

Soluna I

An Eye  
Of Silver



Soluna I

An Eye  
Of Silver

Bram Roding

Author: Bram Roding  
Coverdesign: Bram Roding  
ISBN: 9789403768595  
© Bram Roding

# Prologue

## I

A sharp inhale, and then a thorned voice.

'Why am I hosting an Izashi of the Misogi clan? I have not requested your aid.'

The hall of the lord was a wide space without furniture. The ceiling hung low and the inner area was surrounded by aides, sitting on their knees in front of paneled walls.

*Pale and exhausted*, that's what the lord's guest thought when she scanned the aides on her left and right. *It seems like none of them have had a proper night's sleep.*

She sat on her knees, alone in the center of the large empty space, opposite to her host and a young girl next to him.

Lord Onaka Shibuki of Yubari, a village tucked deeply within the northern forests of the Shion prefecture.

'Oh, that certainly isn't required.' said the woman. One half of her face curtained by deep dark hair, black mostly but in the right light it was graced with a hint of blue. The other half of her face catching the light as her hair sat pulled back into a bun. A grin faintly formed whilst an attentive leer met the glower from the lord. 'We come where we are necessary.'

'Then you've come to the wrong place.' said Lord Onaka curtly. He sat with his feet tucked underneath his legs, dressed in wide and bland colored robes embroidered with circular patterns of crimson and golden thread. The man's face had stretched features and cheeks that caved in a little. A man of age, but not truly defined as 'old'. 'You are not necessary.'

'That is not for you to decide, I'm afraid.'

'What is your name, izashi?' asked the lord irritably.

'Misogi Testara.'

'You will address me properly whilst treading on my ground, Misogi Testara.' said Lord Onaka as if he schooled a child. Not uncommon for Testara to come across. They were always eager to showcase their power and influence when she

stood before them. The Lords and Ladies of the smaller villages never liked being talked down to. They weren't used to it. In truth, it also wasn't the proper way to commune with them as decreed by the clan's leadership. *Buuuut*, being part of Clan Misogi came with privileges, privileges Testara was happy to exploit.

'Forgive me, *my lord*,' she replied, putting so much emphasis on the word that it became apparent she didn't regard it with much respect.

'Why have you come, Misogi Testara? If you're looking for *shinnin*, you're on the wrong side of our walls. And in here you will certainly not find any reanimations.'

'Perhaps, perhaps not. I won't know unless I've had the opportunity to investigate.'

'And I will permit this, because?'

The woman held her response briefly. A few seconds passed until she lifted herself from her knees and rose to her feet. She was clad in soft white and deep desaturated blue with a vest tucked into a tight waistband and wide trousers that fell towards just above the ankles. So wide, in fact, that one could mistake her for wearing a long skirt.

Both arms covered in tight dark sleeves with scaled wristbands to protect the underarms and hands. And from the neck to the waistband and all the way to the ankles, across the center of her body, a cloth with the emblem of Clan Misogi and the emblems of the Sannin, the three leaders of the clan.

'Do not take offense, my Lord, you cannot be faulted for your ignorance.' a meaningless statement. The lord was obviously offended as his eyes widened and nostrils flared.

'The izashi of Clan Misogi do not need anyone's permission for permanently removing the dead from this world. I will be allowed to conduct my investigation, with or without your consent. If I find anything, you can be grateful, as I will be relieving the people of Yubari from Yomi influence. Unless, of course, I also discover the presence of a necromancer. Then we'll have to continue this conversation...' Testara smirked. '...under *very* different circumstances,' she aimed a passionate glance towards the lord. But it was ominous and ill foreboding. '...my Lord.'

Lord Onaka's face betrayed his efforts to compose himself and not burst into a fit of anger. In the end the man closed his eyes and let the silence hang for a minute. He inhaled deeply before opening his mouth.

'What caused the Misogi to take an interest in Yubari?'

'We've received word from... a *concerned* citizen,' said Testara with a provoking tone. Lord Onaka narrowed his already narrow eyes. 'seems Yubari has found itself covered in an odd cold mist during most of its nights.'

'A mist?' Lord Onaka repeated. The impatience and ridicule could be read from the lord's face. It was clearly nonsense to him. Also quite common for Lords and Ladies to dismiss the concerns of their citizens. Especially when it came to signs of Yomi presence. Understandable from their point of view. None of them were eager to host izashi of the Misogi clan. 'That is all?'

'That is enough.'

'Well, if you desire to chase after mists, I will not be the one to stop you. But you will not do so from here. Izashi are not welcome in this estate.'

Testara nodded solemnly. An acceptable term. Preferable, in fact. If she were allowed to stay here, it would be confined to small quarters in some dark and damp corner of the estate. Useless in terms of getting to know the village and more importantly; its people.

'Before I leave,' Testara continued, stopping Lord Onaka from an attempt to conclude this meeting. 'I must ask if there have been notable deaths, either here or in the village?'

Onaka didn't reply immediately. He seemed to first measure Testara and the intent the question was hiding. For Testara it was a source of more information. He should have no trouble answering the question swift and directly.

'No. None.'

Curt and callous, just like most of this conversation. But it was not the lord who provided Testara with insight this time. She noticed a shift in the young girl next to him. This whole time she sat with her head bowed, chin on her chest whilst the lord carried the conversation. But as soon as her Lord Onaka answered Testara's question, she dared to cock her head slightly towards him. Only a tiny bit, Testara barely registered it.

Past the makeup that painted the girl's skin white and the elegantly woven buns resting on the back of her head, Testara was sure she couldn't be older than twelve.

Marriage under seventeen was illegal in the Shion Empire. And arranged marriages were a dying custom.

*A daughter then,* thought Testara. She narrowed her eyes, letting them wander to the empty space on the lord's other flank. *...and no wife.*



# Prologue

## II

Testara found herself at an inn, relieving herself of her cloak and the knapsack she carried on her shoulder. Being able to pay the extra dime, she had ensured herself a private washing room. That saved her a trip to a bathhouse and all the glances and glowers both on the streets and within. There were already enough of those, as she made her way here from the estate.

Testara undid herself of her clothes and tossed them across the floormats in the room. She pushed the sliding door open upon which the steam from the bath escaped. Before she could submerge herself in that, however, it was custom to first clean oneself with water from a small tub close to the bath. And so Testara took a seat on a small stool.

She always wondered whether people stared at her for the scars on her face or because they recognized the emblems of the clan. One scar ran along the lower left side of her jaw and the other cut diagonally from her forehead through her right brow and onto her cheek. Either way, it always made people frown, wince and pull their lips. In turn, Testara would staunchly ignore them for she knew why they looked at her that way. Her presence, the presence of an Izashi, predicted trouble.

There was always trouble outside the walls and palisades of any village. Shinnin roamed the lands, making the forests, plains and mountains far more dangerous than any wild animal could. For an Izashi barely an effort, for any unarmed citizen; certain death.

When an Izashi of the Misogi clan was found inside a village, it meant trouble for the people within. Thus, more often than not, the izashi who were sent to deal with the threat, found themselves met with animosity instead of the otherworldly monsters they were sent to deal with.

It left Testara feeling indifferent and callous about most people she met. Today was no exception.

She submerged herself into the hot water of the tub, thinking back on her meeting with the Lord of Yubari. The lack of a wife but the presence of a daughter intrigued her. At the same time she also found herself bored as this was the umpteenth lord who “welcomed” her this way.

There was once a time where Clan Misogi commanded respect and admiration. Where the citizenry would have a glistening in their eyes when they saw the emblems donned on an Izashi's attire. But since the Skybreak, everything had changed.

Testara tried to lay down her head and close her eyes while relaxing her entire body. To undo the restless thoughts and erratic images that flashed past her retina continuously, the Izashi immersed herself with different senses. She listened to the waters gentle ripple while she let her fingers slide across her skin underwater. From sensitive places around her breasts and upon, down to her navel and in between her legs. A brief respite after the long trek across the countryside of the empire. Testara didn't mind the walks, but they were exhausting nonetheless.

Yet, every attempt to fully focus on the pleasurable sensations were thwarted by echoes of familiar voices in the back of her mind. They disrupted thoughts and tossed them back into chaos. Anytime the storm was about to die down, a sudden gust threw it all up again. It was out of her control.

Testara tried to picture anything that would further stimulate her. Sharing the act with someone usually did the trick, or imagining that someone else's fingers were doing the job appealed also. But as soon as a picture formed, it distorted. It reshaped into something more obscene, disturbing and violent. She swiftly opened her eyes to force herself back into reality and then tried again. But after the third time, she jerked her hand out and rushed upright, splashing the hot water out of the tub.

‘Fuck.’

Dried and donned in a thin yukata, loosely tied so as to make sure it had a deep neckline, Testara left the room to enter the tavern below. She placed herself at the bar and avoided obscuring herself into a dark corner of some of the empty booths in the back. She wanted to be seen. Unfortunately, that also meant sitting closely to the loudest patrons in the booths behind her.

She was given a cup of *ochaké*, a relatively new acholic substance that was easy to produce. All one needed was anything to make tea out of and a bit of cider. Quite a downgrade from wine or beer, but with the fields flooded by shinnin and villages closed off by walls, there wasn't much of a choice. And yet, if you were rich enough, there were ways.

*Cheers to that*, thought Testara cynically as she sipped the ochaké. The patrons behind her made it difficult for her to think. Testara cocked her head up and eyed the bartender. Stoic looking fellow with a stubble and something that pretended to be a goatee.

Their glances met upon which Testara jerked her head backwards. 'Locals?'

'*Hai* (yes).' said the man dispassionately with a deep rusted voice.

'They always this loud?'

'*Hai*.'

'Never had any complaints? Say, from the neighbors?'

The bartender chuckled and poured Testara another shot. '*Karera wa rinjin desu* (They are the neighbors).'

*Figures.*

Testara took the drink in hand and wheeled around on the stool. She casually tilted back and spread her elbows onto the bar's surface while studying the frolicking of the four men in the booth. They rose and sat, shouting, laughing, wavering their cups around as if they were empty---which they eventually were after the wavering.

They stopped when one spotted Testara staring and alerted his fellow patrons.

'*Oi! Nani miten da yo?* (What are you looking at?)'

Testara shaped a smirk. Both to poke further at the drunkards and because she was genuinely amused. All the major towns had fully adapted to the common tongue of the empire. Even most smaller villages had done so. Yet it were always these obscure places that also knew the language but still clung to the old words like a bunch of staunch conservative old farts.

*Alright then. Have it your way.*

'*Nandemonai* (nothing).'

One of them chuckled, but in a repulsive and most unattractive way. 'She likes one of us, I bet.'

'I wasn't aware Madame Ginma let her women wander outside her house!' sneered another, creating a wave of laughter among the four.

'*Ie, ie* (no, no), she's no whore. Not a real one. No whore has scars like that. No...' the man's voice spilled intrigue with a flavor of animosity. 'This one's that izashi. The one Wuyen spoke of earlier.' Testara enlarged her smirk but kept her tongue. 'Where's your friend, izashi? Don't you people travel in pairs?'

Testara was sincerely surprised by the man's knowledge.

'Most do. I don't.'

This one was obviously sharper than the others. Whether that was due to the booze or not had yet to be determined. And, not unimportant, he was the least unattractive of the four.

'What are you doing in our village?'

Testara shrugged. 'Not sure yet. Looking into some things. Maybe one of you fellas can help me. Seen anything weird lately? Heard whispers? Maybe people have disappeared... you know, that kind of stuff.'

The more handsome of the four raised his brows and turned to his friends. 'Well boys, answer the kind lady's question. Has anyone seen anyone disappear?'

One of them nodded, first carefully and then more intensely as his smile curved wide.

'Your wife. Into my bedroom!'

And the table bellowed their laughter throughout the tavern.

Testara shook her head as she discreetly rolled her eyes. It wasn't so much the comment. She could actually appreciate stupid humor like that, but it was the predictability of it. Men like these were so transparent.

She lifted her leg and then crossed one over the other. The fabric of her yukata slipped off, revealing the skin all the way to her thighs. Testara made sure to drink from her cup with a bit more grace than she'd usually have. She saw the subtle-but-not-subtle leers tracing the length of her legs.

'Well,' Testara began as she put the empty cup on the bar. 'you bore me. Don't get too drunk now.'

She slipped from the stool and landed graciously on the floor. Testara shifted into such a position that much of her

cleavage could be seen. Then she shot a seductive glance towards all four of them and strode away, swaying her hips in the most feminine manner possible.

Back in her room, Testara stood by the window, glancing outside as she gently sucked on a thin pipe from which a puff of smoke came out the other end. It gave the room a sweet but spiced scent. A pleasant smell, and a pleasant effect on the mind.

A knock on her door.

Testara smirked.

*So predictable.*

She crossed the room and pushed the sliding door open. The more attractive of the bunch from below caught her glance. He was slightly taller than Testara.

'Come to talk more shit?'

'Not exactly.'

Of course not. But that much was already clear. Testara didn't waste any more words on it and guided the man inside. After the sliding door closed, the two slowly waltzed backwards while Testara undid the wraps around her waist. Eventually she bumped into the opposite wall of the room, allowing the man to approach her so close that she could feel his breath. He slipped the yukata from her shoulders. One hand went behind Testara's head while the other ran over her body. He was quite proactive about it, but only because she let him.

Soon enough the two of them found themselves on the futon, feeling the warmth of each other's skin all over their bodies.

It came to her when her eyes wandered the ceiling as he laid on top, when she straddled him, clutching the cloth of the futon beneath her while the rough hands pulled at her hips. Testara finally got what she failed to achieve before. A peace within her mind, brought forth by her senses running wild, along with the hints of alcohol and herbs that already clouded her mind. No more voices and no more horrid images. The storm in her mind became a quiet sea.

It lasted shortly. But long enough to give her a satisfying amount of relief. Testara lay on her side while her head rested in the palm of her hand. She traced the curls of the man's chest hair as he laid on his back, enjoying the pipe Testara leant him.

'I didn't expect that from an Izashi.' His voice was surprisingly gentle, a far cry than what it was below in the tavern.

'Not the zealous fundamentalist you were expecting?' Testara cracked a smirk.

'Don't tell me all of you are actually this forthcoming?'

Testara scoffed aloud. 'Fuck, no.' She cocked her head. 'Like I said, I'm not quite like the others.'

'Right. No partner.' The man took another inhale from the pipe. 'So, what eye? Gold or silver?'

'Silver. Do you like your lord or do you hate him?' The man furrowed his brows at the question. 'I don't tell anything for free.' Testara added. He chuckled at the notion, seemingly accepting those terms.

'Not too fond of him. Especially not since his wife died.' *Oh?* Testara thought. 'So, silver. Doesn't that technically make you a tsukizashi?'

'We only use those distinctions in the clan.' answered Testara immediately. 'When did the wife die?'

'About a month or two ago. Can you activate the eye at will?'

'Yes. And no, I won't. How has Lord Onaka changed?'

'Is it true that shinnin get sealed into your eye after you kill them? Oh, and... he's become withdrawn. Quite callous towards the townsfolk. He doesn't seem to really care what happens here anymore.'

'You can't kill what's already dead, but yes. Does the lord leave the estate much? And what of his household? Do you see them? Do they talk to the villagers?'

The man smirked and carelessly reached for Testara's waist and letting his hand brush over her skin towards her thighs. 'That's four questions.'

Testara on her turn let her hand free as well. While holding a tight grip on the man's glance with indifferent eyes, she reached for his crotch and cradled the whole deal in her hand.

'Answer them and we'll have another go.'

The man snorted. A seemingly pretentious callous response, seeing how Testara felt in her hand that his blood rushed down below. 'We barely see him. If he needs anything he summons us

to him. Ever since his wife died, no one's left the compound but his aides to come pick up supplies.'

'His daughter doesn't leave either?'

'No. Neither of them do.'

*Neither of them?* Testara thought.

# Prologue

## III

The mist was exactly as was described in the information given to the clan. Cold, thick and it made one feel weird. In this case “weird” was unsettling. A presence that weighed on the heart and dampened one’s mood. As the mist drained the color from the surroundings, so too did it seem to do with one’s feelings.

*Mistweaver. No, not that. A Mistweaver would’ve claimed a victim by now. There would be more signs.*

Testara was tangled in her thoughts while she traversed the mists and strode back up the hill towards the estate. She put the information into order and already tried to conclude as to what she was dealing with. It obviously weren’t stray shinnin that had managed to crawl over the walls. This was more sinister, more complex. And with this mist, combined with a somewhat secretive lord, Testara’s mind went towards a *daishinnin*. Much rarer and much, much more dangerous. Even for izashi from the clan, daishinnin were the true test of their abilities. The architects of nearly every izashi grave.

As such, they were thoroughly studied, documented and categorized. Each izashi was intimately familiar with signs to recognize each specific daishinnin and trained to deal with them accordingly. But mistakes were easily made. Testara’s scar through her brow was a testament to that.

It wasn’t until Testara nearly walked into the face of the gate that she realized she had already come upon the estate’s grounds. The mist appeared to have grown thicker. And these closed gates, with no guards outside, didn’t send off a particularly welcoming vibe. Testara didn’t even bother knocking or shouting. It would only announce her presence and summon resistance.

Instead she decided to use the mist as her ally and strode along the perimeter of the compound, in search of a tree that



stood just a tad too close to the wall. Not too surprisingly, there were plenty to choose from. The izashi climbed up and used the branches to make her way over the gate and graciously land on the gravel within the garden.

*Oops*, Testara saw how she had disrupted the neatly raked circular patterns. But she shrugged it off and covertly made her way towards the main building. She opened the sliding doors without making a sound and slithered through the gallery on her toes. It was the middle of the night, even the aides were likely to be abed.

Testara knew exactly where she wanted to go. It wasn't the first time she had ventured through a lord's estate and for some reason these were all laid out similarly, save for a few details here and there.

In the far corner, furthest from the main hall, Testara slipped into one of the rooms. Just like any room, it was barely graced with furniture. A low small desk, a closet filled with scrolls and empty sheets and a dresser. Beyond, in the adjacent room, a person slept on the futon in the very center. Testara approached and crouched next to them.

The person swiftly turned and thrust the end of a knife at her. Testara prevented the tip from piercing her face and caught the wrist.

'Careful, princess.' The young girl winced and grunted while Testara held onto her tightly. 'I mean you no harm. I just came to talk.' She let go upon which the girl dropped the knife. Not because she wanted to. Her lungs burst and sent her into a coughing fit. Testara approached further and rubbed her hand over her back. Then, as the girl came upright, the izashi placed her hand on the girl's head.

'No wonder you've got so many layers on you. Hold on.'

The girl got no chance to say a word. Testara went towards the end of the room. She first lit a candle and then used the basin filled with fresh water to drench a cloth soaking wet. She brought it back to the girl and helped her hold it against her head.

'What's your name?' Testara asked.

'Hanari.'

'How does that feel, Hanari? I'm Testara, by the way.'

'I know who you are.' Hanari gently took the cloth into her own hands and sat upright while Testara slowly recoiled and scooted backwards.

Without all the excessive makeup and the hair simply loose and straight, Hanari had the natural appearance of a young teenager. Even the flushed cheeks and the glistening of sweat added to the authenticity of it all. She was probably sick earlier today, yet still had to attend her father's formal meetings.

'Does the daughter of a lord always carry a knife to bed?' Testara asked with a faint smile.

'Father wants me to protect myself, no matter how many guards there may be to defend us.'

'I imagine your father wants a lot from you.'

There was a ruminating tone in Testara's voice. She saw the visage of her own father painted on the girl's robes, stern and callous.

'Lately, yes.'

'Since your mother died?'

Testara caught Hanari's mournful look. She gave her a cup filled with water which Hanari gently tilted backwards.

'Since my sister's gone.'

*Interesting.*

'I see.' said Testara with a concluding tone. 'Her duties now befall onto you, is that it?' Hanari nodded in response. Then she let her head hang, looking down into the water of the cup with melancholic eyes.

Testara's thoughts went out to her family. Her father with a striking resemblance to Lord Onaka. And her brother. Both once renowned members of the clan, both long since passed. Yet the shadow of their achievements was long and veiled Testara to this day.

'Will you hurt my father?'

Testara was jerked back into reality by the question. For but a second she sat with widened eyes, but very quickly understood why she would ask such a thing. No doubt all this girl ever heard of the clan were less than savory things.

But the Testara wasn't about to insult her intelligence.

'That depends. If he's involved himself with necromancers... or, Izanagi forbid, made an attempt at it himself...' Testara shrugged.

‘He wouldn’t do that!’ said Hanari hurriedly. ‘He’s stern and cold at times, but he’s not evil.’

‘Yet also quite uncooperative.’ Testara added. ‘What went through your mind when your father answered “no” after I asked him about any notable deaths?’ The few seconds in which Hanari was allowed to answer lasted too long for Testara. ‘You thought of your mother, right?’

Hanari looked rueful. She clearly hesitated to answer Testara’s question. Her expressions betrayed the battle going on in her head. The kindness Testara displayed invited kindness in return. It was obviously rude for a twelve-year-old to dismiss an adult outright, but the girl was loyal to her father as well. Still, letting the silence hang about was difficult for her.

‘He’s not been himself since her death. He barely leaves his chamber at all. Everything has to be brought to him.’

‘And you? Do you go into this chamber too?’

‘No. Never. I’m not allowed.’

‘What about the aides?’

‘No. Especially not them. They’ll leave the food and drinks outside the door for him. Before mother died he was never like that. The only one to ever go in there after mother’s death was my sister.’

Testara listened with great interest. She purposefully kept her tongue in control so as to let the girl tell her as much as possible. No matter the age, people always had this insistent urge on fighting back against pure silence. Even if that meant spilling dark secrets.

‘When did she disappear?’

‘About twelve days ago.’

*The letter was received four days ago, thought Testara. It only mentioned the mist and its unordinary nature. Assuming it took a few days for the people here to notice the strangeness, then the mists came in soon after the sister’s disappearance.*

Testara rose and walked towards the opposite end of the room. She pushed the sliding door open and found herself looking upon the garden at the back of the estate.

‘What will you do?’

‘Take a walk around the compound. I need to confirm something.’ The izashi focused her mind for but a moment. A rush emerged from her stomach, different from adrenaline or

anything the body could produce on its own. It rushed through her back to her head and wrapped itself around her right eye.

She tilted back towards Hanari and caught her glance. Her eyes, brightened in the warm light of the candle, was mixed with a silver glow. Her mouth fell open, attempting to say anything, but the sight evidently mesmerized the girl.

Testara's right eye was enveloped in bright silver.  
'I'll return soon.'

She shut the door behind her and strode into the garden. Half her world looked normal. Dark and faintly lit by the crescent moon in the sky. The other half appeared to be entirely inverted. Silver and white mixed with the contours of the walls, the compound and the trees clearly visible. Testara's path was clear as daylight while she trotted the perimeters of the grounds. She noticed a haze of purplish spots mixed in with the mist. The concentration grew thicker the more she approached the back end of the compound. It was clear that the concentration was even greater beyond the wall. Again Testara sought a way to climb it. This time it proved more difficult to get out, seeing as there were no large trees on the grounds. But the wall wasn't all made of stone. Near the gates it became wood with weaved bamboo making most of the wall.

Testara swung her arm across and a faint crescent silver shape jetted from her palm. It burst through the bamboo and created a tear through which the izashi squeezed herself.

She then scouted the fields beyond the compound. An open plain surrounded by the edges of the forests that were yet within the borders of the village. It should be safe here, yet it remained untouched by human hands. Except for what looked like an abandoned well. Moss and ivy conquered the man-made structure just like the path was covered in weeds and grass.

The concentration of the haze was highest here. Testara could feel it. She had trouble to relax. In the back of her head she could hear the whispers that kept her up at night while a heavy load weighed her heart down so bad, she wanted to just lie down and fall asleep.

It was enough to make her turn around and return to the compound. She had her conclusions ready. But there was one piece of this puzzle missing.

Returning through the tear and retreading the path back to Hanari's room, Testara found herself confronted by the household guard standing behind the sliding door as soon as she opened it. They jerked their *yari* at her. Sharp blades on the end of a long pole, preventing Testara from taking a step into the room and leaving her on the veranda. Beyond the guard stood Lord Onaka and Hanari, shielded by the aides.

'You have crossed a line, *izashi*. You've broken the sanctity of my home!' barked the lord. He approached, silently beckoning his guard to step aside. Testara reflected the glower she was given but remained silent. 'You not only decided to trespass, but also decided to harass my daughter.'

*Harass?* thought Testara with a long internal sigh.

'You have left me no choice but to confine you until I have sent word to your clan's leadership about your misconduct.'

Testara couldn't hold back the cynical chuckle.

'You find that amusing?'

'Quite, yes. You hate having one *izashi* here. What do you think will happen if you start complaining about me? They might pull me back, sure. But another will just take my place. A pair, this time. You should actually be lucky I conduct my duties alone. And what's to say they will just send one pair? If I get pulled back to Kin-Gin Castle, I will make sure I inform my clansmen of the phenomena at play here. I will tell them all about this depressing fucking mist lurking about. The mist that robs you of your sleep and in turn makes you ill.' Testara eyed Hanari. 'The mist that feels so heavy, it makes one sink in despair and see only darkness. The mist--.'

*'Damare!* (Silence!). You've made your point.'

The lord obviously considered his options. His brows furrowed while his cheeks twitched from the clenching jaws behind the skin. 'What do you intend to do?'

'My job.' said Testara adamantly. She ignited her silver eye once more. It made the guards nervous and made the lord swallow the lump of saliva building in his throat. 'And for that, I need your daughter.'

'Out of the question! You're not taking her anywhere.'

'You're free to tag along.' Testara's tone was suspiciously carefree. 'In fact, I encourage it. Saves me explaining what is best left to be witnessed by one's own eyes.'

Hanari wrestled herself free from the aides and strode with steadfast steps to her father at the edge of the veranda, despite coughing through her breaths. 'I want to help! I will help.'

Lord Onaka still wasn't convinced. The sourness of his daughter's assertiveness dripped from his façade. He looked down at the girl but Hanari was unwavering.

For a moment, Testara saw her twelve-year-old self reflected back at her.

'What exactly are you planning, izashi?'

'Your village is plagued by a daishinnin. Or rather, your household is.' Despite Testara's casual tone, a clear shiver was sent through the guard and the aides. They all knew what that meant. 'A *Kyokotsu*, I believe. I need your daughter to serve as bait.'

Lord Onaka's nostrils flared. 'You-.'

'No harm will come to her!' Testara swiftly raised her voice and prevented the lord from barking his objections. '...you have my word.'

Hanari pulled at her father's robes and once again displayed tenacity in her glance. 'Father, please. Let me do this.'

Lord Onaka closed his eyes momentarily. He battled his frustrations again but ended up deflating in a long lasting sigh. He tilted his head back towards the two guards behind him.

'*Kochira!* (Follow me)'

Both jetted into a bow. '*Hai, dono.* (Yes, my lord).'

# Prologue

## IV

They came onto the field. Testara turned around and stopped the company in their tracks. 'I suggest you three stay here. You will only get in the way. Hanari, I need you with me.'

'*Hai*,' said Hanari politely and huddled past her father.

No protest this time. Lord Onaka crossed his arms and plastered his face into a strong disapproving glare.

Away from those strict ears and closer to the old well, Testara met Hanari's glance with a cheeky smirk. 'You've got guts, kid. I like that.'

'W-What is a *Kyokotsu*, exactly?' Hanari asked, stammering and shivering. Perhaps she presented herself more courageous than she actually was. Again it reminded Testara of herself. Except she was eleven, just having become part of the clan and facing her first shinnin. A passionate rage was there to help keep her steady, but also crippled by the timidness and fright of a little girl.

'A spirit of some kind. Unseen unless drawn out.'

'You can't see it? Even with that eye?'

'No. *Kyokotsu* live in a limbo in between Yomi and this world. It needs a hook to be drawn fully to either realm.'

Hanari swallowed. She stopped her stride just before they reached the well and made Testara tilt her body towards her.

'I'm the hook,' she concluded.

'Yes.' Testara nodded. Hanari continued her steps and joined Testara near the wood and stone overgrown with moss and ivy.

'Why?'

Testara beckoned the girl to stay where she was. The *izashi* then reached around her back and pulled a dagger from the sheath that was bound on the backside of her waist. Granite colored, straight edge and a strong hilt wrapped in cloth, Testara crouched and began carving patterns into the grass.

'As I said, the *Kyokotsu* is a daishinnin. And daishinnin are a mixture of Yomi essence and deceased souls from our world. Daishinnin originate because the soul of a deceased person isn't properly guided into the Paths Of Succeeding Lives, the path to Soluna. Or they originate when a soul *is* guided to the Paths, but then pulled back. However, the Paths go one way. And to take the Paths in the opposite direction is to corrupt it, allowing Yomi essence to seep in. Souls that died through natural circumstances will most certainly become *shinnin*. But souls that have suffered before their death----well those become *daishinnin*. The more fucked up the suffering, the more powerful the daishinnin.'

'T-They're people?'

Testara nearly finished the carving. She pondered the girl's question and found that it summoned a specific type of wrath in her heart. It made sense for her mind to go there, but Testara felt it was wrong to make that connection. She swallowed most of the disagreement, though. 'Not anymore.' she said dispassionately.

The izashi came upright with a grunt and inspected the patterns she had just created. Drawn in the shape of a circle, calligraphic characters donned the small bit of field around the well. Testara swept the beginnings of sweat from her brow and approached Hanari.

'Whatever happens next, I need you to do exactly as I tell you to, is that clear?'

'S-Sure. But you still haven't said why I'm the hook.'

'I need to be certain, Hanari. I need you to understand what I'm asking of you. *Anything*.' Testara emphasized. 'No matter what. You do as I say.'

Hanari swallowed and nodded firmly. Testara then wheeled around and started walking away from her. 'You'll see why you're the hook soon enough. Stay by the well.'

Several meters away, obscured by the thick fog, Testara came to a stop, turned around and then rested on her knees. She watched both the well and Hanari with eagle-sharp eyes.

The izashi felt the impatience radiating from the lord as he watched from afar. She could barely see him through the mist, which seemed to grow thicker by the second. A enigmatic silence hung about. The absence of the wind and the absence of



owls and crickets gave the entire field a heavy atmosphere. Yet, Testara's mind seemed to ease instead of sharpen. It was known to happen just before a confrontation with a daishinnin.

Then there was a violent screech. A sound that pierced the ears and tore at the bones inside one's head and neck. Testara's eyes shone bright silver as she looked ahead and witnessed the black figure take shape. The characters drawn on the ground shone brightly and seemed to hold the shape in its place. It was like smoke, smoke that moved in all directions, trying to squirm its way out of the bindings.

Testara rose and took the dagger firmly in her hand. A rush went from her silver eye to her hand and flowed onto the granite colored steel. A veil emerged from the tip and then jetted straight out, lengthening the blade with a silver, turning the dagger into a sword.

The charge began. Testara rushed forward. She sprinted and leapt the last few meters towards the whirling shadow bound in a mysterious glow.

It pulsed, screamed and fought the hold violently. Testara felt the sensation rise from within and spread across her body.

Then the hold broke.

The shimmer shaped into a ghastly feminine creature with dried skin, bared teeth and empty sockets for eyes. Its entire body was covered in a thick layer of black cloth, swirling around in the foggy air.

It pounced onto Testara and swept its arm across. She was thrown across the field as if she weighed nothing.

The izashi spat as she rose to her knees.

'Motherfucker,' she growled.

Guided by the sound of a piercing demonic screech, the daishinnin charged again, darting over the grass with the speed of a hawk diving at its prey. Testara slammed her hands together. Her right eye brightened and emitted a flash of silver. Then her fingers interlocked tightly.

The characters surrounding the well pulsed.

Jets of silver light launched towards the daishinnin.

They pierced the creature like arrows, staggering it in its charge. Testara swept the glowing sword across in a horizontal line. A wide crescent shape fired from the blade and cut through the monster.

It cried.

It wailed.

Then a more darker sound emerged. A mixture of a growl and a hiss, sounding distorted.

It was furious.

It pulled, jerked and yanked while the wound Testara inflicted healed, looking as if the smoke threaded itself together again.

It continued its charge.

There were but seconds.

Testara needed to get past. Luring the daishinnin back into the trap would be the only opportunity she'd get. But the monster was also directly in her path. Testara sent more of her energy towards her right eye, intending on making a move.

Or so she hoped.

The daishinnin changed shape. The black swirling cloth suddenly whirled into one point and a sharp tendril shot towards Testara.

It happened in a tenth of a second.

Blood sprayed the blades of grass as Testara's arm hung weakly beside her body. The sudden warmth and wetness sunk into her coat and she felt the liquid run down her arm all the way to her fingertips.

'Fuck!' she grunted. But instead of backing down, Testara darkened her glower and the glow of her eye intensified.

The daishinnin jettisoned another tendril. But this time it penetrated a fading image of the izashi.

Lord Onaka and his guards approached, eager to join the battle but also hesitant when laying eyes upon the daishinnin.

'Stay the fuck away!' shouted Testara from afar. She stood behind the well, having positioned Hanari in between herself and the daishinnin. Charging Testara would mean charging Hanari first.

'Stay where you are, Hanari!' yelled Testara. The girl trembled with fear as he saw the creature curl towards her. It reshaped into the womanly figure and let its voice ripple across the field. Its screams and cries made the air tremble.

'Trust me!' Testara added.

The daishinnin charged.

Hanari faltered. She shrieked and ran away from the well.

'Fuck!' Testara groaned and swiftly sprinted around the well in an attempt to reach Hanari first. Her motions were hampered by her escape from the daishinnin's attack earlier. Her eye stung and pestered her with a sharp pain in her head.

Testara suffered through it.

In fact, she used the ability again.

A fading shape was left and Testara appeared next to Hanari in a thousandth of a second. Her silver eye bled while she pulled the girl away and dove into the grass with her.

She curled on top of the girl in an effort to protect her

It never came.

Testara rolled into the grass onto her back. Her glance was washed with bewilderment as she saw the daishinnin peacefully hovering above the well. It slowly descended, reaching out to the rubble. Its cries had diminished and the demonic growls had ceased. There was only whimpering. It appeared to weep while searching for something beyond the cover of ivy and moss.

'*Souyu koto da* (So that's how it is)', Testara whispered.

Then her demeanor changed. From bewilderment to enlightenment to decisiveness; Testara was given an opportunity she would not miss.

The izashi charged and kept her steps as silent as she could. Coming upon the daishinnin, she felt both the determination to see this through and the dread of the creature suddenly repelling the attack.

Testara raised the silver sword and thrust it straight into the gas-like body of the monster. The light spread like a fire and made the creature twitch, turn an flail. Soon it gave in. The black shape broke down into hundreds of small flakes that slowly whirled into a spiraling path towards Testara's silver eye. As the izashi absorbed the dark essence, she heard a soft voice say only one thing.

'My... daughter... Anina.'

Testara dropped into the grass with labored breaths. Both her sword and her eye lost their silver glow. An immediate pressure built up behind her eye, both from the extensive use of its power and the newly added guest. It made it difficult to focus. Testara barely registered that Hanari had come up to her and tried to help her back up. Her voice was muffled somehow, all while the whispers in the back of Testara's head conquered

her ears. She had to focus. She had to put effort into regaining that focus. Testara grunted and groaned while Hanari tried to get her to stand, but she just collapsed and fell onto her back.

Eventually she recovered. Testara pulled herself back into the present moment. She felt the sharp pain in her shoulder and swiftly made a makeshift bandage from a piece of her long trousers.

'W-Was that it? Did you kill it?'

Testara chuckled bitterly, clenching her teeth from the pain while she rose to her feet.

'You can't kill what's already dead.'

She dragged her feet towards the well while Lord Onaka and his guard approached.

'Father!' Hanari began a dart towards him, but Testara redirected herself and blocked her path. It earned her a glance of wroth from the lord as well as a sudden alertness from the guard. They clenched their yari and slowly tilted them down.

'You're not going anywhere near her.' said Testara calmly.

'What?!'

'Stay there.' she added commandingly. 'It's about time we find out the truth.'

Lord Onaka stepped forward, 'You will not o--.' and was immediately met with the sharp end of Testara's glowing sword. Despite the aching, despite the exhaustion. Testara's eye shone brightly again and the blade illuminated the field once more.

'Back. Off.'

She saw the lord hesitating. He had his guards next to him, weapons drawn and ready to strike, but Testara knew. Testara knew the lord was aware a fight between them spelled only more trouble.

He motioned them to stand down and thus they lowered the oblong weapons. Testara pulled the sharp glance away from them and approached the well. She cut away the ivy and revealed the opening. Hurting still, Testara leaned over the edge as best she could and looked down. The pain in her shoulder sharpened while her eye burned hotter with every second.

But she needed to see. And see, she did.

The shape of the corpse at the bottom was more than apparent. As well as the haze of purple encircling it like flies around rotting flesh.

Testara came upright. She wheeled around and faced the lord again. She caught his stare and didn't intend to let it go.

'W-What did you see?' Hanari dared to break the silence.

'What was your sister's name, Hanari?' Testara asked while glowering towards her father.

The girl showed hesitation. She looked at her father briefly and then back at Testara. 'Anina. Why?'

'Hanari, come here.' her father ordered.

'Stay, Hanari.' said Testara immediately. 'Trust me.'

'You've overstepped your bounds, izashi. You will leave these grounds at once or I will have you struck down by my guard, damned the consequences.'

Testara took that as a challenge. She suffered the pain of continuing the use of her power while she slowly walked towards the lord's position. His guard readied their weapons again and stepped in between them. Testara eyed both carefully, ensuring their glances would meet.

'Surely you'd want to know who you're truly protecting. Who you're truly serving.'

'Silence!' barked Lord Onaka.

Testara cocked her head sideways and caught Hanari's bewilderment. 'That thing. The daishinnin. That was your mother.'

Hanari gasped and recoiled.

Past the plates that made up their curved helmets, Testara noticed the eyes of the guards narrowing.

'Returned to this world through the efforts of a necromancer, a very poor one at that.' The izashi let her eyes be captured by the strong leer from the lord. 'I presume you quite easily gathered the hubris that made you think you could pull this off.' Testara said with a dispassionate tone. 'You are all so predictable. All so arrogant. And all... so... fucking... selfish.'

'Enough! Seize her!'

But nothing happened.

'*Nani shiteru no!?* (What are you doing?!)'

The guards stepped aside, pulled their weapons upright and kneeled, bowing their heads deeply.

'*Yurushite kudasai* (Forgive us).'

Testara curved a faint smirk. In any other context it would seem odd for the guard of a household to falter this quickly. But

the authority of the clan was truly something unique within the empire. If it turned out to be true that Lord Onaka was a necromancer and the guard had decided to fight Testara on his behalf, they would be punished just as strongly. No matter the coin or the amount of loyalty, most guards did not take that risk.

Testara slowly walked past the guards, ever enclosing on the lord. 'It's always the same fucking story. You're too weak to deal with the loss of your wife so you decide to bring her back, inviting in more Yomi essence to be unleashed into this world.' Testara's voice carried burning wrath. 'You're lucky it was a *Kyokotsu* and not something far more aggressive. Although, given enough time, its presence would've driven your household mad soon. All because you can't cope with your fucking grief.' Testara had come up so close, Lord Onaka could see the pores on her skin.

'Coward.'

He twitched and struck.

Or tried to.

Testara saw the attack coming a minute earlier and handled the lord with ease. She twisted his arm around his back and kicked the back of his knees in, making him fall onto the ground.

'Disgusting weasels like you is why I'm still needed. You make me sick.' Testara held him down while kneeling and pressing the bulk of her knee onto his cheek. The lord grunted and groaned while trying to wrestle free from the hold.

'You're hurting him!' Hanari squealed.

'Good!' Testara barked. 'He hurt your sister, Hanari. It is *her* corpse lying in the depth of that well!'

'W-What?' the girl shuddered.

'Your own daughter. You sick fucking fuck!' Once more, Testara pressed his face into the dirt beneath the grass. Then she let off and pulled him up by his robes. 'Get up!'

She shoved him ahead of her, greatening the distance between Lord Onaka and everyone else.

'F-Father? Is it true?' Hanari asked with staggered breaths. Tears sat in the corners of her eyes and it was clear she barely dared to ask the question at all.

Onaka hung his head and deflated. 'I couldn't do it, Hana-chan. I couldn't live without her.' Hanari gasped and recoiled, swiftly reaching for her mouth with her hands. The tears flowed.

'And Anina?' Testara asked with contempt.

'It was her resemblance. It was uncanny. I-I figured that would help with the ritual. It would help bring my wife back in good health!' Lord Onaka raised his head, revealing a face washed with sorrow. He made himself small while taking a step towards his daughter. 'You have to forgive me, Hana-chan. You don't know wha-.'

Hanari shrieked. Her eyes widened and the tears abruptly stopped as her father's head rolled into the grass. His body collapsed like a sack of rice, showering the blades of grass with deep red blood.

Testara finished the motion of the swing and then calmly breathed as she sheathed the dagger into the small holster on her back.

'You two,' she barked towards the guards. They barely gathered the courage to tilt their heads. 'That girl is your master now. Protect her, serve her. Help her give this village the leader it deserves.'

# 第一章

## Chapter One

# Kin-Gin

Testara opened her eyes. From the core of her right eye, a dark smoke drifted into the bright silver water in which she bathed. The pressure behind her eye dissipated and the black swirl diminished in the illuminated water.

Testara floated underneath the surface of the liquid for minutes without ever taking a breath. Her mind drifted as it always did in these baths. Fresh memories came by first. The fight with the daishinnin and the death of the lord. Before that, Testara ventured through the abandoned hills, slaying one shinnin after another. Their appearances flashing in abundance, walking bodies with the decayed parts substituted by an odd black mass adorned with gold. Their eyes all black with a ring of white. They were plentiful. All the villages they inhabited were abandoned. A stretched landscape of grey shades, littered with dust, embers and corpses. The imagery was intermingled with the voices of the past.

A distraught clamor drifted into Testara's mind. She heard more and more voices until the clamor turned into an orchestra of panicked voices. Yelling, screaming and crying. First out of anger, then fear and in the end out of pain. It turned Testara's body restless. She shook the water back and forth until she could no longer stay within. Testara jerked upright and splashed out of the water, breathing heavily. Her glance was one of dread and wrath at the same time, staring aimlessly onto the rippling water.

As the drops of water ran down her bare skin, a man in white and blue robes circled around the basin with a towel spread wide. It wasn't until he called for Testara that she



snapped out of her trance and took notice of the room around her. Octagonal, like the shape of the basin in which she stood. Varnished wood all around. Minimalistic and warmly lit by the lanterns hanging from the wall.

Testara stepped out of the tub and slowly descended the few steps. She let herself be embraced by the towel that the man put over her shoulders.

'Are you well, Tsukizashi-san?' he remarked.

Their glances met. An attendant of the shrine. His bald round head, small eyes and thin mustache gave him a friendly demeanor. Testara knew him well, as did any izashi. Whilst shrines were spread all across the empire, the one in front of Kin-Gin Castle was the most frequented by the izashi of clan Misogi.

Testara gazed upon the swirling water in the tub. She must've moved as wild as her dream was. But the cleansing did its job.

A standard practice for any izashi carrying both shinnin and daishinnin in their eye. The baths were a way of purifying these lost souls and sending them back on the Paths, back to Soluna. It is to this process the clan owes its very name.

'Please, follow me.'

Testara followed the attendant into an adjacent room. It was one of comfort. Tatami mats for the comfort of the feet, a hearth simmering in the center to send heat throughout the room and low tables decked with food and drink.

The izashi was handed a yukata to cover herself with. She then kneeled beside the low table and poured herself a cup of warm ochaké.

'If you would please lower the robe, just over the shoulder.' Testara complied in silence. She revealed the poorly tended wound from her battle against the daishinnin. The attendant kneeled behind her and first brought a cold salve onto the cut skin. It stung like a long sharp needle. Testara grimaced and cringed. She wanted to pull away.

When the attendant was finished, Testara didn't waste any time and dressed herself fully into the standard fit of an Izashi. The tears and cuts were sown whilst she was in the baths. Testara thanked the attendant dispassionately and left the small structure that stood erected on a flat piece of land. White gravel

paved the ground and housed the Hall of Misogi. An open space covered by a slanted roof that hosted statues of the Sannin. And finally, a single floored hall that provided passing izashi with private rooms to rest in. All together this area was referred to as a Palm of Izanagi, named after the deity that stood at the head of the clan. Many of these had been built across the empire, offering izashi respite should they be in need of it.

A bright white tori gate marked the entrance to the Palm. Testara marched through it and hurried down the great many steps that descended the hill upon which the temple was built.

The sun had barely graced the tops of the mountains in the distance when Testara hurried herself into the temple for a cleansing bath. Necessary, in order to enter the castle. Eyes spoiled by sealed shinnin or daishinnin would defile the sanctity of the castle's grounds.

Something Testara never put much stock in. If the shinnin and daishinnin in her eyes couldn't do anything while she was outside the castle, why would they be able to do anything was she was inside? One of many customs and rules Testara had questioned over the years, both silently and vocally.

Beyond the lush branches of the trees, Testara could see the castle arise upon the hill. Arriving at the early light of dawn would've granted her looks of bewilderment from the guard, were it not that this was a habit of the black-haired izashi. Travelling at night was strongly discouraged. Shinnin and daishinnin were harder to see and moved silently. The darkness of the night empowered them to roam further and for longer periods, making it more likely to encounter them.

Testara didn't care. She was more set on getting home, where it was comfortable and where she could get a proper meal, shinnin or daishinnin be damned.

She crossed the first yard. One of many that surrounded the core structure of the castle. It stood raised upon a hill on the highest terrace. There were four areas that were built around each on a plateau lower than the other, making any visitor pass through four different gates to get to the castle. It was both quite the workout and the time-consuming climb.

Testara would've preferred to stay within the lower segments. That's where the trainees and the attendants lived. Simple living spaces, but they provided everything Testara

needed. It sure would save her this damned climb every time. The higher on Kin-Gin hill one lived, the higher the rank one carried. Testara's private quarters were in the structure built in a square around the main castle. But that's not where she was headed.

The izashi slipped through the gates at the front of the large yard that surrounded the main castle and walked up to the board at the entrance. It was a large wooden panel with the names of all izashi tied to the clan. If one were home, their personal dagger would be hanging from their hook on this panel. Testara completely ignored her own name; Testara of the Uchida line. She instead searched for another and found it: Mariko of the Saguchi line. A dagger hung underneath. With her own dagger still sheathed on her back, Testara proceeded.

All around her were facilities needed for the clan to operate and train potential izashi. Private quarters of the senior members, lecture halls, libraries, workshops for a variety of crafts and spaces to practice one's fighting skills, it was all here.

Testara remained in the shadows of the gallery while sweeping a glance across the yard. It was a calm day, a few izashi here and there, but mostly the attendants. Fingers of Izanagi they were called. They were responsible for the upkeep of the castle as well as facilitating daily life for the izashi. Testara knew a few by name, yet all of them knew her. But she was in no mood to strike conversation or to be seen at all. If she was seen by anyone familiar, the Sannin would soon know of her return as well. That had to be avoided at all costs.

*She has to be somewhere.*

Testara slithered past the lecture halls in an effort to find Mariko. It wasn't unusual for her to sit in on the teachings of the clan and offer her knowledge to potential izashi.

'The eye of silver is the eye of offense. The eye of gold is the eye of support. To pair them together is to ensure one supplements the other. Synergy is the key.' announced the voice from behind the sliding door. That was definitely not her. Testara moved on.

The way Testara snuck across the halls and galleries made her feel like she wasn't allowed to be here. Perhaps she was making a bigger deal out of not being seen than necessary. Still, she kept at it and eventually found herself in the main structure

of the castle, working her way up the stairs. No doubt the Sannin could smell her presence at this rate.

Then her eyes fell on the end of a group of izashi. Testara saw only their backs, but that was enough to identify them as senior members. The towering Bi-Yoon and the white-haired Zisuchi twins were among them, after all.

*Mariko!*

Fair black straight hair, gently brushing left and right on her back and cut evenly at the bottom. That was her.

Testara hastened her tempo but kept her stride as silent as that of cat's. Before Mariko was able to enter the chamber through the sliding door, Testara pulled her back by her clothes and pressed her against the wall.

She didn't waste time. Testara gazed into those grass green eyes only briefly. She made her intentions clear and leaned forward, ensuring their lips connected while her hand ran towards her neck and slithered onto the back of her head. There was no protest. In fact, the kiss was most welcomed---at least, for a moment.

'You're the worst.' said the woman when they separated.

Testara smirked as she fingered away a few hairs from her face. 'I am.' Their eyes met. Alluring glances from Testara to Mariko but also in return. 'But you like it. Don't you dare deny it.' They kissed again. 'Or would you rather sit at that meeting?'

In between the kisses they spoke. 'I need to.' Another kiss. 'In fact, you need to, since you're here. All senior izashi have been called to gather.'

Testara uttered something of a bored groan. She dug her hand through the layers of cloth Mariko wore and slipped her hand in between her legs.

Mariko recoiled. 'Not here. Not now.'

'Well, let's go elsewhere then.' Testara said impatiently.

A footstep made the wood creak. Mariko immediately pushed Testara off her and straightened her clothes in a nervous motion. A stark contrast to Testara who caught the inspecting leer of the older woman with indifferent eyes.

She wore the same attire as both Testara and Mariko, but was somewhere in the 40's range. Her shoulder-length hair was tightly pulled into a bun on the back of her head.