"You’ve made it,” said Kaede, her eyes brightening as Seppun Ishikawa bowed into the cramped alcove.

"You are looking well, Lady Akodo."

Kaede winced. "Please, Ishikawa. Not so formal." She gestured to the empty cushion on the opposite side of the table. Ishikawa took his seat, casting frequent glances at the rest of the sparse teahouse. Patrons whispered beneath the filtered shade of amber lanterns amid plucks of the biwa, but none looked their way. "I hope I have not inconvenienced you too much,” she said, pouring straw-colored tea into his cup.

He shook his head. "Not at all. I was hoping we would have a chance to speak.” He searched the room once more before looking back to her. "You are here unescorted?"

"I can take care of myself, Ishikawa."

"These meetings will be easier once you and your husband have officially moved to the Palace of the Emerald Champion.”

She didn’t reply, and instead pushed his teacup forward. "Here. You will have to drink the whole kettle, I am afraid. I do not care for the blend, myself."

"No?" He held the cup close to his nose, then sipped. "It is a strong soldier’s tea," he remarked. "Bitter. Suited to strengthening one’s resolve.”

"It is mostly barley." She chuckled. "It is the only blend they seem to serve in this province. I complained about it to my husband, actually. It is enough to make one miss golden needle.”

She looked away, resting her pointed chin on her palm. "It is enough to make one miss many things,” she added softly.

He set his cup down. "We should close the shōji.” He reached toward the lattice and rice-paper screen.

"Leave it open,” she said without looking.

Ishikawa grimaced, but withdrew his hand. "You know how this would look if someone saw us.”

"How would it look if we were hiding behind a screen? Can two old friends not visit in a public place?” She turned toward him. "We can speak freely here.”

"As you say. Still, your husband may not approve of your coming here unescorted.”

"You know him better than I,” she quietly replied.

Ishikawa leaned back and folded his hands on the table. He said nothing, just watching her. Kaede waited, the pressure in her chest slowly building, until he finally offered her a mute nod.

Words spilled from her mouth. "I do not know how to be a good wife to him,” she confessed.
The shame torched her cheeks. "He avoids me. He barely speaks to me. His face never changes. I am not even sure how he feels about me. I..." She closed her eyes. She should not be telling these things to the Captain of the Imperial Guard, a man who would work closely with her husband, the newly minted Emerald Champion. "I am not even sure who he really is. How am I to ease the tensions between our clans as his wife if I cannot even know what lies in his heart?"

"Give it time," Ishikawa finally said. "It may comfort you to know that few in the Empire know the mind of Akodo Toturi. Chief among his greatest strengths is that he cannot be predicted or easily read. But you are not merely anyone, Maryoku-no-Kaede. You are the daughter of the Void Master himself and his greatest student. You survived three months in the mountains of the Dragon Clan. This should be no contest."

She bit her lip.

"Do you remember when we were children?" Ishikawa continued. "In the summer, my father would visit yours, and I would stay with your family. At night, you would leave all the windows open so that the fireflies would come into the house. You said you wanted there to be stars inside as well as out." He smiled. "One so willful would not surrender hope so easily."

The heat did not leave her face, but Kaede nodded. "Perhaps," she whispered.

Ishikawa reached into his collar and withdrew a rectangle of folded red paper. It was tied with a strip of ribbon and painted with the mon of the Ishikawa. He placed it on the table. "A letter from your brother."

Her eyes widened. She swept it up, inhaling the scent of pine and sandalwood steeped into the paper. The golden pagodas of Kyūden Ishikawa flashed ephemerally in her mind. "You have done me a great kindness," she said.

"It is nothing," he replied. "It does me well to see you smile."

Kaede set the letter aside and refilled his cup. "So," she said, "you were in Phoenix lands recently." She hesitated. "Did you speak with Father, then?"

He nodded.

"Did he...say anything? About...the unusual situation?"

He stopped, teacup hovering just before his lips. Slowly he lowered it. She kept her face like a still pond, pushing her churning stomach down from her surface thoughts.

"He did." Ishikawa kept his voice low. She had to lean in to catch his words. "It is getting worse. Two new stars have appeared in the northern sky. The Asako cannot discern why. Meanwhile, the water kami ignore all but the greatest of offerings. The Elemental Masters debate over what should be done." He paused. "Your father said the tsunami that savaged the Crane coast could be related."

Kaede clenched her jaw. "Did he say how?"

"I am afraid any explanation would be beyond my ability to understand."

She nodded, then drew a deep breath to steady herself. "It is spreading. I have felt it here as well."
The color drained from Ishikawa's face.
"The summer rains have been few and far between," she continued. "The kami of the clouds will not speak to me. And there are other signs more subtle than can be explained."
"Have you said anything? To your husband? To anyone?"
Her gaze rested on her wrists, where the men of the Akodo stared back. "I cannot," she admitted. "If the Lion sense that the Phoenix cannot defend themselves..." She left the rest unsaid.
"Kaede." Ishikawa's expression was grave. "If the imbalance is spreading..." He searched for words, anguish briefly flickering across his features. "You realize what I must do," he finally said. He lowered his head. "Forgive me. I have no choice."

The din of the teahouse prevailed between them. Kaede slowly moved her hand forward along the table, letting it rest just beside Ishikawa’s. He looked up.
"Please," she whispered. "Father entrusted you with this. I ask that you trust him in turn. The masters will bring it before the Seppun in due time. But we must comprehend it first, or the other clans will act in haste. It could make things worse." She met his gaze. "Please, Ishikawa. For me?"

Ishikawa looked into her midnight eyes for a long time. At last he pulled back, putting the cup to his lips and emptying it in a slow inhale. Then, he closed his eyes and nodded.
"Thank you," Kaede said. "I will not forget."
"I will have another cup of that tea," Ishikawa replied.

Ishikawa mounted his horse, checking that his things were in place. As the servant took the horse by the reins, he took one last look back. Through the window of the tea house, he saw that Kaede was still there. She was speaking to someone, smiling, laughing. But not in her eyes.
He turned away, darkening. He whispered, "You are not worthy of her, Toturi-sama."

After reading it for the second time, Kaede set down her brother's letter and looked into the paper lantern in the corner. Soldiers glowed in vivid color on its surface, locked as they were in perpetual battle against the giant moths attracted by the light. "Tadaka," she whispered, "why must you always take the shortest path to your goals?"
"My lady?"
Kaede looked up. Her servant’s curious expression glowed in the lantern light, made even more vibrant by her white makeup. "My brother," Kaede explained. "It seems he has challenged his sensei to a duel."

"With his own sensei? But...the bond between a sensei and student is sacred! Are such things common among the Phoenix?"
"Maki-san," Kaede said flatly, "kindly fetch me some paper and implements. I will return my brother's letter tonight."
The maidservant’s face melted into an expression of horror. "With his own sensei? But...the bond between a sensei and student is sacred! Are such things common among the Phoenix?"

"Maki-san," Kaede said flatly, "kindly fetch me some paper and implements. I will return my brother's letter tonight."
The woman lowered her head, touching it to the floor. "Of course," she murmured, slipping
out of the room.

From beyond the silk screen separating Kaede from the balcony came a distant, mournful wail. She turned toward the screen and listened for a reply, but none came. A lone wolf, she decided. They were common in her mountainous homelands, but not here in the open plains of the Lion, where the farms were well guarded and the roads well traveled, even at night. It would be far from home, then. Calling out in vain search of something familiar.

Kaede rose and stole the lantern from the drunken moths. Leaving the letter open on the table, entrusting its contents to the tangled glyphs of the Phoenix cipher, she took impatient steps away from her room. The hall outside was a perfect square; her lantern’s light just grazed the stair’s banister. Distantly, the night servants gossiped in low tones. They awaited Toturi’s return, whenever that would be. Kaede looked over the banister and saw their shadows in the flickering lights.

The sliding door across the way was painted with a scene depicting a pride of lions disrupting a flock of feeding cranes. Beyond that door was her husband’s study. Kaede's pulse quickened as she considered the shōji’s tapestry and wondered what might lie beyond.

"Never mind, Maki-san,” she called out. A slight smile parted her lips. ”I will get them myself.”

She approached the door with her weight on her toes. The eyes of mural animals followed her as she went.

Am I not the head of my husband’s household? Can I not go wherever I please?

Painted lion eyes watched her palm as it pressed against the door’s lattice, sliding the screen aside.

Toturi’s unlit study was plain and utilitarian. Kaede’s heart skipped at a humanoid silhouette in the corner, but then the lantern light revealed the polished lamellar plates of empty armor, and she relaxed, releasing a self-admonishing breath; It is only the servants who are not allowed in here. Her rationale had no effect on her racing, mischievous heart. Like a child seeking treats, she entered the room, slowly closing the door behind her.

She set the lantern down and approached her husband’s knee-high desk, each step conjuring an accusing squeak from the nightingale floor. Her gaze floated from one object to the next: an empty daishō stand by the door, a sheathed kodachi with the Matsu mon on its pommel, a crisply folded origami crane resting on a squat pedestal, and a three-tiered tana shelf displaying ancient scrolls. The shelf in particular drew her interest. Many of the scrolls were made from bound slats of bamboo, predating the invention of paper.

Atop the shelf, lantern light glinted off a carved stone lion. This was a replica of the guardian lion of the Celestial Cloud Monastery, exactly as it appeared in her memory. Her father had laughed when she’d climbed onto its back as a child. Her outstretched fingers traced the grooves in the polished granite. The familiar style was unmistakable: this was carved by Asako hands. What was this replica doing in the study of the Lion Champion?

The desk was frustratingly clean, nothing like the desks she’d rummaged through as an adolescent. The lone foldout drawer did contain some inksticks and a brush, but no inkstone. Halfway there. She set them on the desk.

Now where does he keep his-?

Her foot struck something mid-step. Gasping in pain, she hit the floor as the squat coffer scattered its contents. Kaede grimaced at the wooden box, once hidden in the shadows but now illuminated by the lantern. "Stupid," she chided herself and pushed up from the floor.

Or maybe not. Among the contents spilled, she spied a smooth inkstone, a water vial, and a collapsed stack of papers. Triumphant, she scooted to the box and collected her discovery.

As she did, the lantern revealed one final object: a thin bound notebook, cast to the floor.

Kaede froze. She’d seen books like this. It was almost certainly a journal, entrusted with the intimate thoughts of its owner. Toturi’s journal.

That’s not fair.

Her letter forgotten, she sat at his desk and laid the book in front of her. Her stomach churned with a sense of invasion. Spilt water will not return to the tray. I have come this far; I may as well have a look. Her hand hovered over the cover. It will probably be ciphered, anyway. Her fingers curled beneath the cover. And if it’s not, shouldn’t a wife know the mind of her husband? With a nod, she flung it aside.

She frowned. The first page was blank but for the number “1” written on the corner. She turned the page. The next two were also blank. Puzzled, she flipped the book to a random place.

There. Something written in High Rokugani. As an ocean to a small stream, the leader to his people, this is the Tao to the world.

From the Tao of Shinsei. On the next page she found two more quotes. She furrowed her brow and flipped through. Some pages contained entire sutras. Many were empty. Is he copying portions of the Tao?

Sighing, Kaede looked up from her fruitless search. The door was open. Watching from the entrance stood Akoclo Toturi.

The journal clattered to the floor from her limp fingers.

Toturi was still dressed in his sandy travel clothes, his swords tucked into his belt. In the shadows cast by the lantern, she could not read his face.

Her mouth went instantly dry as a wave hot guilt rushed over her. She felt like a fox caught with a rice ball in its mouth. She lowered her head. "It is inexcusable," she finally croaked, and awaited his angry outburst.

Instead, he slipped the swords from his obi and set them on their stand by the door. Then he crossed the study to open the sliding door, exposing the balcony. The night air tussled her dark hair. Her husband stood enshrined within a perfect moon. Beyond, the wild grasses of Lion fields were dotted by countless fireflies. For a long time, they remained that way.

Toturi finally spoke. "Have you ever heard the story of Shinsei and Akodo?"
When she did not reply, he continued. "After the Little Teacher conversed with Hantei-no-Kami, and Lord Shiba wrote what would become the Tao, Akodo One-Eye made to leave. Hantei called out to him, 'Brother, you show disrespect to this monk and his wisdom.' Akodo simply replied, 'His way is not my way.'

"Shiba spoke then: 'It is not his way, but the way of the world.' Again, Akodo replied, 'It is not my way.'

"Finally Shinsei spoke, saying 'The Tao cannot be one thing, for then it could not be another.' When he did, Akodo drew his sword and raised it high. 'This is my way,' he said, and left."

Kaede’s reply came in a whisper. "I have never heard it told that way."

Toturi turned. The strong features of his moonlit face were devoid of anger. "Originally Akodo forbade any copy of the Tao to enter Lion lands. When the Emperor heard this, he decreed the opposite: a copy of the Tao should rest in a place of honor within every Lion dojo. And it is so, even to this day." Toturi returned his gaze to the starry fields. "And to this day, not a single copy has ever been opened. No one would dare. Not even the Lion Clan Champion."

Kaede’s eyes widened. She felt as if she held his very heart in her hands. In that moment, the clouds in her mind parted, and for a brief flash, she saw the moon.

She sat at Toturi’s desk. Ritualistically, she prepared ink, then opened his journal to the first page. She dipped the brush and wrote with careful, practiced strokes.

When she reached the third page, she sensed his eyes upon her. He wore open confusion, gaze locked in shock. "You are missing many sections," she remarked. "Fortunately, I have it memorized. I could probably complete it tonight." She met his eyes. "If it pleases you."

Toturi looked away. He was gone within moments, out the door and into the hall. Kaede lowered the brush in tandem with her heart. She was a brittle leaf in his wake, cast helplessly without direction. Her eyes dimmed. Failure was a lone brushstroke on the cold, empty page of her husband’s journal.

"I will never reach him," she concluded, and began to put the implements away.

She stopped. Toturi was at the door again. Now he carried an iron kettle and a small wooden tray. As he set these down, Kaede spotted several small cups and a green brick of compressed leaves. It was bound in twine, a slip of paper identifying the tea. It bore the mon of the Isawa.

She gasped. "Golden needle," she whispered.

"I thought it might be more to your liking." Toturi broke the brick and steeped the leaves. His movements were deliberate, practiced. He placed a cup before her with avoidant eyes, turning it thrice. He poured. Kaede inhaled the scent of pine, citrus, and sun-roasted leaves. Home. They looked up in tandem. In the moonlight, his cheeks were slightly red.
He sat in the lotus pose on the balcony, looking out at the night. She sat beside him. Fireflies hovered around them. In their brief sparks, the swaying of the midnight grass did not seem so different to Kaede than that in the lands of her birth.

"You will let in the fireflies," she warned.

Toturi placed his hand, palm up, on the wooden floor. "You do not mind, I hope?"

"Not at all," she replied, and rested her hand in his.