boxes and baskets into the carts to drive down to the train station, where girls left in shifts beginning at six in the morning. Always, we were interrupted by someone's mother or a maid trying to beat the crowds into Tokyo. A driver came for Yamamoto in an already-burdened automobile. She took one final look at the hallway, staring at the whitewash with pitiless eyes.

Yaya’s father came next, tapping his heel and checking his watch. When Yaya threw her arms around him, he smiled distractedly.

“Let’s get going, Yaya-chan,” he said, grabbing her suitcase. “The train leaves in half an hour.”

“Papa, can I have fifty sen?”

“I’ll deduct it from your dowry,” he joked, ruffling her hair and pulling out his pocketbook. “Do I look like I’m made of money?”

Yaya stuffed the banknote into my hand and made me swear on my grave to write her when she was in Taihoku. I pointed out that this wasn’t for another six months, and anyway, we would see her at school. What was she so worried about?

She left in the shelter of her father’s overcoat. I watched them go, shivering alone in the school gardens.
Four hours of floor-scrubbing later, Nagihiko unearthed a slip from my suitcase. He shook it out, silk floating in the cold updraft.

“No,” I said. “You may not.”

“It’s mine.”

“You are a thief as well as a liar.”

Nagihiko held it up to his chest, pointedly. To my horror, it hung off his narrow shoulders and body just so. I scratched the back of my neck furiously.

“It’s mine,” he repeated. “We have the same slip size.”

“No.”

We did. I tore a second slip from my suitcase. We came together to compare them. I mirrored my hands to his. They fell the same. The same width, the same length. Nadeshiko and I.

Nagihiko’s chest rose and fall softly against mine, lashes pointed downwards, breath audible. He was closer than my shadow. My skin itched and crawled. I was on fire.

“No,” I said again.

“Very well.” Nagihiko turned away. I ached to touch him, but we were oceans apart.

“Is it just us left?” Amu appeared in our doorway in a travelling suit that made her look five years older than she was.

I looked up from my comic strip book. The sun was going down. Nadeshiko sat at her writing desk.

“It is,” I said. “Are we going?”

“I think so…” Amu glanced sideways at Nadeshiko, lip wobbling. “When are you leaving?”

“The overnight train.” Nadeshiko stood up, taking Amu’s elbows in her hands. “Sometime tonight.”

“What will I do without you?” Amu whispered.

“Have heart, Amu-chan,” Nadeshiko said bracingly. “Go home to your mother and father. Think about what’s important to you.”

I turned my back, gathering my things sourly.

“I will,” Amu said miserably. “Have a Happy New Year.”

“Best wishes to you as well,” Nadeshiko relinquished her.

I got to my feet. Amu stood between Nadeshiko and I, smiling. Waiting expectantly.

“Hold this,” I gave Amu my hat-box. “This is for you.”

“The hat-box is for me?” Amu misunderstood, for in that moment, I thrust a fist-sized silk parcel at Nadeshiko. I stared at my own slippers. I settled my debts.
“Happy New Year,” I said, wishing she’d just take it. I didn’t want to dance with her in front of Amu. “It’s not much.”

This was standard self-effacing speech. *Oh, it’s just a bauble. It’s boring, but … it’s a dull little thing, but…*

“Rima-chan, I couldn’t dream of accepting anything from you,” said Nadeshiko. She looked whiter than usual.

“It’s nothing,” I lied. White teeth biting red lip. “It’s too much for the likes of me.”

“Take it before I throttle you,” I said, veering off-script. “I have a train to catch.”

Her hands took it. Her eyes did not.

“Well,” I said, “Good-bye.”

I marched out as fast as my little legs would carry me.

Amu stared at me all the way down Seiyo Hill. I avoided her eyes, cold and empty. *It’s done, I told myself. For three months, you poured your feelings into it. You returned it to its source. Now you can forget about them.*

Vainly, I tried to replace Nagihiko with another man in my vicinity. Every businessman in Kamikawa was disembarking around us, returning home for the holidays. Amu and I took seats in the middle second-class car, as though it mattered. The train was nigh-empty, having deposited its previous loads.

“If I could trouble the little misses for your tickets?”

The ticket-taker appeared over Amu’s shoulder. He punched and returned them.

“Next station is Osaka,” he informed us. “Then Kyoto, Nagoya, Shizuoka, Ofuna, Yokohama, terminus station Tokyo Central.”

“Thank you,” Amu said distantly.

The stationmaster’s whistle pierced the air, and the train rolled forward with a hiss and lurch. A businessman across the car shook a newspaper open. Amu and I watched pensively as Seiyo Hill slipped behind the windows and we rolled into twilight moorland.

“It’s...” Amu finally spoke, breaking the soft lull of the rolling train tracks. She exhaled softly, turning her gaze back to the pitch-black window. “It’s been an eventful year, hasn’t it?”

I nodded.

“I miss Utau,” Amu mumbled. “I don’t know why, but I miss him.”


Amu hugged her knees and looked downcast with reddish eyes.

My wooden limb patted Amu’s knee. I felt stupider than when I was dancing.
“Put it behind you,” I urged. It felt hypocritical, even to myself. Amu was torn between two men, and I, torn between two faces, was doling advice. “There are millions of men on earth.”

Amu looked up at me, eyes golden in the light of the electric lamps. Her shoulders rattled, but from the movement of the train car or emotion, I could not tell.

“But only two to me,” she said softly. “Hotori is gentle and reliable. I feel reassured when I’m with him. But when I’m around Tsukiyomi-san, I’m helpless. I would let him do everything to me, a thousand times over.”

My friend could not read the horror in my expression and assumed a lack of sympathy.

“Of course, it wouldn’t be like that, for you,” Amu added. “You’ve always been sure of what you want.”

If I was like Utau, I would have laughed right in her face. What a joke! I wanted out. I focused so firmly on what I did not want that desire had always eluded me. All but once.

“What I want?” I said wryly. “To have a Year of the Tiger that is utterly dull. I should like to die of boredom next year.”

Amu laughed weakly. I smiled and returned to my diversions, trying and failing to shake off the sense that I had uttered a curse.

Travelling was, and still is, for me a liminal space where time suspends. When you are sitting in a train, an automobile, or a shaky Empire-class aeroplane a million feet in the air, your obligations vanish. You are in a waiting room sitting sedentary until your destination. Nothing begins and nothing ends.

The lights flickered. I jolted awake from my stupor. In those days, electricity outages were common. Commotion from the front of the train was not.

The roof crackled, as though being pummelled by a million pieces of rubble. Before I could ask Amu what was going on, my body hurled forward. I grabbed the seat for purchase. A dull roar. A newspaper skidding across the train car’s floor. Amu yelping in my ear. Something huge was surging below us, breaking the earth, and soon it would reach the train, the train—

“Get down,” a voice from outside myself said, and my hand shot out for my friend’s elbow.


We crawled below the train seats, hands locked on each other’s forearms. The car rocked side-to-side. The head train car screeched against the iron rails as it last-minute braked. The lights swung. The hammering on the roof petered off like the tail-end of a storm. Glass shards were rolling down the car to join the newspaper lying in a heap in front of us.

My shoulder bones ached from the uncomfortable position and my body screamed out in protest, but I remained frozen to the spot. Amu’s eyes shine with terror in the dark.

It was just our luck to run into a quake. I thought of all the other trains across Japan trying to shepherd thousands of people home for the New Year and almost laughed aloud from the absurdity of delays. But as it turns out, I was wrong. It wasn’t an earthquake. Not precisely.

The ticket-taker returned to our car apologetically: everyone must evacuate the train. We crawled out from underneath the seats, wobbly but intact. Throngs of displaced passengers congregated by
the side of the tracks. It was Kobe farmland as far as the eye could see. We hadn’t even left the prefecture. I felt the stirrings of complaint.

I could not see, for I was too short. But Amu could. She gasped, pointing ahead.

“Look!”

“I am,” I said, frowning. “What?”

“Th-the face of Mount Rokko, ahead of us…”

Amu’s word had got the attention of the man in our car. He pointed over everyone’s heads.

“Landslide!” he cried in a gravelly voice. “The rain must have loosened the soil, and so when the earthquake hit…”

Momentarily, the throng cleared ahead of me. The rock face had crumbled and spilled across the tracks in the form of boulders, pebbles, and mud. The train was stopped dead a mere two, three yards short. I now understood the scream of the brakes.

Like the sea after a storm, my brain had slowed to the unnatural silence of post-crisis calm.

“We are not going home tonight,” I said, frank.

“But Mama’s expecting me!” Amu cried.

“Your family has a wireless,” I pointed out. “They will hear of the earthquake and expect delays.”

I wondered if Yaya and the others got through. Then realised it didn’t matter. The earlier train would have made it through the pass before the earthquake rolled across the prefecture.

“Where could we possibly stay? We have to turn back,” Amu murmured, as though it was dawning on her.

I imagined the Dragon’s face when we turned back up at her school doorstep to procrastinate her vacation, little grubby-faced burdens that we were, and paled.

“We could get overnight lodging,” I suggested.

“Oh… do you have money, then?”

I paused.

“I have fifty sen.”

The deed was done.

We waited what felt like hours in the hot, sticky dusk for the blockaded train to re-shift itself onto the opposite tracks. I grudgingly stood by while Amu took our return vouchers back to our prison. I sulked the whole train ride back, feeling the looming curse of the coming Year of the Tiger over my head. My responses to Amu were curt, short.

I would have been happy to delay my arrival by any other excuse but this. I feared hearing what marriage partners my mother had procured, but I feared the Fujisaki family and their enemies more.
I had enough of that family, enough of the school, enough of it all. The monotony of my china-cabinet house with its dying solarium and Emi’s tippity-tappity footsteps would have been bliss.

We were spared the agony of appearing on Fujisaki-sensei’s stoop to beg her charity. As our train came to an uneasy halt under the black sky, a single lantern bobbed on the opposite platform. As we came closer it illuminated Shion’s face, taking hasty notes. Closer still, and a soft voice dictated what sounded like the last of the typhoid decontamination notes.

“… Only one shaku to a whole tub of water will suffice, for cooking and drinking only. For bathing, pay no mind. The well inspector will be by tomorrow, and then you…”

Even dressed modestly to travel in a lush dark green kimono and otter stole around her shoulders, Fujisaki-sensei was the picture of glamorous self-assurance. Her face barely moved at the sight of us. I realised why upon closer approach.

“Mount Rokko,” she said, inclining her head. Up close, it was easier to see the lines under and around her eyes. “We received the landslide warning shortly after you left. How long are the train delays?”

Amu bowed so low that her nose nearly touched her kneecaps. I swore she pulled a muscle doing so, because she tried to subtly rub her hip. I stared at the ground, in fear of looking around hopefully for Nagihiko.

“Forgive the imposition,” Amu muttered. I couldn’t see her face in the dark, but I was certain she was bright red from the impertinence of it all. I was unfazed, having long grown used to having to depend on others for my survival.

“The station said a day, sensei, before the track could be re-routed and the rubble cleared.”

“A poor omen before the year is over,” Fujisaki-sensei murmured to her sleeve. I found this rude. Shion’s mouth opened as though to say something. I wondered if she was going to offer to let us stay with her. She was silenced by a single look.

Fujisaki’s eyes were shaped different than Nagihiko’s. They were rounder and softer by the barrages of age, brown and not glittering black. But so are the eyes of a viper.

“Miss Shion,” Fujisaki-sensei lilted, loosening a single glove and taking out a slim book. “Make it so.”

I wondered what was being made so. When Shion returned, two tickets passed from her paw into the conductor’s. With a sinking in the pit of my stomach, I watched Fujisaki’s obi swivel around to face us. The red knot’s pattern in the gas light looked like a demon’s face, ascending the steps to the passenger section.

“Come,” the obi said, softly. “Until it is safe to travel, it would be our pleasure to host you in Hiroshima.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi, guys!
The train hurtled south under the cover of night, putting ground between Tokyo and me. It made me maudlin to imagine Mother asking Emi to wait for a train that would never come. But when I remembered how she spoke to me over the summer, I released the breath I was holding. I missed my family, but I did not miss feeling trapped by circumstance.

“Is Nadeshiko-san with you, sensei?” Amu asked hopefully through her fear. I held my breath again. Please, no.

“She is resting in the sleeper car,” Fujisaki-sensei said, eyes on Amu and Amu alone. “But I’m sure she would be delighted to see you tomorrow. Surely she would prefer a school-friend than her old mother.”

Despite the grime of Kyoto’s train station, Amu’s twill suit looked smart. She stood poised, taller than me. In her shadow, I felt like a frilly seductress, slithering into Fujisaki’s household to cradle-snatch. Fujisaki-sensei might prefer if Amu caught her son’s fancy.

“Oh…” Amu wilted. “I suppose so. Thank you again.”

Her gaze turned to me.

“Some rest might do you some good,” she put her coin purse away. I felt briefly sorry for the imposition. I thought her cruel and unforgiving, but Fujisaki had cared for me when I was helpless and ill. Like her son, she loved elusively and unreliably.

“You have had quite an ordeal… and before the New Year, too. Mashiro-san is still weak, is she not?”

Mashiro-san was weak as a rule. She reviled physical exercise and had been coasting on her typhoid fever to get out of physical education class for weeks.
“How could I forget – Rima, your lungs are still weak!”

I felt fine but nodded numbly.

Our twinette was typical of the economy class ticket we were on: cramped, dark and uncomfortable. A woman was already asleep in the bottom bunk.

We washed and dressed by the light of a single candle, illuminating Amu’s still-perplexed face. As we climbed into the top berth and lay down under the covers, Amu finally spoke.

“You would think it would be natural for us to share a sleeper car with Nadeshiko, not strangers.”

My eyes snapped open.

“I don’t know, just…” Amu was whispering breathlessly to the ceiling. “We’re all girls. We all sleep together, but you’re the only one who’s ever been in the same room as her, Rima. It’s strange, isn’t it? Does Fujisaki-sensei not trust us with her daughter? Does she want to keep Nadeshiko alone? I don’t want to think bad of her, but… I don’t know.”

The knowledge made me feel funny in the pit of my stomach. It was a moment before I realized it was fluttering in pleasure. I possessed a privilege no other woman had. Nadeshiko, mine alone. But only so far as another woman didn’t capture his attention. The fluttering stopped.

“Yaya says she has a deformity,” I said, trying to be neutral.

“No,” I said. Softer. “She’s perfect the way she is.”

“I suppose it isn’t any of our business,” Amu said, gulping. “I wondered if it wasn’t because…”

I was used to sleeping on solid mattresses on sedentary floors. That a den of snakes awaited me at the end of the train’s rattle-and-purr did not ease the approach of sleep.

Nadeshiko, Nagihiko, Nadeshiko. I could summon her next to me in Amu’s place, even now. Tantalizingly close. Nagihiko’s nose tracing my neck, his hair in my hands, cheek against his. I squeezed my eyes shut and fisted the blankets with both hands.

“If it wasn’t because… I’ve often thought Nadeshiko might like women like you do.”

I wondered if he lay awake in his empty sleeper car, thinking of me.

Perhaps he thought of Amu. Perhaps he thought of begonias and ghosts and pretty things, not a cold woman’s touch. My nails dug into the scratchy blanket.

“If she did, it would make no difference,” I said, hollowly. “A passing fancy before marriage.”

Amu sighed. “I wish… I’ve never been able to tell what Nadeshiko’s thinking. If only I could look into her heart.”

I rolled over to look at Amu. I could only see the outline of her face, uncertain.

Her hand patted my shoulder, and my anger melted away. I refused to cry, but the tears still came. It was Amu’s turn to clumsily comfort me in the last hours of the Year of the Ox.
I awoke from my doze to realize the train was still moving. The length of the ride felt an eternity to the Tokyo high-speed rail. I did my toilette slowly. Amu pointed to the little window.

“Rima, look! The sea looks so different this far south!”

Amu had always wanted to visit Nadeshiko in Hiroshima. I tried not to feel bitter for her sake.

The sea did look different this far south. I joined her at the window. Kure was the country’s biggest dockyard. I could barely see the ocean for all the warships and aircraft carriers. A light dusting of snow adorned the masts and pagodas, giving everything a silvery sheen. I could tell that come spring, the surrounding hills would be lush and green. Islands were scattered off in the morning mist, glimmering like distant dimensions.

“I wonder if we’ll see Nadeshiko at breakfast?” Amu asked hopefully. “It’s unusual for her not to just… materialize.”

Nagihiko was beholden to his mother more than ever outside of Seiyo’s confines. Amu discovered mother and son in the dining car, eating a subdued bowl of rice. A camellia was tucked into Nagihiko’s ponytail, back straight in seiza formation despite the chair.

Upon spotting us, he went very stiff and smiled politely. It was Fujisaki-sensei who beckoned to us imperiously and implored us to eat. I dared not look at him, and instead opted to bore a hole in my spoon.

“We heard the landslide,” the spoon’s warped reflection whispered to Amu. “From where we were. A horrible rumbling, like the sound of a dragon stirring below the earth.”

Oh, no, I think Fujisaki-sensei sounds worse than that, I would say wittily, if it was just Amu and I. Instead, I ate faster.

“I’ve been in a quake on a streetcar when I was younger, but it wasn’t nearly so bad. We just stopped until it was over, and some things knocked over,” Amu said, paling. “I thought the train was going to turn over. But Rima grabbed me the moment the shaking began and pulled me under the seats. If it wasn’t for her, who knows…”

“Did I?” I looked up from the spoon. Three pairs of eyes stared at me.

“You did,” Amu said, amazed. “Do you not remember?”

“I don’t,” I prodded my rice. “I just remember being under the seats with you.”

“The memory is like a pool of water,” Fujisaki-sensei spoke, surprising everyone. “When a stone breaks its surface, the ripples fracture its recollections long after the stone has sunk.”

With this proclamation, Fujisaki-sensei ended the conversation. We ate in silence. Outside, a station-whistle. For the first time in ten hours, I felt the train slow beneath me with nausea.

“Home,” Fujisaki-sensei whispered, in a voice reserved only for her and her son.

“Home,” Nagihiko whispered back, with the first genuine smile I had seen from him in weeks. Home.

We disembarked the train into a lungful of crisp winter air. On an uneasy sleep, the scene passed like a disorienting dream: my suitcase passed to me, the sloshing of the winter sea against the
docks, the clatter of the streetcar. We went up a hill. I nodded off sitting up straight, like a horse. I heard Nadeshiko whisper something to Amu, and her soft replies. Fujisaki-sensei did not speak at all.

The air got colder. An incline. I opened my eyes blearily, only to find the streetcar halfway up a hill, stopped. The scenery outside the streetcar was blanketed in a soft, quiet white, lit dimly pink in the morning sun. The roofs of surrounding houses were drowned in white hillocks, pine boughs weighed down by it. When I exhaled, my breath fogged out in front of me like a dragon’s snore.

“Where are we going?” I asked Amu groggily. Fujisaki-sensei answered with uncharacteristic spirit.

“Not the destination, but the journey.” She rose to her feet gracefully. “One we are taking on foot.”

“What,” I said.

“The streetcar won’t run this far in the snow,” Fujisaki-sensei murmured through the stole around her face.

I looked at Nagihiko, aghast. To my surprise, he was already meeting my eyes. Before I could stop myself, I smirked back.

Amu wordlessly gestured to our luggage, handing me my hat-box.

We blundered through the three-day-old snow. For once I was grateful for Amu’s clumsiness, which kept me from looking ungainly in comparison. Even Fujisaki-sensei’s graceful snow-slicing walk staggered when she met a patch of ice. Our centres of gravity were made no more stable by the labor of our suitcases, hauled from hand to hand. Such was the conditions that Nagihiko did not even lower himself to the chivalrous offer of taking our things – though I wished he had, as I would have taken him up on it, grudge or infatuation be damned.

I wasn’t sure how we were going to scale the mountain until Fujisaki-sensei held out a hand, stopping us. She broke off the leafy branch of an azalea and began brushing the snow at her feet. She unearthed a set of teeny-tiny stairs, tightly hugging the hill.

“Before this land was settled by farmers,” Fujisaki-sensei said to the cold air with the familiar sing-song rhythm of a geisha telling a story. “There was a temple here, dedicated to the Amida Buddha. The monks built these stairs to more easily walk up and down the hill to the temple network.

“All of that changed when one monk made a terrible choice. Since that day, the temple is no longer here… but the steps to Heaven they built remain, even buried under the snow.”

Amu gawked. Nagihiko spoke up:

“Mother, don’t tease our guests,” he said. “That’s just a story she made up.”

A wink and a boyish grin at Amu. I soured. A hare scampered across the snow. Its huge feet distributed weight, allowing it to skim the surface. My tiny feet merely sank.

Fifteen minutes later, we crossed an arching bridge over a frozen river. It was here that a dainty-footed girl of no older than twelve crossed our path, with two buckets slung over her shoulder.

“Young Mistress, senpai,” she called, bowing as low as could be afforded with the yoke over her shoulder. “Welcome home.”
“Thank you,” Fujisaki-sensei replied gently. “Did you see us coming up the hill?”

She nodded shyly, covering her mouth with her kimono sleeve.

“Go, then,” she said. “No doubt you have an errand.”

The girl made herself scarce in the snowy underbrush.

For the last quarter of a mile, I had lagged behind. At least I had not dropped a pin in the snow like Nagihiko and spent ten minutes searching for it while Amu and I caught our breath. My shoes were soaked through. My feet felt like blocks of ice, and twice as heavy.

Descending the other side of the bridge yielded stripped-bare maples framing a white wall weighed down by the snow on its gables. A keyhole archway was carved into it. No gate.

I looked to my left, then my right. The wall was low and flat but stretched as far as my eye could see in any direction. I saw Amu following my gaze, and a dawning realization.

The Fujisaki mansion was emerging through the snow-laden trees.

It could not have been more opposite my little house on Chuo Road if it tried. My city home compacted where Nagihiko’s rambled, like morning-glory growing willy-nilly over a moor. It could have been a farmer’s hovel but for its labyrinthine size. A network of hallways and porches laced themselves through the wilderness. It was unattractively thatched, all dull brown and whitewash.

As the lady of the house, Fujisaki-sensei ascended into her domain first. From the blinding white of the snow, we were plunged into the pitch dark. A traditional foyer took shape in the harsh white light as my eyes adjusted.

“We’re home!” Fujisaki-sensei announced to the rafters. A wall parted, much like in Kouen Castle. From behind it came an elderly woman. She removed Fujisaki-sensei’s stole and took her parasol, murmuring something about heating bathwater. My ears perked.

A house of women, I thought. Like Seiyo.

To my delight, the Fujisaki house was efficient and worshiped the guest to the point of insanity. Four pairs of tabi socks were waiting for us, warm from the coals. As Amu and I removed our wet stockings, I finally began to feel more human and less icicle.

“Apologies for intruding,” Amu apologized to her socks. I mirrored her and leaned forward, fiddling with my gloves.

“Not at all,” Fujisaki-sensei said warmly, but something about the way it was delivered seemed disinterested. Amu picked up her suitcase handle and received a faffing hand.

“No, no,” Fujisaki-sensei insisted. “We will take your things to your room.”

“Hot bath first, I think,” the housekeeper contributed, clearly over the moon at having girls to smother. I wondered if Nagihiko allowed himself to be babied like this.

The answer was, of course, that he was just as bad. The abominable creature took his place between his mother and housekeeper, furrowing his brow at us.

“They’ll need something to change into. I’ll go take some out of the storehouse.”
“I have a suitcase,” I said. “Don’t trouble yourself.”

Fujisaki-sensei and Nagihiko both tutted.

“We’d like you to relax fully while you’re under our care,” Sensei said.

“This is a cult,” I whispered to Amu. She shushed me.

The Fujisaki’s bath was an outbuilding accessed by covered walkway. When a snow monkey leapt off the roof and into the pines, I nearly gagged. The housekeeper seemed oblivious. Baths in those days were offered to guests before anything else as a method to get one comfortable and relaxed. I wasn’t sure how anyone could relax, up to their chin in scorpion broth.

Well, one person could.

“This is so nice,” Amu sighed, wet cloth stuck to her forehead. We were both crammed into the single tub, like salt-packed sardines. “I never want to get ooooot.”

*Amu shabu-shabu,* I thought, and grinned to myself. Then I sobered, remembering I, too, was in the pot.

“Why is the Dragon even doing this for us?” I asked, blowing bubbles like a mudfish.

Amu extricated her leg from the bathwater and shrugged her shoulders in a relaxed roll. Unlike Amu, I knew the taste of luxury but had no urge to savour it.

“What’s the saying… mm… ‘better than a distant relative is a nearby stranger’? Who knows what we could have done if sensei hadn’t intervened on our behalf?”

“We could have stayed in Seiyo,” I pointed out. Amu frowned at me.

“Not like this,” she said.

“You’ll see,” I muttered.

In the foyer area of the bathhouse was two piles of folded clothes. I expected Nagihiko’s choices to be over-the-top. They weren’t. One was solid pine green with bamboo leaves, the other plum with zigzagging plum blossoms. They came with warm underrobes and jackets, padded for the mountain cold.

Returning to the main house brought us face-to-face with a maze of sliding doors. Twice we took a wrong turn into a futon closet, and I got to watch Amu walk confidently into a pile of folded mattresses.

On the third incorrect door, we came face-to-face with the glassy eyes of a traditional Japanese doll the size of a child.

I braced.

Amu yelled.

I smacked her, which only made her yell again. We both turned around to see the housekeeper. Amu went bright red.

“Please excuse our outburst…” Amu was still apologizing repeatedly as the housekeeper showed us to the guest-parlour. She politely got onto her knees to slide the door open, and Amu had to duck
below the lintel.

It was the largest room in the house by far and must have been nothing short of luxurious in the summer. The far wall of sliding screens would open to the summer air, Seto Inland Sea visible beyond the veranda, framed by pines. By winter, soft white light diffused into the room through the storm-shutter to illuminate a calligraphy scroll in the alcove opposite. I smelled something soft and fragrant that I would later discover was hinoki cypress.

Strangely, what has stayed with me most about the Fujisaki house was the use of gnarled and bent wood posts in the room’s construction. It made me think of my stunted tree-drawing, worlds away.

“Don’t dawdle in the doorway!” a middle-aged woman I did not recognize enjoined us. “Come down to the hearth where it’s warm.”

Her voice was so jovial and inviting that we could not help but come closer. We were forced into the seats of honour with our backs (humbly) to the scroll.


The woman who spoke to us was not the only Fujisaki clan-member I did not know: two men were present, one older than us, one younger.

Nagihiko looked up from the woman’s right, grinning. “Is it true? You both get lost on the way back from the baths, and walked into a futon-closet?”

“Nadeshiko,” his mother reminded her, “It is not proper to listen to the maid’s gossip.”

“Especially when inaccurate,” I said, compelled to speak out of turn. “It was twice.”

Nagihiko laughed, surprised. My chest hurt.

“Let’s eat,” the woman said in a husky voice that did not match her red mouth. “Hinamori and Mashiro-san, is it?”

Amu gave a noise of assent and hungrily eyed the grill laid out over the hot coals. A kettle hung from a hook in the ceiling, steaming. My stomach growled. I hadn’t eaten since the train.

“Welcome to our home. Thank you for taking care of our Nadeshiko all this time. It’s not much, but we’re happy to have the company.”

She must be Fujisaki-sensei’s sister-in-law to speak with house authority above Nagihiko’s mother. Certainly not married. Her hair was pulled off her face in an elaborate coiffure, and her face was powdered and painted like an actress’s. When she thought we weren’t looking, she winked and clicked her tongue at Fujisaki-sensei, who bristled. I felt a funny shiver in my stomach that I thought might be cold, but probably wasn’t.

The food was simple but dazzling. Bowls of rice were passed around, followed shortly by roasted sweet potatoes; then by fresh Miyajima oysters grilled in their shell before our eyes. There was none of the seasoning I was used to, but it was steps above the hardtack of Seiyo. For some time, there was nothing but the grateful clinking of chopsticks against bowls as we ate.

I tried to find a dignified way to pick the oyster out with my chopsticks. Across the hearth, Nagihiko was prying the oyster from its shell and mixing it with his rice. Nagihiko’s aunt raised an eyebrow at him.
“What’s gotten into you? You’ve eaten oysters before,” she raised her eyebrows. The powder at her hairline cracked to reveal a seamline. I goggled, but nobody else seemed to have noticed.

“Just slurp it.”

To prove her point, she detached the mollusc neatly with her chopsticks, doused it in a splash of vinegar, and tilted it up to her mouth. Her lips pursed around it. I watched the flesh wobble and slide down her throat. My shiver worsened.

“Come now,” his aunt laughed. “You'll have a happy wife if you can eat an oyster, eh, Nade?”

“Father!” Nagihiko tried to say with dignity, flushing. He hadn’t spoken in quite some time, and I realized he had slouched under the table, as though trying to make himself as unnoticeable as possible. “Don’t embarrass me!”

Father. Unlike me, Amu forgot to hide her look of surprise.

The seamline on Nagihiko’s father’s brow cracked further and revealed the coiffure to be a wig. The wig was promptly discarded on the floor, leaving only a hairnet.

I should have guessed, between the raunchy jokes and husky voice. A male actor of female roles. The famous Fujisaki Aoi IV looked as normal as one could get for a glittering Kabuki celebrity. There was something of Nagihiko in the arch of his nose, the fullness of his mouth. Other than that, he could have been any kimono-clad man in his mid-forties on a train platform.

“I’m just ribbing, I’m just ribbing,” the Mr Fujisaki Aoi grinned. “You can wed someone as miserable as you like.”

“Don’t say that,” Tsubaki said. “Or she will, just to spite you.”

Amu’s eyes were still locked on the Kabuki wig behind him, staring. Having confused gender presentation once before, I found myself remarkably undisturbed.

"Madam Fujisaki is right,” the older man warned over the sound of bowls. “The world is changing. The West has put the idea of love marriage into our daughters’ heads, and young people act selfishly.”

Amu, Nagihiko and I – the young people – all exchanged a neutral look. Children should be seen and not heard had been hammered into me from the time I knew how to cry.

Fujisaki Aoi only seemed amused. “In my short time on this earth, I see some fathers treat their daughters like hina dolls, keeping them in storage until they can sell them. What’s the use in that?”

“You romantic,” the old man scoffed, shovelling rice into his mouth. It occurred to me that it must be a member of the troupe, and that the entire house likely belonged to them. “You’ll let her marry whoever touches her first?”

“The worms will eat one’s daughter, even locked in a trunk,” he said lazily. He was citing an old proverb: hakoiri musume ni mushi ga tsuku. “Teach your child to see vermin, and you won’t have one who acts selfishly.”

Nadeshiko smiled modestly.

“You mean to say,” the man gave us a cursory glance before leaning in. “You will let her pick for herself?”
Pronouns were absent. Did every close associate of the Fujisakis know Nadeshiko’s identity? Or did the blending of gender within the theatre form a tidy precedent for unusual companions? I never found out, for Tsubaki decided she had enough of this conversation.

“Hinamori-san,” she entreated, turning to her with a bright smile. “Am I to understand that you and Mashiro-san live in Tokyo?”

Amu, panicking under the attention, tore her eyes from the wig.

“Yeah,” she said. “Yes.”

She looked to me for help. Remembering that Nagihiko’s father hated Tokyo, I smiled with my eyes.

“The city seems busier than ever these days,” Tsubaki mused. “We must seem pedestrian by comparison, no?”

Amu’s glare was intense now.

I said: “I would hardly call the country’s largest shipyard pedestrian.”

Tsubaki’s neck swivelled to me. I lost my nerve and swallowed another oyster.

“These are good,” I added.

“The shipyard is an eyesore, isn’t it,” Fujisaki Aoi said with a smile. “Supremacy for supremacy’s sake.”

Nagihiko and his mother both tensed. Too late, I realized I had tread on one of the hot-button topics endemic to every family.

“I’m pleased you like the oysters, Mashiro-san,” Tsubaki addressed me, but she was speaking to her husband. “They are just coming into season, and a specialty of the prefecture.”

Fujisaki Aoi gingerly touched his shoulder, as though it was sore. I was reminded of Utau’s body language the morning after being beaten. Tsubaki’s face was a mask. She couldn’t have. Not her own husband.

I made up my mind to not speak again, even if Amu begged me to. Making conversation did not come easy to me: I spoke bluntly, or not at all. Shipyards, indeed! It was far better to keep my mouth shut.

“Mashiro-san,” The Dragon’s voice called out, almost lovingly. “It is so quiet in here.”

Her punishment for my comment was swift.

“I had the pleasure of witnessing your koto performance this past summer. Would you do us the honor of musical accompaniment?”

“No,” I said. “I will not.”

Nagihiko’s father roared with laughter. Tsubaki, perhaps under the impression he was mocking me, shot him a glare.

“How I love a woman’s straightforward modesty!” he cried, wiping an eye. A black smear followed his finger.
“I find Mashiro-san’s playing charming.” Nagihiko did not elaborate.

“Then you must play for us,” Tsubaki concluded like the thing was decided.

I groaned under my breath. Servants brought an ancient koto out from what must have been one of the many futon-closets. My table and dishes were removed in favor of a thirteen-stringed beast I never thought I’d have to look at again.

_Mother, I miss you_, I thought miserably. At this moment, I would take a stiff New Year’s Eve over having to play a koto in front of a family of doubtless musicians.

I plucked a string. Tsubaki winced. Wrong note. I tried again with the correct string this time, whispering notes under my breath. Nagihiko’s mother could not humiliate me, for I had no pride in my accomplishments as a woman. One, two, three. Nagihiko dancing like water in my room,

Something resembling the Nagasaki Wandering Song took shape, each note filling in the stillness with a misshapen sound. Hatanaka Marimo would be performing excellently in my place. The kind of old-fashioned love story that all parents dream of. An accomplished Japanese beauty who could wear kimono, who had pretty hands and feet, could play koto for her mother-in-law without her wincing.

All-in-all, I considered it a mediocre performance better than my usual standard, which pleased me. Nagihiko’s father requested _Haru no Umi_, which surprised me twofold, as I played poorly and assumed Kabuki actors to be old-fashioned. Tsubaki engaged Amu in polite conversation over my second song, which Nagihiko joined. Watching them, I felt a little bit like Nagihiko’s father’s vermin.

Aoi called for tea, and I was rescued from the beastly instrument. The hearth wore down to coals. Nagihiko declined a cup, and instead lowered his head to the floor.

“Forgive my impertinence,” he said. “I must take my leave.”

“Of course,” his mother said. “I will tell O-Mari to keep a lantern lit for you.”

So ended our first night in the Fujisaki house.

Amu and I awoke the next morning to the almightiest clatter. The maids were just outside the guest room, cleaning the house from top to bottom in preparation for the new year.

I groaned, burying myself in the futon. Amu crawled over to the snow-viewing window, lifting the shutter with a smile. For Amu, this was the farthest she had been from her problems in months. Me? — I was ever so slightly closer.

Fujisaki Aoi was out making New Years’ calls. Nagihiko was nowhere to be found, so I knew he must be practicing. The Madam Fujisaki spent her time between supervising her son and entertaining callers, leaving us free of her gaze. It was slightly better than Seiyo. Almost.

As giftless guests imposing during the busiest time of year, we begged to help. They refused. They only relented when Amu grabbed a broom and declared herself cleaning. I had no choice but to join.

The maids despaired of my womanly ability. At first, they conspired to send me into tight spots nobody else could reach. This was to no avail: I would clean whatever was in front of me, blind to stubborn mould and corner-dirt.
O-Mari had the idea to shunt me off to the kitchen with the housekeeper. Like most women of a certain age, the housekeeper was shamelessly bossy. There was no shortage of work to do, and lunch to be considered. It was soon clear that whatever basic ability Seiyo’s kitchens might have instilled in me, a housewife I was not. I could make scalded rice, brew tea and cut vegetables. I could not de-scale a fish, monitor a grill, prepare stock, shave noodles or pound mochi. There had always been a maid to do our cooking and cleaning so far as I could remember. It was considered beneath my family name, dying and heir-less though it was, for a Mashiro to do her own housework.

I was sent back out of the kitchen in disgrace. Through the thin paper screen, I heard the muttered “princess.” My cheeks were on fire.

Amu fared better save one respect: she was a born coward. As we pulled futons from a closet, out poured a torrent of large, brown grains of rice. I picked one off me, only to realize it had little legs and was moving.

“Bug!” Amu hollered, jumping like the floor was fire.

The maid was swift and lethal. Wielding her broom over her head like a sword, she struck the louse out of my hand.

A pungent odour filled the hallway, coriander but worse. My nose crinkled.

“Stinkbug!” a voice roared. It was O-Mari.

“They’re everywhere!”

“The lady will never abide by this,” she said grimly. “There must be hundreds. We’ll never kill them all and dissipate the smell in time.”

The stinkbugs crawled through the wood grain, into the warm cracks and crevices. We had thrown open the shutters to air the house through. Brow furrowed, I watched them run from the cold draft.

My pride still stung from the kitchens. I said, “Have you a mosquito-coil?”

“They’re put away in storage, for the summer. What a question, Mashiro-san. Why for?”

I did not answer. She left to fetch the coils. Calmly, I took a lantern down from its bracket. The insects crawled towards the light, mistaking it for the sun.

“Rima?” Amu asked curiously.

“Hush,” I said.

I refined my trap in the ensuing hour based on their movements. A tray of soapy water was pushed under the lantern, raised on a platform. The mosquito-coils were placed in front of all other warm drafts or closets, warding them with the smell of pyrethrum.

The bugs fell frantically to their watery death. This did not endear me, but they feared me.

Vermin.

The housekeeper re-emerged from the kitchens with Nagihiko, balancing trays of glutinous, mirror-like rice cakes. I recognized them as the ones I couldn’t pound sufficiently with a mallet.
“The young miss is getting so strong,” the housekeeper teased him. “It’s a pity you weren’t born a boy.”

“And what a boy I’d make!” Nagihiko laughed. “Where’s Mother?”

But Mother was already present. She looked terser than usual when she said, “and has the parlour alcove been done?”

“It has.”

She took two rice cakes from the tray and took delicate steps around a corner. We stood there uncertainly, exchanging puzzled looks.

“An offering for the altar,” the housekeeper said in a low, pained voice.

“For Amida Buddha?” Amu asked, obliviously.

“And the lady’s father-in-law, and the child she lost in infancy to cholera.”


The anguish in Tsubaki’s voice had been genuine that night. The tragedy in three parts: the paltry ashes of a child not yet two, barely enough to fill an urn. Registered in the book of the dead under her newborn brother’s identity, switching places with him in one fell swoop. As we spoke, Nagihiko stood before an altar, eye-to-eye with his own name on a burial tablet.

If Nagihiko could only reappear, so I could say silently with my eyes: I know. You never have to smile and hide anything; not with me.

But when he returned with his mother, his eyes were elsewhere. I presumed so were his thoughts.

“I ought to go to the theatre early,” he said, in a subdued, quieter voice than I was used to. Our eyes met, and then broke at the same time, startled. “Father and I can go. The performance is an amateur, small little thing. It is my wish that Hinamori-san and Mashiro-san not be bothered for such a petty thing on New Year’s Eve, when you are doubtlessly missing your families.”

It surprised me to note that I did miss home: I had never spent a New Year’s away from family in my life, and in a strange prefecture, surrounded by my failures, I felt lonely. But my only lifeline – Amu – put her hands together and her eyes lit up.

“Oh, Nadeshiko, please, we’d love to come! At home, my family always listens to the NHK radio programme on New Year’s Eve, so I’m used to staying up for a show. I’ve never seen real kabuki, even when it’s playing in Shibuya. Please.”

The idea of being trapped alone in a house with O-Mari and the housekeeper was not an attractive one. It was only a dance. And whatever else I might delude myself into thinking — I loved how she danced.

“I would like to go, as well,” I said robotically.

“You’ve worked very hard,” Tsubaki reminded her son, frowning. She seemed as confused as I was that Nagihiko was trying to put us off it. “We would love to have you.”

Nagihiko lowered his head in wordless submission, tucking his hair delicately behind his ear.

“You look as if there is something you would like to say, Grandmother,” said Tsubaki, looking
over my shoulder.

“I do,” the housekeeper burst out. She nodded to Amu’s and my cleaning smocks. “You don’t mean to send them in that, do you?”

Chapter End Notes

1. Next chapter soon, this one was split into two because it got too long!

2. The continued support for this rando fanfic REPEATEDLY humbles me ♥️️️️️️

3. I love Nagihiko's dad even though I made him up based off a single throwaway line from the anime
PLEASE READ: The plot segues into content some might find uncomfortable; I will likely be bumping the rating. An anchor link will be clearly delineated within the chapter. It will take you to the paragraph at which the story resumes. It will look like this:

Skip

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 20

My mother never cared for the theatre. Passive consumption was not her style. But there was always a client or a silk buyer who would want to go see the famous Kabuki Theatre in Ginza before they talked business. He was always obligated to invite her family. I always knew when one of these excursions was to occur because Mother would say to a maid: see if something can’t be done about that hair.

As the adults made pleasantries, I would gaze at their wives. Kimono was customary, as was getting your hair done by a hairdresser: their hair would be coiffed and pulled back to show their foreheads. If they were daring, they would have a red lip. The shy ones were my favourite, sometimes no taller than I, hiding behind fans and clutches, only wearing a thin sheen of powder to set off their skin.

Even the demurest of wives is chatty around a pretty child. “Have you ever seen a little girl with such round, pink cheeks?” Candy would appear from purses, hand pats, compliments. The curls were marvelled over, the long lashes, the little cupid’s bow. I glowed, drinking in the attention.

Inevitably, a man would interrupt with: such features on a woman will be comely.

Or: a man likes a touch of childishness in his wife.
The magic was ruined then, as talks spiralled into politics. I was a resource that could not be squandered.

Despite my avowal not to be bought by Fujisaki riches, I allowed the housekeeper to help me into a kimono for Nadeshiko’s sake. It looked like something Emi would wear. The pattern was traditional folk toys of balls and dolls and racquets and calico cats on a field of orange. It came with a pair of bright red socks.

My mother would have said that only a maiko would wear something so flashy. If she knew I was in a house of artist types, she would file a lawsuit.

Like everything else in this province, the Kabuki Theatre was ramshackle and plain. In those days, Tokyo was modern compared to the other provinces. It had all the headquarters, the embassies, the shopping, the news.

Even Osaka, Japan’s second-largest city, was backwater and its accent bumpkin. Nadeshiko made a point to suppress her flat, broad Hiroshima dialect at school. She had no such convenience at home. Nothing brought me glee like mocking her use of the editorial we and her lilting, flat vowels.

“Good luck, Nadeshiko!” Amu had cried two hours previous, waving as Nagihiko and his father departed two hours early. “We’ll see you afterwards.”

“Breeeeaaaaak a leeeeg!” I cried in a mockery of her singsong accent.

Nadeshiko frowned. It was easier to make a comedy production of the object of my affections than court her in earnest.

The snow made us late. To my surprise, Nagihiko’s father was waiting for us outside the theatre. I think he had the notion of waiting for us by himself, to no avail; he was thronged with well-wishers and adorers.

“There you are!” he cried, disseminating them. “I am your guide tonight. Am I to understand that neither of you have ever seen Kabuki before?”

I had never met a celebrity so determined to live like a construction worker. He clutched four tickets in his hand. Chips of wood, not paper.

“I have,” I said. “It was a long time ago.”

“I haven’t,” Amu said.

We were ushered into the theatre by Nagihiko’s father. The Kabuki Theatre of my childhood had been western style with balconies and folding seats. But this: this was a plain little room divided by a central walkway, full of cushions for sitting.

Oh, no.

No.

Seiza!

My knees screamed. I toppled sideways onto Amu’s shoulder, as the lights went down.

In the semidarkness, Fujisaki Aoi IV’s resemblance to an older Nagihiko was striking. In the odd
half-light from a nearby lantern, he whispered from Amu’s side that Nadeshiko was dancing *Wisteria Maiden*, a classic dance of the kabuki repertoire. A sake tray with an array of cups was passed around.

A sharp strike on a drumskin indicated the beginning of the performance. To my surprise, I remembered the natural progression of a dance performance from that summer. It would go lights down, then drum, then flute, then shamisen, rising in cacophony. Then the vocalist’s warbling.

Onstage, Nadeshiko’s slim figure emerged — or rather, she must have, for I heard a collective soft gasp. She weaved through the black silhouettes of the audience member’s heads before me like a butterfly through a thicket of trees. I stood up a little straighter. Nothing. I leaned my head to the side. The man in front of me fidgeted, and his head moved to block her again. My breath quickened, and I craned my neck. She was gone again, dancing downstage where I couldn’t see her.

The shamisens and koto rose in volume, drowning out my thoughts. The average kabuki act is three hours long. This one was shorter, at two. It felt like five minutes. I took what I could from my poor view.

At one point, I leaned off my ankles, standing ramrod-straight on my knees. The audience had fallen deathly silent. Nadeshiko half-knelt but a stone’s throw from where I sat, wisteria branch over her shoulder. The closed fan was clenched in her grip, and her eyes…

Were full of tears. Her face was twisted in anguish: not like when she was playing the demon, but like she was playing a helpless girl. I knew the expression well from wearing it on the inside of my heart for months. Her wrist tremored; lip trembled. Slowly, haggardly, she raised her eyes to the audience. I felt as though she was putting a dagger in my hand to kill her. Her knees buckled, and she fell to the stage and from my sight.

Before I could gather my bearings, a stirring rose up among the audience. Across the room, a man whooped. Another cried, “Like that!”

Fujisaki Aoi’s mouth curved into a cold, satisfied smile when they shouted his kabuki guild’s name. His wife’s silhouette folded into the seat next to him. Amu watched the stage, entranced. I was the only one who saw them raise their glasses together; a toast to their own creation.

The sake hit Amu worse than me. We stumbled out of the theatre two and a half hours later on watery legs, Amu moreso. Excited people exited the doors through a detached pane of glass. The lights of the ships in the harbour looked less like Fujisaki Aoi’s *eyesore* and more like a thing of soft, sparkling beauty. My eyeballs tingled.

Nagihiko’s father roared in delight when his son met us.

“*Nadeshiko!*” he bellowed with arm slung around the Dragon’s skinny shoulders. “*My girl! Show them how it’s done!*”

“Oh, Father!” Nagihiko said warmly, face smudged with chalky white. “You’ve been drinking!”

Nagihiko had washed the red off his lips and the black off his eyes, but a touch of the pigment remained, giving him a naturally pretty look. He was in the aubergine kimono I liked again, hidden under a padded coat. The air around him shimmered like he was blessed. I smiled.

“Rima, what are you staring at?” Amu giggled in my ear.

“Whassat?” I mumbled.
“Your father was pushing sake on your schoolmates the whole performance,” Tsubaki sniffed, but she couldn’t have been so disapproving – she had brought the sake tray over. “You did well.”

Nadeshiko bobbed a bow, cheeks pink. “I don’t deserve your praise.”

“You took my advice.”

“Dinner!” Aoi shouted over the din, whirling on us. Amu stumbled, and I caught her arm. “We said we’d take a few members of the troupe back with us, some friends... It might get cozy.”

A few meant twenty or so. The once-airy Fujisaki hearth was now lined elbow-to-elbow with theatre spods. Amu and a costume director sat on either side of me. I now understood the housekeeper’s frenetic energy. Nagihiko was out of my sightline, kitty-cornered away by well-wishers praising him.

I wish I knew if it was deserved, for I hadn’t been able to see anything. Amu was also effusive, as she always was.

“Beautiful,” she gushed right along with the actors and musicians. “You looked like you were really crying.”

“She was!” said a nearby man. “I don’t know how she did it, but it was a tear! It marred her eye makeup.”

“And the kimono!”

“Beautiful. We were lucky to get it on loan.”

“Let’s eat!” Fujisaki Aoi interrupted us, picking up his chopsticks at the arrival of warm noodles. “The last night of the year isn’t getting any younger.”

Through my drunken headspin, I became aware that we were the youngest women there, still rouged and primped at the height of availability. This caught the interest of the men who were interested in that sort of thing. We were asked after, and our whole tale of the earthquake regaled to much oohs and aahs by Nagihiko’s mother.

“I have friends in Kobe. Suppose the lines are down?”

“A bad omen—! So close to the New Year!” a geisha exclaimed. I smiled drily behind my hand. Nadeshiko would concur. She didn’t even know about the well-water or the Yamabukis.

“And unaccompanied, too…”

“They got unlucky, then,” said a rig operator. “For most of Hyōgo, it was minor.”

“I think we were very lucky,” Amu replied, cheeks pink, “That we could rely on the generosity of the Fujisakis.”

I stayed quiet, though I made an mm noise to be polite.

“Here, Hinamori-san,” someone said, pouring her another cup. “Another for both of you.”

My dizziness was wearing off. “Thank you.”

“One more cup, and we can get a smile out of Mashiro-san,” the boy from the night before said. “Demure buds bloom the brightest.”
“Or they die on the branch,” I said, tilting my head back. He glanced around, confused.

“Let’s liven this up,” a man announced. “Let’s play a game.”

“Go on without me, I’m too old,” Tsubaki said demurely, getting to her feet. It must be nice to be old.

“Which game?”

“Suggestions?”

“Shiritori.”

“Shuttlecock.”

“I wanna play dice.”

“Oy, I’m not teaching girls how to gamble. What is this, a mobster house?”

“One Hundred Poets,” Tsubaki suggested, despite sitting out. I remembered Naghiko’s rattling of poetry, and paled.

“Oh, A Gathering of One Hundred Ghost Stories, please!” Nadeshiko begged.

"Veto.” Amu raised her hand.

I laughed. The room emitted a soft oh-hh.

“Oh, she laughed,” the boy from earlier said, but he sounded disappointed. Another younger man rifled in his kimono, and the clink of money changed hands. "Who did it?”

For making me laugh, Amu was designated the honour of picking what we were subjected to. All our choices involved either in-depth knowledge of the Japanese language or hand-eye coordination.

“I’m too old as well.” In the things I thought I’d never say category: “I’m going to go sit with sensei.”

“Rima, noooooo,” Amu said, hugging my arm. “Nooooo, I was gonna do shuttlecock.”

Amu, athletic when she wanted to be, would pick shuttlecock. Aoi got to his feet in a very big flurry of excitement.

“I have paddles,” he said. “Wait.”

They had his face on them. From Kabuki promotions. I swallowed my snarky comment.

Amu and I lost, mostly due to my weak arm and lack of coordination.

“It’s the sake,” said an observer, laughing. “You made sure to get them drunk before you played them.”

“In fact,” Nadeshiko said behind her sleeve, “Mashiro-san plays better than when she is sober.”

I hit the shuttlecock particularly hard out of spite. I aimed it at Nadeshiko’s head. Instead, it flew directly into Aoi’s unattended drink. The man himself had vanished. The shuttlecock bobbed in the
sake.

At that moment, Tsubaki shushed us all.

“Listen,” she said, softly. “The one hundred and eight bell chimes of the New Year.”

Out on the harbour, we heard the tolling of the deep bell of the closest shrine out on the sea. We all went very still. I counted the rings. Three, four, five. Six. Seven. Across Japan, every Buddhist temple would ringing in the New Year.

“One hundred and eight times, for each of the earthly sufferings,” the geisha said, raising her glass and clinking it with the rig operator’s. “To a pure conscience in the Year of the Tiger.”

“Cheers,” the Dragon said, sipping. “And may the Tiger finish the war with ferocity.”

Murmurs of concurrence. Perhaps it was the mention of the war that pushed the festivities long past the tolling of the bells. One or two nodded off. Amu leaned on my shoulder. I roused her, softly.

“Let’s go to bed,” I said. “Our train is tomorrow.”

“Oh,” said Amu, groggily. “Where’s Nadeshiko?”

Nowhere to be found. One by one, the Fujisaki family was vanishing. Tsubaki loyally remained, making low conversation with the geisha.

“Bed,” I repeated, hauling her to her feet. I decided it would be easiest to find our room by circling back around the veranda, now covered. After peeking through the rice paper enough times, I saw a room that dimly resembled ours. Amu fell face-first onto the entirety of the futon, face still made up. I was not up to the task of taking my makeup off. I settled for wetting my handkerchief and wiping most of the powder off my face.

“Oh, and Rima?” Amu said, muffled.

“Yes?” I said, getting into bed.

“Happy New Year.”

One truly never knows how much they have drunk until they are lying down with their eyes closed. I was in the backseat of an automobile driving in breakneck circles. My head spun, and I lurched.

“Happy New Year,” I mumbled, dizzy.

We made it. The bells had rung my temptations away. Our train was tomorrow. Tomorrow! I would see my mother. I wouldn’t have to visit a shrine. I could see Emi and grandmother. I could eat langue de chats.

My heart sunk. I would grow up. I had just rung in my last New Year as a child. Amu and I had lived through seventeen years, now. 1938 loomed full of strangers.

Toilet. I stumbled out of bed more sober than I got in. I likely had smudges of mascara under my eyes. I was still in the pretty kimono the Fujisakis had loaned me, having been too drunk to take it off.

It would be foolish to take it off now that I was going back into the cold. In old Japanese houses,
the toilet was a separated outhouse, located at one of the corners. I could open the storm-shutter and see the promising wood hut.

I came back freezing, but relieved. The air smelled like it was going to snow. There was something romantic about the early hours of the night, when nobody was awake.

Only the light was on, behind the rice-paper next to the toilet. Two figures were whispering: Nagihiko and a woman.

I paused. I closed the outhouse door. I crept closer, trying to keep my sandals from clacking too loudly on the grate. I could barely make out any of the words. I pressed my ear against the gap at the bottom of the door, frustrated.

Nagihiko’s voice was rough and guttural. I had only heard him like this once. I squinted and cocked my head. I realized it was father, not son.

“… saw them there, tonight, at the show?”

“Of course,” Tsubaki’s voice whispered back. “They’re making sure you’re behaving. You need to be more careful. Please.”

Once is a fluke, but thrice was a habit. I was developing a penchant for eavesdropping on the Fujisakis through screens. I ought to have stopped. I ought to have walked away. My compulsion to take what intelligence I could kept me rooted to the spot. It was then I should have known.

“We behaved,” Aoi laughed on the other side of the screen. “It was a production of *Wisteria Maiden*, not an anti-war product— ow.” A hiss of pain. I froze, sure his wife had struck him.

“Hold still,” Tsubaki whispered something I could not hear. “I haven’t wrapped the dressing yet.”

Their voices resumed, too quiet to hear. The swish of fabric, and the intimate whisper of lovers. My legs begged me to flee. I closed my eyes, like this would help me hear better.

From the mother, sudden: “He knows. I do not know how, but he knows. Or suspects. … The diplomat’s ball.”

More whispers.

“After all these years?”

“I slighted his pride,” Tsubaki said in a slow, measured voice that indicated she had lots of time to think about it. She avoided his name like a death taboo, but even the way she said *his pride* made me nervous.

“Back then… I thought only of earning enough to support myself. … I was a child… thought it was enough for him to patronize me while my heart wandered.”

“Not for a man like Yamabuki. … thinks he can force women to love him out of duty. He thought you belonged to him.”

“… all so long ago.”

“Longer to fester,” Aoi said. “The product of our transgression gets to look his daughter in the face.”

“I was with child when I left. Nadeshiko might have been his. I thought he would have spared her
— if only because maybe…”

“… But not Nagihiko. The seed of suspicion is there. … Even if she was… loved her like my own. Do you hear me? She was my daughter. Buried under my family name, even if she cannot have anything el…”

Whispers.

“Our only son.” Tsubaki’s voice broke. A choked sob. “After Nadeshiko, who could ask me to lose our only s—! …”

A creak on the veranda behind me. My knees cracked as I shot up. I whirled around, hair hitting the screen. I was blinded. A pinprick of light swam and clouded my vision.

My eyes adjusted to the night. The light was an oil-burning flame. The flame was a handheld lantern. The lantern was held by a thin, white hand. I raised my eyes, aghast, to see Nagihiko’s moonlike face swimming above it.

His parents had stopped speaking. The light behind me had extinguished.

Nagihiko said, “You’re up late.”

I pulled my kimono tighter around me. The winter was not as silent as I thought. Drunkards stirred within the house. The lights on the warships in the harbour twinkled, and I was certain even now, there were night-guards keeping watch.

I squirmed. The remaining sake made me feel excessively slow and stupid. I looked down on the ground, trying not to make it obvious I was eavesdropping on his parents.

“I can never sleep after a performance,” Nagihiko seemed determined to fill my cold silence with chatter. “My heart races. I play it in my head, over and over. The sake doesn’t make me sleepy, either. Did you get lost on the way back to your room?”

My mouth opened. The muscles in my throat flexed. Nagihiko looked at me.

“I never thanked you,” he added. “For the <i>temari</i> ball. I... I had not considered you were capable of making something so beautiful.”

“You’ve been avoiding me, Nagihiko.”

My throat worked. It was a passive-aggressive statement, designed to indicate that I had noticed. The Nagihiko of my imagination would look down in guilt, shame, despair – he would beg for my forgiveness to the veranda. He might cry. I thought he might not have to say anything at all, so long as he was sorry.

“You are cruel,” Nagihiko said. “Was I so unkind to you?”

The wind howled off the inland sea. The chill settled somewhere under my kimono.

Nagihiko took a step closer to me. The overhang’s shadow passed over his face. The muscles in his cheek moved as his jaw clenched.

“What,” I said, “The blithering devil are you talking about?”

“You are a good liar,” Nagihiko said, “But not that good. What have I done to make you treat me this way?”
Self-introspection was not my strong suit.

“You are talking delusional nonsense,” I said. “Weren’t you so unkind to me? You’ve barely spoken to me since summer. You favoured Amu over me, used me, insulted me, without a thought in the world.”

“Hush.”

“I trusted you,” I found my voice, “And you-”

“Hush!”

A lantern-light bobbed on the other side of the storm-shutter. My anger subsided, bubbling at a simmer. The light faded and vanished down the hallway.

Nagihiko turned on me, face pinched. It was like staring at fish guts. I wanted to scoop him into my arms and put him back together again, even though I had cut him open.

“If you had confided in me, that day,” he said, quieter but rehearsed. “If you had told me how you felt, I would have said yes. I would have said yes a thousand times over.”

“You aren’t making any sense.”

“Last summer, I called on you with the intent of asking your father to let me marry you.”

I dropped into freefall. The veranda went blurry, but I kept my footing.

“You’ve lost your mind,” I was now alarmed. “You’re insane.”

“If I’m insane, you made me this way,” Nagihiko’s knuckles trembled on his chest. I couldn’t look anywhere else. A snowflake fell on his wrist and melted into nothing.

“It was foolish of me, I know. A boy’s impulse. I know now that you have no father I could ask anyhow. But if you wanted me, I would have found a way.”

“You don’t want to marry me;” I said helplessly. “You’re mistaken.”

“For months. Maybe years. You have never been a friend. You were always something else. You kept me strung on, suspended on twisted hope, misinterpreting signs. You were right to reject me. I am no man yet. I may never be. I have no fortune or title or breeding that could tempt a woman of your station. But then, for you to stay close and look at me like that – tell me how I could stand it?!”

The image of him falling to his knees in front of me blazed itself across my eyes. Utau had warned me. Amu had begun to guess. Blinded by jealousy, I had not entertained that Nagihiko was in love with me.

There was too much standing in his way. I was illegitimate with a foreign father. I was cold and stoic at the best of times. My time here would have shown him what poor wife material I truly was. I was a mother’s nightmare, better-suited for concubinage than bearing children.

He must know he reached for someone difficult to win. He reached anyway.

“I ought to kill you,” I croaked around the ball wedged in my throat.

Nagihiko barked a laugh. “You already have.”
A tear rolled down his cheek. I caught it on my finger. It stopped, still and shining. The elder Fujisaki’s conversation vanished. All that was left was the hard, firm thought that he was too precious to be discovered, too precious to lose.

Slowly and tentatively, Nagihiko’s hand closed on my wrist.

He was mine if I wanted him. Months. Maybe years. Nadeshiko taunting me on a train, Nagihiko on his knees in my bedroom, Nagihiko at my bedside, Nagihiko pining where I couldn’t see him. In spite of it all, mine. Mine if I asked. Mine a thousand times over.

As I stood there, my mother was picking my suitor. I did not want to marry anyone. I did not want to do anything. I wanted to exist on this veranda forever, in suspension.

I would say no. I would reject him kindly.

My hand disobeyed. It caressed his cheek like a lover.

“If I confide in you...”

Nagihiko leaned forward, brow furrowed.

“If I confide in you, would you say yes to me still?”

His grip on my wrist tightened, and then released. He stared at me with wet eyes, lips parted. He was going to turn his back on me. He would call me a cold-blooded harpy, a creature that could not love. I would be saved. I would return home to the unsatisfying life I had resigned myself to.

“Yes,” he whispered hoarsely.

Hot tears pricked my eyes. I reached for him. We intersected in the snowfall, kimonos tangling together into a chaotic quilt. His body collapsed into mine. I took him in with all the strength my arms could give me. My head fit under his chin. His arms fit around my waist. We closed the gaps between us and sank to our knees on the edge of the porch.

I couldn’t stop grabbing fistfuls, trying to keep him close. I was nervous, terrified. I was elatedly happy. I was so giddy I thought I would faint. I closed my eyes, and the world tilted until I was floating in space, anchored by the thump of Nagihiko’s heartbeat. The world constricted to hold only the two of us. I was living somebody else’s bizarre, romantic life. Or maybe I was just living my own, which I did not do often.

I suppose we may have spent several sunlit years there, wrapped up in each other like skeins of silk. I held onto him for so long that I forgot where he ended, and I began. We were a living, breathing organism, warm to my touch, fragile as a moth’s wing.

“Oh, Rima,” he said in that deep voice, right in my ear.

“My name?” I shivered.


I could have hit him. Instead, I pulled his face into my shoulder, leaning on his hair. The loose strands got in my mouth. Nagihiko’s hairline smelled like a mix of camellia oil and sweet wax. I traced my nose down it. I smiled. I was a fool. I was the embodiment of a clown, and I didn’t care. Anybody could have opened the door to the veranda and seen me curled up on his lap, his head on my shoulder, and I would have burst with pride.
As I swayed against him, the gravity of what I agreed to sank in.

What existed between us didn’t mean anything. Even holding him where I could be caught was improper. For Nagihiko and I to have done the thing properly, it ought to have gone like this:

He should have been legally be a man, so we wouldn’t have known each other at all. A mutual acquaintance would ask my father (now present) if he was an acceptable match. I would have been provided a grainy photograph that wouldn’t have shown off his high cheekbones, his straight eyelashes, the dimension at the corners of his mouth. Sanjō would be the go-between, or the mother of Utau, a distant acquaintance. We would have had a few dinners, an outing or two, to see if we liked each other. An hour alone, if our parents were progressive. He would have sent a letter with a formal offer. After a week of deliberation, I would have given my assent. He would have charmed me on my marriage bed, and I would have fallen in love with him all over again.

Instead, we had fumbled around behind the backs of our families like rats in a gutter. Every step of the way had been done incorrectly. I was almost impressed.

“We shouldn’t,” Nagihiko seemed to have the same thought, and pulled away. “This isn’t…”

The cold rushed to fill his absence. I wanted to kiss him.

“I don’t want anyone else,” I said hollowly.

His hands caught my face, and his haori slid off. He put it around my shoulders, using the pretence to clench it too tightly around me.

“It isn’t up to you,” he reminded me. Snowflakes clung to his lashes like the goose bumps to his neck. He had never looked so tantalizing. “Your mother, and mine…”

“You’re Nadeshiko,” I said, recklessly. Every particle in my being cried out for him. “The daughter of a kabuki actor. What is there for you to take from me?”

His lips stopped moving. The lantern reappeared, distant but clarifying behind the screen. My heart quickened.

“Where can we be alone?”

“Mashiro-san.”

“Not my name.”

“Rima.”

“I won’t let you deny me.”

He didn’t. Instead, his hand found mine. He brought me to my feet. We walked together into the snow-laden trees. With one last look at the veranda, he weighed his guilt. It lost. He squeezed my hand. We walked faster.

I left everything behind and followed him. Whoever’s boy this was, leading his lover through the woods, I was going to steal him.

Like his mother, he picked his way over a path half-remembered under the snow. He ducked and wove around the rocks and outcroppings in a hypnotic dance from boyhood. Taking me under the arms, he lifted me over a log lying in the path.
Then we were before a little fairy-house. Nagihiko walked me around the side, hand trailing its side. I wondered if it was the bathhouse. It couldn’t be. It was too mossy and too diminutive, as though built for a child. It blended into the trees so spectacularly that I might have missed it, had Nagihiko not been with me.

I would later learn it was a free-standing tea house, built purposefully away from the bustle of the main house. In normal circumstances, we ought to have washed our hands before going in. I should have taken off my shoes nicely.

But it was the middle of the night, and everything was sleeping under the snow but owls. I had already committed so many wrongs that ritual seemed laughable. Nagihiko opened a tiny crawlspace in the corner of the exterior screen, and put his entire head in. He vanished through it.

A pair of white hands emerged the other side, lovingly.

“It’s warmer inside.”

It was warmer on the other side, but only just. There was no furniture but four tatami mats. The centre hearth was unlit. My teeth chattered as I crawled towards him.

Nagihiko took the lid off his lantern and tilted it towards the coals. I said, “Won’t your mother see the smoke?”

His eyes were black. “Let her.”

In the low light of a smouldering lantern, the shadows on his face were darker and warped. His cheekbones were longer, eyes dangerous.

A little flame sputtered to life on the coals. I turned his jaw to face me. He looked down at me obediently.

Even now, my mind was racing. I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to talk to him for days, maybe months, maybe years. I wanted to know everything: when did he know, and how long? To weep that I couldn’t marry anyone, not now, not when I wanted to live and have him be a part of it. To explain with urgency how much Marimo had terrorized me, how I had watched Nadeshiko’s ponytail move in class, how badly, painfully, I had wanted her even when I wished I didn’t.

“What are you staring at?” Nagihiko asked me in a voice high and reedy, blushing like Nadeshiko.

I looped my arms around his neck, leaning us both into the warmth of the burgeoning fire. I pulled him with me as I flopped against the tatami mat.

Nagihiko braced on top of me. For a moment, I thought he was going to cry. Then—

“It was like you saved me,” he said thickly.

“From what?”

“Everything. Myself, maybe.”

“I wanted to,” I whispered. “Even now, I want to.”

His eyes moved down to my mouth. I was conscious of how I must look: spread out between his braced hands, undone hair spilling over the mats. Open, languid. Small, easily manoeuvred, lips parted, eyes wanting.
“You don’t know what you’re doing,” he said, softly.

“Suppose I don’t,” I said lazily. The firelight softened him, leaving little dancing flecks of ruby-red on his hair. It poured onto my shoulder, tickling my face.

“I’m not going to do anything to you. I swear it.”

“You won’t do anything to me,” I repeated the lie. I reached for him. “It’s cold, Nadeshiko. Keep me warm.”

The size difference produced a clumsy mess of arms, nothing like on the veranda. We were content to be close and alone, cradled in the darkness. If I squeezed my eyes shut and hugged his waist tight, I could pretend we never had to be parted. I am sure now that we didn’t even know how to hold each other, never mind anything else. It had the air of play-acting something one has heard of second-hand.

I barely knew what to do with him now that I had him, except marvel at how he was crafted. I stroked my hand down his back. Round his waist. They settled on his hip, feeling the jut of bone under my palm. He sighed. His soft breath on the side of my neck was more thrilling than it had any right to be. Then I moved to the curve of his thigh, where the muscle tensed up. His lips grazed my ear, something hot skimming it. I pressed my legs together, prickling with excitement.

In the struggle, Nagihiko’s haori was abandoned under me. My robe slid off. She kissed my exposed shoulder. I rewarded her by wriggling free of the sleeve. Her mouth traced wet circle after circle down the length of my arm. I thought I might be shaking.

“Are you cold?” she murmured against my palm. Another kiss. I wasn’t. Sweat was pearling on the back of my neck, but my arms were chilled. I was cold, but deliciously warm, every muscle in my body aching.

I raised my eyes to hers. They gazed back at me, unmasked and bright. Deliberately, I fit my leg between hers and pulled her to me. Her kimono hiked up and her mouth dropped open in shock.

Whatever she felt was shared between us, a nervous shudder against the unclothed areas of my body. Her back arched and her kimono fanned out around her. She dove for my neck, rolling me back against the firelit floorboards. Pursed lips touched my cold skin, bringing blood back to the surface. My head rolled to the side and my arms dropped next to my head, opening my body for her. The empty kimono sleeve tangled itself under my back, pulling the body with it, exposing my left breast to the freezing winter air. I shivered again as the nipple stiffened.

“Stop me,” she whispered in that sweet, high voice against my neck. “Say no.”

I kissed her. She moaned in protest, mouth opening on mine. Mouths locked together, I put Nadeshiko’s hand over my breast, holding it there. My ears were thudding. The hint of her teeth grazed my lip, skin on skin on skin. I wondered how Americans could have ever screened this in moving pictures, when it felt like this. When it looked like this.

I broke the kiss, just to see if she would follow. She did, seeking my mouth out again. I was giddy on the mere idea that she couldn’t have enough of me. The kissing turned softer, deeper. Her tongue worried at my lips, and I parted, letting her explore me. Her hands kneaded me and gave the occasional squeeze, turning me to mush.

I know now that lovers speak to each other, murmur in each other’s ears, politely apologize when
something pinches. We were terrified to speak, like we were on holy ground. If I even so much as whispered is this alright, we would wake the sleeping gods beneath the earth and be wracked apart. She took kiss after kiss after kiss from me instead, hovering over me every so often to watch my face for hesitancy.

I doubt there was any. Something in Nadeshiko’s dainty manner brought out something impudent in me. I was dimly aware of moving against her, as though watching from outside myself. I threw my head back, pulling her hair to keep her on me.

Her hand slipped inside my kimono, caressing my thigh through silk. I guided her hand to the overlapping fabric of my under-robe. I parted it. She brushed the bare skin of my thigh. Her hand stayed there, testing the give of my skin, like she was evaluating me.

I rolled her over so we were facing each other. My breath was coming fast, hard, in little huffs of air. Insistently, I parted my kimono and kicked it up my leg. Her tapered fingertips skimmed the fine hairs on the back of my thigh. The air inside the innermost robe was humid hot, sticky like summertime. I sighed, squirming. Her hand made played northwards to my throbbing centre, closer and closer. Every movement brought forth a tickling, warm heartbeat below my navel, faster and hotter than I had ever been able to summon on my own.

Enough of her teasing. I grabbed her wrist, groping to her long fingers as though trying to find something in the dark. Her eyes narrowed at me in a smiling laugh. Her hand moulded obediently however I moved it. I pressed her fingers against damp curls, down to slick, hot flesh that parted all too easily. I felt myself overflow and flushed.

Nadeshiko was bright, wild, like I had shown her something out of her wildest dreams. Her finger worked up against where the nerves were sensitive, sliding easily back and forth. I was incensed. Likely insane. Nobody had ever touched me outside of myself. It was strange. Foreign. Stronger and more vivid because I didn’t expect it. The rocking rhythm resumed, gentle but insistent. My mouth dropped open; eyes lidded.

“You’re so cute,” her voice in my ear, breath tickling. The finger drew away. I almost moaned in protest and rocked into her hand, chasing my quarry. I loathed being called cute. But when Nadeshiko called me so in the cradle of our bodies, with patient longing in her eyes, I felt glowing and special, like when the ladies would compliment me at the theatre. Only better.

Words never came easy, but her fingertip gently worrying the sensitive flesh eked a sound in my throat. I could tell she wanted more of it, because every time I hummed, she doubled down. Her ankle crisscrossed mine, rubbing my leg as her finger traced a lazy oval. Her hand was wet. My lips were wet. I felt brimming with something I could not sate, except by getting more. More.

My breath came faster. I stretched, first an arm, then a leg. Pinpricks ran up my spine, followed by spasms of delight. Any thought of what was proper, what looked dignified, what looked pretty left my head in favour of getting myself closer to white-hot euphoria.

“More,” I whispered.

“Greedy,” she whispered back. “I’ll take care of you.”

Wasn’t she already? But then she exhaled against my ear again, tongue gently licking the tip of my earlobe, once, twice. A bite. Sucking. My toes curled. I hugged her neck.

She might know what she was doing more than me, after all. Whoever she had learned this on
made me jealous, hot and full of anger. Were there others? I grabbed her head between my hands.

“Please,” I said.

She laughed. The teahouse was full of heat now, fire roaring in the grate. The backs of my knees were cool from sweat, under-robe forming a puddle. Nadeshiko was teasing me. She kissed the tip of my cold nipple and then the underside. Bliss. My kimono parted further, and her eyes lowered to the gap. She looked so completely ravishing on all fours between my legs that I could have eaten her.

I squirmed. She took so long to touch me that I expected her to take longer. I thought she would kiss my thigh, circle me, tease me. She didn’t. The silky warmth of her mouth enveloped my womanhood all at once. My legs tensed, toes curled. I became one with the floor.

“Oh,” I breathed.

A smacking noise. She looked up, demure, lips wet. “Like that?”

I pushed her head back down on me as way of answer. Nadeshiko smiled smugly into my hair. The pressure moved, wandered, flicked up. With every move, the aching intensified, burning hot, rich. She lapped and then turned her mouth to the side, lewd, like she was kissing – I clenched – purring something I couldn’t hear. Only I had seen her like this, I realised. I wanted to be the only one who saw her like this, who she wanted to pleasure, who she wanted.

I closed my legs around her head, pushing against the hot wetness. Whenever her lips broke contact, the air was piercingly cold, making my hair stand on-end. I had lost all self-preservation. I lost. I was wanting, and I was begging.

“Mine,” I whispered.

“Yours,” she moaned and then sucked where the nerves were sensitive, eliciting a hiss from between my teeth. “All yours.”

She held me apart, face buried. She had been rehearsing a delicate dance before, but not anymore. She sluiced whatever she could reach, mouth wide open, head bobbing. I was swollen, delicate. The gnawing in my stomach was a hunger, louder in my ears.

More. I needed more. Harder. I took what I wanted out of her, and she responded by going lighter, gentler. I put two fingers right at my cleft and pulled upward, revealing more of me to her tongue. She stopped wandering, bracing on my legs. It was a maddening back and forth, hard, then soft, then harder. I found myself helpless at her beck. If she stopped now, I couldn’t say no. I couldn’t.

I broke, back arching. My body rewarded me by magnifying the rasp of her tongue into intolerable pleasure, singing against me like a koto-string. I pressed against her mouth, exhaling ragged from the base of my throat.

I fell back against the floorboards. I refilled my lungs with oxygen. My skin was tickling, sensitive. She was still licking, and my leg jerked from overstimulation.

“Oh,” I gasped. “Stop.”

“Mm?”
“Done.” I shied from her mouth.

“A-ah-” another wet noise as she pulled her face away. My cheeks were hot. I beckoned, lazy and spread-eagled. She had a meek expression on, like she had been caught with her hands in something she shouldn’t.

She said she wouldn’t do anything to me. She hadn’t. At least, nothing I had not already figured out for myself. But it left me on my back, thrumming with delight: and nothing had gone in. That was key, of course. I found I loved her more for it, that she hadn’t tried.

Nadeshiko crawled up to join me, slithering an arm round the back of my neck. I fell into her, exhausted. From my sleepy haze, a thought:

“And you?” I asked, sleepily. My hands strayed to whatever stayed out of my reach. Despite knowing nothing, I instinctively knew what arousal looked like in her, red-eyed and pursed lips and the delicate way she handled her groin. I pressed up against her with morbid fascination, caressing the weight behind her kimono.

Nadeshiko let out a sob in spite of herself, grinding into my hand.

“Oh, don’t,” she begged. “Don’t, please.”

My hand withdrew. Hypocritically, she pulled me back. When Nadeshiko blushed, it always blotted from the red rims of her eyes to the tip of her ear. Even the firelight, I could see her full lips quivering. Her slim hip was digging into my stomach in a gentle thrusting motion. My mouth watered. I pushed against her leg and was rewarded with a shuddery moan.

She shied, burying her face in my neck. “I don’t want to do anything to you,” she repeated.

I assented with an ’mm.’ Her ear was warm and soft under my teeth. She jerked with pleasure when I bit it, squeaking into my shoulder. Climax warmed me into action, impelling me to reward her.

“But I want you,” she gasped, as I clambered on top of her. “Oh- d-don’t-”

She pulled my knee between her legs. I threw myself on her, cheek resting on her chest. The warmth of her skin radiated through it, down the length of her body where we were pulled flush. I testily rolled my hips and admired with thinly veiled delight as she bucked uselessly under me.

Again. Her hips lifted off the tatami and she stiffened against me, eyes half-shut, mouth open. The silk layers whispered between us with every shift and thrust. The yawning urge returned to me, something fluid rolling down my leg. I could feel the breath leaving me, my legs giving out. Getting purchase on her was exhausting. I wheezed.

“Let me.”

I let her roll my body over, still panting.

She handled me like a dollmaker would something fragile and breakable. A cool palm covered my eyes, sinking me into darkness. My knees were pushed together, then worked back against my chest. My ankles fit on either side of her neck.

A sitting cushion was folded and under my lower back. I opened my mouth to ask what she was doing. A wet hand. My thighs parted, then closed. Slick, wet pressure all over the still-sensitive skin, rubbing raw. I inhaled, head lolling back. Firm flesh nestled against my belly – not in me – throbbing hot, almost velvety.
I opened my eyes, lashes brushing Nadeshiko’s palm. Friction against my thighs as she began to thrust. Her fingernails dug into my knees, and I wanted to see her face so much it hurt me, sweet and anguished and aching for release.

“Good?” a feminine whisper.

“Yes,” I said, dazed. I didn’t know how my thighs could have gotten this slippery – or I did, but could not believe it. I felt along the side of my leg until I reached for her hand. I tiptoed down to where my thighs parted, where she was moving.

“Here?” I whispered to the darkness of her hand, making a loose fist around the head. She moaned again, and it made me move my hips down on her, pushing my knees together. The fire roared higher, and she let out a choked cry. My heart beat in tune with my fingers squeezing swollen flesh. Nadeshiko moved faster, and I sunk into a strange half-dream. I was awake but not asleep, in darkness but alive with feeling. My body was sleepily aroused all over again. I got wetter. The hand removed itself from my eyes.

Nadeshiko’s eyebrows pulled together, pretty lips open. Her eyes were nearly closed. Her kimono gaped to expose her long, white neck and fine line of her collarbone. I gripped tighter, and she hugged my knees to her chest, gasping. The corner of her mouth lifted in a beastlike snarl. Harder. Faster, like she was trying to ruin me.

“Good,” I panted.

My inexperienced hands did what I would have done to myself, stroking wherever I could. She was too far gone to stop me. Her face twisted, and she bit back another sob.

“Oh—”

She threw herself into the confusing knot of our hands and limbs. Our kimonos tangled into a chaotic temari ball. She matched my pace wildly like she was back in a dance, hitting every cue, strings of hair obscuring her face. Princess Sarashina shook off the repression of her disguise to bare her teeth at me, bone-white. The thrusts grew shallow, wanting, needy. And I wanted it.

“Go ahead.”

She jerked. Nadeshiko lost herself somewhere beyond the embrace of my legs. Her eyes were empty. She forced herself on me, hips twitching, then quivering.

“Ah—! AH!”

Fluid rushed to fill the gaps between my fingers. With a shudder and tremble of her lip, she pressed her face into my knees. Her forehead was a bright, flaming red. I lay there, dampened and soiled, drinking her in. Drips went over my knuckles, like when I squeezed a fruit too hard.

Her face looked contrite enough to beg me. She groped within her obi and pulled out a fistful of kabuki blotting paper. She pulled herself from my thighs. I lay there, dampened and soiled, drinking her in. Drips went over my knuckles, like when I squeezed a fruit too hard.

For a while, we stared at each other, mulling over what had passed between us. My stomach was
sticky, legs weak. His hands lay on my shoulders, and mine on his chest. He was still breathing a little heavy, eyes lidded. He tucked a loose curl behind my ear. Then he turned to dump snow on the hearth, dousing it. The fire sizzled and hissed, exhaling steam.

I followed his downturned lashes with my eyes. I wanted to share his warmth for the rest of the night. I wanted to sleep knowing he would be there when I woke up. There were no futons here; my spine was already aching with discomfort. I pouted.

“Stay with me,” Nagihiko said softly, reading my expression.

“Amu,” I said.

I thought his face might fall, remembering that we shared a futon in the guest room. Surely, he would notice. But Nagihiko only smiled coyly.

“Amu’s drunk,” he said, taking me in his arms. “And will sleep until noon.”

“It sounds to me,” I said, “Like you’ll justify anything.”

He kissed my forehead. I giggled as he put me back into his haori.

After the warmth of his skin, the walk back through the night snow was intolerably cold. As a people, the Japanese scorned internal heating and large grates. We made do off small hearths, living eternally in fear that our wood dwellings would catch fire. We bundled ourselves in layers that did absolutely nothing. I pressed myself against Nagihiko, teeth chattering.

I only eased my shivering when he got me inside the storm-shutter. I untied my obi and outer layers. We fell into bed together. I wondered how long I could make these few hours before daylight pass as slowly as possible.

“Mm.” He wrapped his arms around me and rested his head on my breast. A strip of eye was visible through my would-be lover’s eyelashes, watching me.

Sleep lapped at the edges of my vision, slow but sure. The world swung, suspended in the black pearl of a room. I remembered that Nagihiko could not sleep.

“Wake me,” I said, “When the sun rises.”

“Then,” he replied, “I will beg Amaterasu to dawdle.”

Chapter End Notes

#LOVEWINS #HAPPYNEWYEAR #HOLYSHIT

- Nagihiko is so corny... Tadase come get your boy he's scaring the hoes
- I really wish Nadeshiko's sex ed wasn't limited to 19th century shunga woodblocks.
- Special award goes to all the Anonymouses on tumblr.com for calling Nagihiko's cryptic, Japanese pseudo-marriage offer way back in Chapter 10. I really thought I was being slick but alas, my readership is clever and used to reading between the lines for their Rimahiko fix
• "Oh so is this the end tsuki no kimi?" unfortunately no. Actually. We are um. Halfway through.
• Once again I am so sorry for ruining everyone's childhood. i, uh. I love y
The sun rose regardless. I woke to cramped, sweaty darkness. A human hand was in mine. Nagihiko.

He fell asleep in the hour before dawn. The pillow went under his shoulders to support his back, chin up. His closed eyelids lay smooth as fallen snow. It was too easy to relax into his side and pretend to sleep. Easier still to listen to the sound of his breathing. He inhaled through his nose, exhaled through pursed lips like a sigh.

I never shared a bed with another person like this. I was smothered. There was no space to stretch my legs. The mingled warmth of our bodies was sweltering. My clammy palm found his again. Squeezed.

He sighed in his sleep, head tossing. He was a picture washed in India ink on tissue paper. He still slept with his mouth open. He was so beautifully, blissfully alive.

And I was alive with him. I did not take easily to sentiment, but in those early hours before dawn, I let myself go soft. I studied the silvery-white outline of his nose. I thought about the meaningless cosmic joke that birthed us within two years of each other. How we lived in the same time. In the same place. If I hadn’t, we wouldn’t have met. How strange. How cruel.

All the while, Amaterasu’s face threatened me. When the icicles on the veranda began to glitter, I unstuck myself from his legs. I crawled out of bed, taking care to tuck the blankets in around him. A strip of white eyeball showed through the eyelashes. Maybe not as asleep as I thought.

I stole from the young master’s room like a thief.

Frost crept over the veranda where we forgot to close the storm-shutter the previous night. I hastily closed it.
True to Nagihiko’s prediction, Amu was out cold. The morning chill clung to me as I got into the futon. She grunted and rolled over, taking the comforter with her. Shivering, I reflected that true luxury was waking up on one's own schedule.

Outside my screen, the scratch-and-sizzle of the hallway lantern being lit. The maids were waking. I had cut it close.

Surely Nagihiko did not mean to make me his wife. I grinned at the wall. My thoughts run away with me. If we had maids, maybe he wouldn’t mind that I couldn’t de-scale a fish. Suppose I could take Emi with me, as though Mother would ever surrender her (or say yes to the union).


I didn’t know what marriage looked like. As a girl, I imagined two copies of Mother running around in a frenzy. As a woman, two unpleasant strangers cohabiting. Maybe it was like the tragic couple of the moving picture: a long-suffering loyal wife who works as her husband wines and dines his mistresses.

What of Nagihiko’s parents? The Fujisaki marriage was too odd to consider.

One thing I knew for certain: abandoning the silk mill to become a dancer’s wife would be nothing short of selfishness. It was selfishness, too, to ask Nagihiko to give up what he was born for in favour of silk-spinning. I was not yet foolhardy enough to elope to a warzone at eighteen.

I couldn’t wed Nadeshiko. More importantly, I didn’t want to. I ran my finger down the line of my navel, where something dried remained stuck to my skin. Nagihiko would never ask me for sons if I did not want them. I loved that about him. He might not even care about marrying me, only about taking responsibility. And I loved him for that, too.

It was impossible. The two of us were always destined for an expiry date. I was suddenly frustrated with the circumstances of it all. I wanted to stand up and rage against the sun, against my mother, against everything holding us apart.

The panes of sun almost reached the door. A maid rooted to the spot outside the screen. She cocked her ear. The second time, I heard it. A rapping on the door, a voice from the other end of the house.

“So early on the first day of the year!” the maid whispered. “Who could possibly...”

Every event in a stranger’s home is alien. It must be an overzealous friend making a New Years’ call. She called for the housekeeper. I almost drifted back to sleep when I heard more footfalls, more whispers.

“The Master...”

“Then wake him!”

A brief conference was held. They scattered.

After that, Fujisaki Aoi must have gone to the door. There was no reason for him not to. Now unable to go back to sleep, I sat up. I wet my fingers and managed to flatten my hair down from its fevered frizz. I rested my hand-mirror gently against my crossed thigh and inspected the damage.

Bright red spots dotted my neck. It couldn’t be typhoid. I had the vaccine, same as everyone else. I
didn’t feel feverish – save the hammering of a headache –

The ghost of Nadeshiko trailed her lips up my neck, kissing harder than I thought she could. *Stop me.* Teeth on my arteries, full of feeling. *Say no.*

I put the mirror down and looked for a polo-neck jumper.

If I had been at home, Emi would have ribbed me for it when I came out for breakfast: *You’re cold, Little Miss? Heh heh!*

But O-Mari barely noticed I was there. She poured me tea and set out a bowl of dried plums for the hangover. Her lip had a quiver. She kept looking over her shoulder.

Had Tsubaki said something? Surely someone not above beating their students was not above beating her maids. The house was still asleep, save for the two of us and Mr Fujisaki.

“Are you quite alright?” I said, surprising myself. O-Mari jumped, and tea sloshed everywhere.

“Oh,” she gulped, mopping the table with the edge of her yukata sleeve. “Oh, forgive me, it’s nothing.”

My stomach was in too many nauseous knots to eat. I opened a book on the kotatsu.

Even for New Years’ Day, the atmosphere was out of place. I could not envision the Dragon having a lie-in. Nagihiko rose early. Didn’t they want to visit some miserable shrine?

I felt O-Mari’s eyes on the cover. She likely couldn’t read, never mind read the brick-like English alphabet. She chewed her lip.

“Miss, why don’t you read something from our collection instead?”

I would have sooner disembowelled myself. But it was my last day in the house, and it was too awkward.

“Erm,” I said, thinking this would stop her pussyfooting. “Alright.”

“I will put that one back with your things,” O-Mari said, holding the book out like a live grenade.

Amu dragged herself into the room a time later, face grey, shadows garish. She looked like the ghosts she was so afraid of. She was too hungover to gawk at the sight of me reading an Imperial Court poetry anthology. I flipped the page.

*Limitless,*

*The far side of the clouds*

*May part us, yet*

*Within my heart,*

*Shall I carry you?*

“How’s your head?” I said, not unkindly.


“Quite,” I said. “Where’s Nadeshiko?”

Amu didn’t know. The morning never really began. Without Aoi there, the day felt like a disjointed extension of night. When the sun was well and firmly up, Fujisaki-sensei opened the screen.
“Excuse the intrusion,” she apologised in her own house. “Did you sleep well?”

We made noises of assent. A stray stinkbug crawled across the tatami. Were my dark circles obvious? My skin crawled. Could she smell the teahouse smoke and see the love-bites through my jumper?

My nerves were further shot by Nadeshiko behind her. I failed to catch her eye. Had her mother been questioning her? Is that why they took so long? I should have never let him light that fire!

Her eyes were glassy, smile hung straight. Was I staring at the same person who had unravelled on top of me? I pressed my thumb over the kanji for heart.

The train left that morning. I barely took in what the housekeeper was saying. Our things were packed. The weather was clear but cold, from last night. Nadeshiko was nodding and would not look at me.

“I should go move everything to the porch,” Nadeshiko got to her feet.

“You won’t do it right,” I said very fast, following suit. “I’ll move my own things.”

I caught her eye. The plan took shape, wild and half-baked. I corner him on the porch, ask him what’s wrong? Feel his hands on mine, say goodbye —

“The housekeeper can take care for that!” Fujisaki-sensei exclaimed. “Both of you, sit down.”

I sunk back to my knees. I wondered if Nagihiko was looking at me, but thought better than to check.

That morning was spent in proximity and out of reach. I picked holes in my stockings the whole trolley ride to Hiroshima Station. Across from me, Nadeshiko’s legs had gotten so long that her knees occasionally bumped against mine. Her bone-white knuckles rested on her lap. Amu spoke, but mostly it was the Dragon: about this and that, the snowfall and the night before, good wishes for our families. I could have throttled her. It was too oblivious to be intentional sabotage.

“We leave you here,” she said finally, relinquishing us from our prison. Mother and daughter stood together, posed stiffly like expensive dolls. “It was a pleasure to—”

“Thank you so much!” Amu burst out, throwing her arms around Nadeshiko. I wanted nothing more than to snatch her away and do that myself. I wanted to feel her fragile limbs buckle against me and her arms tighten across my back again. Hot-white jealousy burned through my nerve endings.

“For everything, I can’t believe- y-you have to let us repay you! Stay over with us whenever you’re in Tokyo, there’s not much room, but—”

“Don't thank me, please,” Nadeshiko squeezed Amu tightly. Her eyes met mine. “It was all my pleasure.”

This was it. I would not have a chance to be alone with him until school reconvened. There was no way to say goodbye in front of Amu and his mother. I picked at a cuticle. Then bowed.

“Until we see you at school.”

She looked like she dreaded it.
Clink, clink, clink.

My spoon against the cup. My mother slid an abacus bead to the left. Her only daughter was stranded by an earthquake, days into the New Year, and still, my mother counted and tallied.

My mother was too logical to rage. But her face was pinched white from the inconvenience.

“You ought to have wired me,” she said. A bead slid over.

The marks on my neck burned under a silk scarf.

“Could have been dead under the rubble, for all I knew. Recount the remittance column. The figures are off.”

This last part was at the accountant. He stood next to her, looking as though he would like to be excused.

“You had an appointment with Dr Inoue for the day you got back before dinner with a client. I was unable to produce you. You were unaccounted for. Wasting time with school-friends in, where, Hiroshima?”

The tea was tasteless. My heart beat faster, thinking of how precious few minutes I had to waste.

My mother said, “So soon after your illness. I had no way of seeing you.”

She looked tired. Her fingers did not waver on the abacus. I felt ashamed upon realising that my mother had nearly lost her only daughter twice.

“Mama…”

“You’re thinner. Suppose the weakness is permanent? This would complicate negotiations. This is why I wanted Dr Inoue to verify your good standing.”

It wasn’t that Mother didn’t love me. This was how she talked, in business and numbers. A sickly mare did not demand its price.

“No matter,” she said and moved on before I could take it in. “We proceed without an examination and promise one at a later instance, if all goes well.”

“Whatsoever do you mean?” I said. “For what purpose?”

My mother picked up her bell and rang.

“Kusukusu,” she said, “See if something can’t be done about that hair.”

Emi could barely contain her laughter. She bubbled over with information like an unattended pot as she raked oil-soaked hands through my curls.

“The suitor’s your age. Kukuku. Of course, the Misses were careful not to say his name in front of me. The go-between is the hairdresser down the street, who knows his elder sister’s husband. Their family farms rice and potatoes.”

“Tenant farmers?!”
“Respectable ones.” Emi yanked my hair to the side a little too hard. “The boy’s gotta big brother, so he’s itching for a family to take him in. Your mama thinks he’s too broad, but your grandmama insisted we meet him as a formality. She says nobody knows the permanent effects of your illness, so we must hurry to marry you off.”

*Permanent effects* meant madness. I heard whispers of it here and there. Some women were never quite the same after enteric fever. Childbirth could make it worse, prone to fits of hysteria and withdrawing from society. In wealthy families, private investigators were hired to ensure no such risk. I heard once of a man disqualified from consideration due to a distant great-aunt with dementia.

It reminded me of Nagihiko’s strangely acute knowledge of my grandfather and the innocent flattery towards my mother last summer. I wanted to laugh, giddy. He had been inquiring into my family so he could marry me. What a fool I had been!

I knew my own mind. I was not mad. Yet I was mad. I was crazy, demented, off my head. I yearned for fruit out of my reach, knocked it down, bit into its sweet flesh. I was now expected to cast it away or make off with it like a thief. The circumstances were absurd.

I was mad. I stared back into the mirror. I looked hardened and mutinous.

“Would any man do?”

“Hmm?” Emi said through pins in her mouth.

“Would any man do?” I repeated. “I am taking a husband into my house, am I not? So surely his standing does not matter. Surely any man will do.”

Emi hooted, turning me away from the mirror. “Oh, don’t let your mama hear you say that!”

Despair. One meeting, I chanted. I could bow out politely and overpower my mother if need be. She was a mere woman, after all, nowhere near the authority of a father or a brother. Divorce was acceptable, where I was from. If you disliked the man so much, and you had been forced into a marriage out of obligation, you could always return home if need be. Most didn’t. But I could.

I wondered what Nagihiko would say if he knew where I was. I recalled his would-be suitor that hot summer day in Ginza, who wept inconsolably at her marriage-meeting with Nagihiko. I scorned her for dragging her heels. I said it was futile to fight the inevitable. Now, I prayed a silent apology to her.

My jaw hardened. I was cocooned in a kimono, then a silk overcoat. A quince flower was tucked in my hair. I was guided out the door, into a cab, down the street, like a dream. Something was resolving in me, like a stone polished over and over by the battering of the waves.

I would not forsake Nagihiko. My heart had a capacity of one. I could no more change my tastes than force the sun to rise slower. I understood what Utau meant now, back at the ball: *I thought I could find a powerful husband. Even the military is too cowardly to go up against him.*

Maybe it wasn’t enough for Utau. An idea was formulating. It might be enough for me. I would not forsake Nagihiko. But a military man – one with a father who outranked General Yamabuki – would be enough to protect the ones I loved. If my husband could save the Fujisakis and go to war in China, I would be a future widow alone in an empty house. I would be free to take Nagihiko back into my arms.

Would Nagihiko would still have me?
I thought of the male cuttlefish, which was an odd thing to think about in the moment. In their pursuit of a mate, a weaker cuttlefish standing no chance against his opponent will camouflage himself as a female.

We wouldn’t have to wait until he died. Nadeshiko would call on me without impunity, slip past the front door of my husband and into my arms. If she was careful, she could do more than that. I fought a shudder, and my knee jogged impatiently under my kimono. I had opened my robe, let her in. I would let her in again.

I stepped out of the cab. Two men and a woman were waiting for us. One man was young. One man was older. It was the younger, then.

I re-adjusted my muff and met the younger boy’s eyes.

“Kirishima-kun,” I said, amazed the name came so easily to my lips. “It’s been a while.”

“Oh!” said his brother. “You two have met before? What luck! I suppose you both attend school in Kobe.”

Kirishima looked just as he had when I had seen him at the ball. Unruly hair, serious eyebrows.

“Let’s go in and get our table,” my mother hurried before I could say any more. My mother had made an odd choice. The dining establishment was underground down a series of steps, and the entrance was shaped like a barrel. I knew it was my mother’s choice, because a farmer would never choose to eat a non-rice product.

Barmaids scurried about the floor. The smell of roast beef lingered. Foreigners tended to look all the same, yet the couple in the corner nagged me. Both blonde, I was certain I had seen them before. Amongst the foreigners, one or two Japanese servicemen evidently had a penchant for German cooking. A gramophone warbled out a song in a language I didn’t know. On the piano, somebody had draped a bloodred flag emblazoned with a Buddhist manji.

I was no better at the countries of the world than I was at anything else. My mother gave me no time to contemplate it; she hurried me up the stairs to the formal dining of the second floor.

“A bierkeller?” the older man said in response to something I hadn’t been listening to, tripping over the German in his broad accent. He must be Kirishima’s brother. That explained his cheerfulness: he would be inheriting everything. That they were farming stock explained their waistlines. My prejudices blinded me to appreciating this quality in a husband-to-be, but Mother was cleverer than that. In time I wish I had been less picky.

Mother was the worst company one could have at a banquet. Thankfully, the hairdresser who introduced us knew her role in the game. Perhaps even enjoyed it. She kept me entertained with her gawking at the foreign food.

I learnt that Miss Kinuko Mashiro had always loved Western food, dined here once or twice, and had herself a penchant for beef. Everything on the menu baffled the hairdresser, from hamburger steak to Berlin pancakes, but everyone was excited to receive a round of beer.

The hairdresser harangued Kirishima with questions, saving me the trouble of speaking. Did he eat a lot of foreign food? Had Kouen not used the German model on its students? But potatoes, surely, were German? And how was the harvest that previous year?

A girl is a thread in a tapestry pulled by warp and weft, duty and face. She forges alliances, bears children, brings bride-price, serves in-laws. The longer the housekeeper talked and the longer my
mother and Kirishima’s brother knowingly nodded at each other, the tighter and tighter I stretched.

“Why, Mashiro-san!” the housekeeper exclaimed. “How quiet you’ve been!”

The enemy of the shy woman is the busybody who draws attention to how quiet she is being. The thread was stiff as iron. *I don’t participate in fishwives’ babble* danced on the tip of my tongue.

“I’m afraid she’s inherited my serious nature,” my mother said gravely.

I picked up my spoon and grimaced like a Kabuki actor into it. Kirishima choked on his beer.

“From a young age, she was soft-spoken and contemplative.”

I composed myself. Kirishima’s dimples vanished, but his eyes lingered. I was a fool for acting like myself.

“How lucky that is,” Kirishima’s brother said. “Fuyuki was an over-serious child as well. He took his responsibilities so seriously; I couldn’t believe I had the bad luck to be born first.”

I was a shifty child in subtle ways: making faces, rearranging my dinner into offensive pictures, reading magazines within books, letting Emi talk me into schemes. I wondered if my mother remembered this, or if she was recalling a child she invented.

I stole another glance at Kirishima, quailing under my mother’s evaluation. He was but a boy, the same age as me. He caught my eye, and smiled.

Kirishima would not turn me down. My hopes rested on his family finding something about me they did not like. Infertility wouldn’t dissuade them: I owned a silk-mill and could always adopt an heir.

I could always be ugly. I put my napkin to my lips and wiped the rouge off.

“Rima,” my mother said, watching me like a hawk. “What are you doing. Are you quite alright?”

“Queasy,” I said.

I was plied with ginger. A delicate countenance would make me look frail and likely to die, especially after the bout with fever. I needed a way to lose my mother’s watchful eye to destroy my prospects.

I realized that I was plotting again. I blinked.

“German food is so heavy,” I said, trying to look ill.

“A true Japanese beauty,” the hairdresser tutted. The Japanese beauty was worlds away in Hiroshima, unaware that I was thinking of her. “Japanese food is always simplest and best.”

“Might I take some air?” I used my best Nadeshiko impersonation. “I have forgotten which way we came in…”

To my displeasure, Fuyuki Kirishima jumped up to my aid.

“No,” I said.

The table was silent.
“I mean,” I amended, “Don’t trouble yourself on my account.”

“I assure you,” he said, “I’ve seen a lady vomit before.”

My eyes popped. If I wasn’t trying to make him hate me, I would have liked him.

My mother said, “Go.”

I went. Kirishima hover-handed my elbow and walked me down the stairs. Passed the flag and the piano. Out, onto the street.

I blinked in the weak winter sunlight. A family walked towards the park. Two school-girls passed us. For the first time in years, I was away from a teacher and away from my mother. I was unsupervised. I inhaled.

“If you’re going to be sick,” said Kirishima, “I would do it behind the Wako Tower.”

“Why?” I said.

“That’s where the drunks go.”

Oh, how I liked him. I wish I didn’t. I would not make a cuckold of him.

“I regret to disappoint,” I lied. “It’s been like this since the typhoid.”

He walked me towards the clock tower. I did my best to make my legs shake. Fragility came easy to me. Under the watchful eyes of the pillars, I doubled over. Arms crossed, he politely blocked the sun with his body. I reflected on the absurdity of the image: me, done up in a kimono with flowers in my hair, pretending to retch. I was blessed instead with the hiccups.

I continued to hiccup at the watch display. To my amazement, Kirishima spoke.

“To tell you the truth,” he said, “I’m glad you’re ill. I hoped to talk to you alone.”

As was my habit, I shrunk in response. The invisible fortress I built between us raised its gate.

“I don’t know, well… just, maybe… the whole thing is set up a little strangely, so I find it difficult to speak freely in a meeting like that. I was nervous, but when I found out it was you, I felt better.”

I blinked. He must have seen my surprised look, for he kept rambling.

“You’re surprisingly easy to talk to, you know.”

“I am glad I have a single accomplishment,” I said. Perhaps a bit of lingering bitterness from the ball. “Your classmates thought I had none.”

“My education was common, so I don’t notice things like that.” Kirishima seemed to be having an internal struggle over how honest he could be. “I think they were all only trying to get Fujisaki-san’s attention, because she’s so refined.”

So unprepared was I to hear Nadeshiko’s name that my stomach flipped over.

“Seems refined?” I looked up, flushed.

“I thought she was the delicate flower type, and so did everyone else. But she earned my respect at the ball.”
“How?”

Kirishima seemed to realize he had said too much, but it was too late. His eyes darted around.

“I’m sure she wouldn’t want me to tell you. It wasn’t for your benefit. She was only doing what was right in the situation. You mustn’t ask me anymore.”

“It’s too late,” I said, quivering. “You’ve said too much. What happened?”

“She gave Shouta terrific what-for, when they were all saying that stuff about accomplishments. I don’t know how girls manage to sound so elegant when they scold someone.”

My heart beat a million miles a minute. “Tell me what she said.”

Kirishima hesitated. “Ah…”

“Whatever you can remember!”

“She said that –” Kirishima licked his lips and walked away from me.

“That it was any wonder Mashiro-san was so stiff. That Mashiro-san is shy, but people mistake it for coldness.” He spoke faster. “That above all else, Mashiro-san values sincere people unafraid to make a fool of themselves. That you were conserving effort for a dance partner who would enjoy himself, instead of gawking at her beauty.”

Nadeshiko, who held her tongue, had relinquished it. For me.

“It sounded better when she said it,” He looked back at me over his shoulder. “But I saw for myself that it was all true.”

As he spoke, I remembered he existed.

Kirishima smiled weakly at me, framed between two columns like a Greek statue. “I like you. Since that night in the rain, I’ve liked you. You’re honest. You would tell me if I had no reason to hope.”

I opened my mouth. I wish he had said anything else.

“I can’t.”

“I know,” he said quickly. “I know you’re young. I know your family wouldn’t…”

“I can’t, Kirishima-san. Not four years from now. Not ever.”

He avoided my eyes, mussing up his hair. He lacked the pride to look dejected. Only resigned.

Kirishima might have made me a good husband, had not been drugged by passion. He was loyal and honest. He reminded me of Amu. Even then, I liked him. I think I wanted to be his friend.

It was a world away from the aching urge to take Nagihiko in my arms and save him, redeem him, leave him better than I found him. To watch him. To hear him speak until the sun came up. A feeling like that doesn’t need marriage to validate it: it stands on its own, still and shining.

I could have married Kirishima if I wanted to. A wedding is a piece of paper. It was not out of nobility or adultery that I declined his offer. It was because I liked Kirishima. Curse him for his sincerity. I knew too well the feeling of watching your chosen person love another.
“I like you.” Even to me, it was weak. By the looks of it, Kirishima found it weak too. “But my family, they’re…”

*In debt,* I was going to say, an excuse suddenly coming to my attention. *My house has no fortune, only thousands of yen in debt. Do not saddle yourself with me-*!

“They’re in debt.” My voice was drowned out by the blare of a car, and the call of my mother’s voice.

“There you are!” my mother cried from down Chuo Road.

I was torn from Kirishima, back into the arms of my mother. I looked back at him as I was put into a cab, eyes wild. I was not the blushing bride my mother was selling. I was a cutthroat securing her survival at her expense.

Chapter End Notes

I know it’s monotony at this point, but stay safe, everyone! (groans)

what happened at the Fujisaki house New Years morning? why do I like kirishima the more I write him? how does Rima keep getting more femme fatale with every passing chapter? all these questions, and more, will be answered coming up next on Disney Channel!

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