The priests didn’t know what had angered the kami of Hōseki Pond Shrine, only that their lives had been in mortal danger when it expelled them from the worship hall. They described the incident in vivid detail: offerings erupting into flame, scrolls knocked from shelves, porcelain icons smashed, and the broken rafter that had nearly crushed poor Kichi. Ever since, anyone who stepped inside had been assaulted by invisible forces. The priests were baffled. The enshrined spirit had never acted that way before. But then, as Kosori reminded herself, these were only lay priests. They could not perceive the kami they served, much less discern what they had done to offend it. That was the realm of shugenja alone. So they wrung their hands uselessly and awaited an Isawa.

Isawa Kosori no Kaito grimaced at the letter as she read it again. She and the other shrine keepers were to learn as much as they could and keep bystanders safe, but ultimately their instructions were to await the shugenja’s arrival.

In ten days.

A crash from the worship hall. Another artifact, or a part of the shrine itself, destroyed by the spirit’s anger. Kosori sighed. Perhaps it was fortunate that she’d permanently lost her voice. This way, she couldn’t say something disgraceful.

She looked to her attendants, two shrine keepers of the Kaito, vassal family to the Isawa, as they tried to reassure the trio of distressed priests. One snuck her an exasperated look, and Kosori returned it. With each day, the kami’s anger was escalating, as were its actions. What would remain by the time help finally arrived? But there was little to be done about it, with elemental imbalances across Phoenix lands spreading the Isawa so thin.

Kosori crumpled the letter in a tightened fist. I can’t just waste time waiting! Tsukune-sama wouldn’t wait. She’d leap into a burning building rather than stand idly by!

But without a shugenja, there were limits to what she could do. The Kaito were shrine keepers, trained to assist priests and protect shrines. Their elevated art was that of the shrine keeper: wards and charms, medicines and folklore, combat against malicious spirits. Reaching the pinnacle of their ways, one might become a living shrine in which kami could dwell. But they did not have the Isawa’s gift. They could not truly commune with the spirits.

And even if she could, her orders were clear. She was a mere vassal of the Isawa. Even with her new position in the family, could she so boldly defy her masters?

She closed her eyes. Isawa Kaito, Honored Ancestor, please guide your humble servant!

A whinny caught her attention. On the unconsecrated side of the fiery torii arch, a man fed
his horse at the humble traveler's stable. He had a hooked nose and an angular jaw, and rich brown eyes that matched his hair. On his purple kimono's shoulder, an unfurled scroll was depicted in white. Kosori remembered the mon, the symbol of the Iuchi family, shugenja of the Unicorn Clan. His horse took a radish from his flat palm, and he patted it on its long snout, then made a series of quick gestures. The horse watched the movements with deep eyes.

It had only been a month since she'd left Cliffside Shrine. Maezawa did his best as a healer, but the ki of the meridian itself had been disrupted. When the wound finally healed, Kosori had lost her voice completely. The grooved scar across her throat was visible to any who looked.

Now she spoke with her hands. She was still learning, of course. The language was just as complex as spoken Rokugani, but wholly different. It would require years to fully master. But she knew enough to recognize that the Unicorn had asked his horse not to sway too much in the stall. He was speaking to it with his hands.

Few others back home knew sign language. She recalled long days spent in silence, people all around, unable to converse with them. It was lonely. Seeing this stranger now, speaking just as she did…

She had to approach him.

Kosori had never seen a horse up close. She stared in undisguised wonder as she approached. The creatures were unkind to roads and increased the cost of maintenance, so only fifty traveling permits allowing horses on Phoenix roads were issued each year. That this man had obtained one spoke to his position.

The stranger finally noticed her gawking at his mount. She traced a line to her own face and fluttered her fingers, as if holding a fan. “It is beautiful,” she was saying. She waited, breath held. He stared at her with a furrowed brow. Her heart sank. Perhaps he wouldn't understand her after all.

But then he smiled. “She is beautiful,” he replied, patting the horse's flank. “Her name is Mayu.”

A grin spread across Kosori’s face. At last! Someone other than her attendants and sensei to talk with. She traced her own name in the air, drawing the kanji backward.
“Greetings, Kosori-san,” he replied. “I am Iuchi Takeya.” As she bowed, he abruptly jutted out his open hand. She stared at it awkwardly, unsure of what to do.

He pulled it back with a nervous laugh. “Ah, apologies! Habit.” Something about his laugh and the way his eyes twinkled made her blush. “I sometimes forget myself.”

Another Isawa would have taken his unbreaking gaze and rustic forward manner to be rude. But not Kosori. In the city, everyone was polite, and politeness meant never looking directly at anyone. Because she spoke in gestures, if no-one looked, then she was truly silenced. For days she had hoped for someone to be rude and look at her.

“This is my first time in these lands,” he confessed. “Are you from around here?”

She did not have the vocabulary to answer, so she just pointed to the horizon, where the distant mountains of Garanto Province were steeped in the blue of the sky, barely visible.

He chuckled. “Ah. That’s a little off from where I am going.”

“Undertaking the pilgrimage?” she managed.

The Phoenix and Unicorn had an agreement, one that had stood for nearly three hundred years, that Unicorn samurai could freely travel to the Phoenix’s Shrine of the Ki-Rin without travel papers. There was no other arrangement like it in the Empire, a sign of friendship between the two clans.

He nodded. “I am. But before I can continue, I must make offerings here, as my ancestors once did.” He sighed. “Sadly, it seems no one may enter. I could not help but overhear your shrine’s troubles.”

Kosori furrowed her brow. The priests wouldn’t let anyone in while the kami was angered—for their own safety. But Takeya was an Iuchi, a shugenja. Surely it would be different for him!

He absently brushed Mayu’s raven mane. “I offered to help, but…” A smirk touched his cheek. “Well, it is safe to say, I think the priests might prefer an Isawa.”

Wheels spun in Kosori’s head. She asked with her hands, “But you would help, if asked?”

“That settled that. Kosori clapped. Her attendants appeared instantly. As they knelt, she tried not to smile at Takeya’s surprise in her periphery. “We can wait no longer. I will take this man with me into the shrine. We will appease the kami. See to the safety of the priests.”

“Kosori-sama,” one attendant spoke, “our orders are to await the Isawa’s arrival.”

She shook her head. “Our instructions said to ‘await the arrival of the shugenja.’” She gestured at Takeya. “There is a shugenja right here.”

The two keepers smiled wide.

When they were gone, Takeya cast her a sheepish look. “Somehow I am now under the impression you are more than you appear, Kosori-san.”

She smiled back and went to get her bow.
Kosori fell back against Takeya's weight as they clattered to the floor. A solid thud shook the chamber immediately after. A fallen rafter had smashed through the floor, splintering it and scattering the offerings. Kosori blinked at the wooden beam. Had Takeya not acted so swiftly, she would have been crushed.

"Are you all right?" he asked, pushing himself up.

She grabbed his collar and yanked, forcing him flat again, just out of the path of a hurled oil lantern, which smashed against the wall and coated it in flame.

Takeya scrambled to put it out, smothering the flames with his haori jacket. Kosori rolled to her feet and reached into her obi for one of her wards. As her fingers grazed the paper, the air went stale. The spirit had vanished.

Limply, she retrieved the paper ofuda she'd left at the center of the room. The surface was flawless, the power word perfectly inscribed. It should have bound the spirit to this chamber. What had gone wrong?

"I suppose the third time isn't always the lucky one," Takeya spoke absently.

Kosori grimaced. Ruined offerings were scattered across the inner chamber, hanging shimenawa ropes severed and scorched, and the kamidana, the shelf and altar that displayed the icons of the kami, was cast down, the artifacts broken. Three times they had laid out an offering, with more fail-safes and protective measures in each attempt. A storm had erupted each time.

"The kami would never attack a Kaito," she signed. "Never."

Takeya scrunched his face at the collapsed rafters. "As you say."

Well, she couldn't quite explain that. Although her family enjoyed the kami's favor, she'd never encountered one so angry. Perhaps there were limits to the kami's natural fondness for her bloodline.

Takeya shook his head at the fallen kamidana. The scroll bearing the kami's name lay crumpled at his feet. "This doesn't make sense. It acts like an invoked kami in all ways, except that it will not respond to us." A flash of blue between his fingers caught Kosori's eye. He was fidgeting with a strange bauble. "If this is how one spells the name of the Hōseki Pond's kami, then its true name should be…"

He paused, seeing where Kosori looked. He quickly closed his hand around the charm. She did not know how to sign her question, so using her finger, she wrote it on a dropped sheet with spilled ink. Is that meishōdō?

He was silent for a long while. Her bones vibrated in her skin beneath his scrutiny. He was judging, considering. Then he finally nodded, dangling the trinket out for her to see: cloudy, set in bronze, and painted with strange letters.

"My ancestors once cataloged the true names of every kami enshrined along the road to the Shrine of the Ki-Rin. This is the trinket for the Hōseki Pond kami."

The little bauble stirred before her eyes. Of meishōdō, she knew only what others had told
That it was sorcery, a means by which the Unicorn commanded the kami against their will and without offerings. The notion that this Iuchi could compel any of the enshrined kami along his route chilled her blood and filled her with dread.

Kosori signed, “You would command them?”

His brown eyes tilted to the bauble in his palm. “There is more to meishōdō than that. By invoking the spirit’s true name, the properly trained can use the trinket to directly communicate with it.” He clasped it as one might a string of prayer beads. “I had hoped to speak directly to the kami of this shrine. I was going to ask it…”

Hesitation. “…if it knew my father.” His expression softened. “What he was like…”

His words pricked Kosori’s heart and steeped her with shame. To think she had suspected him of sinister intent, one who would risk his life and well-being to restore balance to a shrine in a stranger’s land.

He grimaced self-deprecatingly with a red face. “It isn’t important. Please forget I said anything.”

Kosori moved into his vision. “I know how it feels.” And then, timidly, “I hope you get your answer.”

He nodded, tucking the bauble into his kimono. “Thank you.”

Awkward silence, and then he coughed. “Right.” He gestured at the scorched offerings. “Curious that the kami of Hōseki Pond would manifest as fire, wouldn’t you say?”

That was curious. The kami was actually the spirit of the mist suspended above the pond. It was strongest in the morning, when dew coated the butterburs. It could never manifest as flames.

Tsukune’s voice echoed in Kosori’s mind. The elemental imbalance favors the fire kami. They erupt even after minor offerings. The council says this is the cause of the drought, of the unseasonable heat…

A crash. Takeya turned. Yet another, from deeper in the shrine. They met one another’s eyes and nodded. Gathering their things, they cautiously made their way toward the sounds.

The inner sanctum was a high balcony overlooking a marshy pond. Paper streamers fluttered in the trees surrounding the waters. The evening sky painted the tepid waters in fiery hues, and the clearing was cast in a thick haze. Kosori felt moisture on her face and the hairs on her forearms standing stiff. In the absence of teeming bugs and the chirps of frogs, she heard only a strange buzzing that make her inner ear itch.

“Something’s here,” said Takeya nervously.

With an ear-splitting bang, one of the trees broke, as if split by lightning. Kosori jumped, her heart skipping several beats. It was only then that she noticed the scorch marks along the stones and fallen boughs edging the pond. They were scars of a battle.

Ripples trailed along the pond’s surface, as if a tiny hand were tracing lines in the water. Then came another bang, another crashing tree limb. Takeya drew forth his bauble again and
Kosori clenched the amulet by the chain. As it hung, it swayed gently.

Kosori’s eyes darted from the amulet to the pond and back again. It was moving in tandem with the trailing ripples.

*It’s here,* she thought. *It’s been here the whole time.* Then, a revelation.

Gripping her bow, she lifted herself up onto the banister. Her reflection looked up at her from the shallow waters, three stories below. Takeya rushed forward. “What are you doing!”

With her free hand, she signed, “Jumping.”

She stepped off the edge.

A gust pushed against her legs, cushioning her fall. She landed harmlessly. The kami came to her aid, just as she knew it would. She was a Kaito, and although her gift was not that of the shugenja, the kami flocked to those who shared her ancestor’s blood. It would not allow her to come to harm.

And in that instant, she knew that the priests were mistaken. The kami of Hōseki Pond was not offended, and it was not angry. She spun toward Takeya on the balcony and thrust out two fingers. He looked confused, but she thrust them out again and again, urgently. Two. Two.

*His eyes widened.*

*“Two spirits.”*

What the priests had believed was an angry kami was, in reality, two spirits locked in battle over the shrine. A battle of invisible wills, raking the walls, breaking the rafters, primordial forces locked in stormy opposition. The offerings, which would have empowered the kami of the pond, were being not rejected, but denied by its invisible opponent.

And whatever it was, it was here.

Grim resolution overtook Takeya. “I think I know what we’re up against. I…I can make it corporeal for a time, but not for long. It will take my full concentration.”

The sky darkened. A wind began to stir the pond at the center. *It knows,* Kosori thought. *It knows what we’re trying to do.*

From within his sleeves, Takeya produced a small charm. From her position, Kosori could barely make out the lupine silhouette and the glint of silver. A litany of words tumbled from his lips, musical speech she could not understand. It’s not Rokugani, she realized. Is this meishōdō?

Her back was to the pond when the light burst into being, gilding the balcony in yellow and casting her shadow against the shrine wall. There was a roaring hearth behind her. Slowly she turned, eyes watering in the heat, her jaw going slack. Suspended above the pond was torrent of fire contained within a massive humanoid form. Black smoke poured off its body like spilt ink.

Two narrow ember shards were its eyes.

*“It’s a jann,”* Takeya called out. *“A type of djinn.”*

*What’s a djinn?* came her absent thought.

*Kosori!*

A flaming bolt exploded against the wall behind her. Kosori splashed face first into the
pond. She felt searing heat as another passed over her back. She scrambled up, splashing as she ran. A glance at Takeya confirmed that he could not help her; if he ceased channeling, the creature would be incorporeal again. She was on her own.

No. She wasn’t. There was Mayu, just visible between the trees. The commotion must have drawn her here. The horse was agitated, rocking back and forth, approaching and then retreating. Kosori recalled how Takeya had signed to her before. How much did Mayu know?

Kosori cast Mayu a gesture. “Distract it!”

The horse paused for what felt like several dragging moments, then flung herself into the pond. As Mayu galloped past, water splashed onto the djinn, erupting into steam against its fiery skin.

Beneath the crackling flames, Kosori heard a painful scream.

The djinn fixated upon Mayu, flames balling above its hands. Mayu galloped wildly, eyes glassy and wide, but there seemed to be no panic in her gait. Kosori had no time to wonder at her ally. She drew forth an arrow and affixed the shaft with a sacred sutra. The water beneath her stirred.

*Kami of Hōseki Pond, please hear my prayers…*

The djinn showered the clearing with flaming bolts. Blasts singed Mayu’s coat, but she did not stop.

Kosori ceremoniously strung her bow. *We are here to help you. You need not fight this battle alone…*

Thin smoke rose from the wolf amulet in Takeya’s palm. He gritted his teeth. “I can’t do this much longer!”

The arrow fell into place. Kosori lowered the bow and drew in tandem with her breath.

*…Let me be your vessel. Dwell within me and guide this arrow. Together, let us drive this invader from your home!*

She exhaled. The arrow slipped from her fingers. For a moment, Kosori caught a glimpse of wet dew coating the arrowhead.
In a flash, Kosori’s sight bleached out in white fire. Her mind rattled with wordless screams. The voice was familiar: she’d heard it before, but she couldn’t quite place where.

Her sight returned slowly. She was hunched low, knees in the pond. The djinn spun in a conflagration, clawing at its back, where a geyser of golden light bled into the sky. There protruded her arrow, impossibly preserved, from the being’s shoulder. The flames of its body weakened as it flailed, the planted missile repelling its hands with an invisible barrier. With each desperate jerk, it shed glowing ribbons.

She thought of a pricked waterskin, leaking a stream, deflating.

The scream. The voice. It was hers. The djinn howled in her mind with her own lost voice.

It bolted, soaring above the canopy, trailing golden ribbons like a firework. Then, it was gone, the phantom of her own voice silenced.

Takeya collapsed against the balcony, the wolf amulet clattering to the floor. He blew on the blistering skin of his palm and allowed himself a few breaths before calling out, his voice filled with concern. But Kosori was not injured. She was grinning, droplets of dew forming on the tips of her fingers as Mayu cantered around her in playful circles.

It was only a day after the shrine’s restoration when the carrier dove returned with a reply. The tiny seal of the Council of Elemental Masters made Kosori’s heart skip, but instead of a rebuke, the letter congratulated her on restoring the shrine’s balance. From her report, the council felt that the Kaito’s skills could be further utilized to help restore the harmony of the lands. She was to seek Shiba Tsukune at Shiro Gisu at her earliest convenience to discuss how this goal could be realized.

But it was some time before she could complete the letter. She kept rereading the first line. It addressed her as “Kaito Kosori of Cliffside Shrine.”

Not “Isawa Kosori no Kaito.” Kaito Kosori. This was not the convention by which one addressed a mere vassal of the family. There was only one reason they would do this. Even so, she could not comprehend it.
A second letter arrived only moments later. The calligraphy, modest but confident, was clearly that of Shiba Tsukune. Kosori consumed the words with widening eyes.

Kosori-san,

It seems the council finally agrees with me. Thanks to your recent feats, similar victories by other esteemed Kaito throughout our lands, and Tadaka’s kind words that finally turned the hearts of the council, they now acknowledge what I have known all along to be true. The papers establishing the Kaito’s new domain are underway, and soon I will present the council’s decision to the Imperial Court to be acknowledged by all.

I fear we’ve done you no favors. Although the Kaito will enjoy more prestige and a greater role in the clan, there will also be more responsibility, and new hardships await the Kaito as a fully fledged Great Clan family. Perhaps better than anyone, I can tell you there are some things for which we can never be fully prepared.

But I know you can do this. I believe in you, Kosori. No matter how hard it may seem, know that I will always stand beside you. Together, let’s both do our best.

We shall talk soon. You should commission a formal kamishimo. I suspect you will need it.

As we said to Tetsu on the day of his first promotion, “Congratulations. I am very sorry.”
– Shiba Tsukune

Kosori ran from her tent on joyful feet, the celebratory cheers of her attendants and praises of their ancestral founder falling away. Like an arrow, her family was rising in the world. There was much to come from this, much to be sorted out, but for now, none of that was important. First things first. She had to tell Takeya.

There was much she needed to tell him. That she was the daimyō of the Kaito family. That he had changed her mind regarding meishōdō. That she wanted him to accompany her to Shiro Gisu. It was on his way, after all. The thought broadened her smile. Perhaps she could learn more about him. That would be nice.

He was in the stable, affixing the saddle to Mayu’s back. The horse looked to her in lazy recognition, then back to her master. Kosori assailed Takeya with excited gestures. “I have news! It’s important!”

Takeyu turned away. “Hello, Kosori-san.”

She stopped. His voice was cold. She brought herself into his vision. His expression was flat, his eyes distant. Only then did she notice his full pack and traveling cloak.

“You’re leaving?” she signed. He’d said he was going to stay until the shrine was repaired, until he could properly commune with the pond kami. “What about your question?”

“I’m going home,” he said.

She stared, uncomprehending.
“I am forbidden from entering the shrine,” he continued. “It seems the priests believe I brought the ‘demon’ here. That it followed me.” He glared at Kosori. “How did they get that impression, I wonder?”

Horror washed over Kosori like a wet blanket. In her report to the council, she’d named Takeyu and meishōdō specifically, meaning to praise him. But there was no kanji for “djinn,” no way to describe the spirit in the rural dialect, the only writing she knew. So she invented a word: “Gai-yu-ki.” Outsider demon.

She’d used the same kanji used for gaijin.

“I will correct them!” she insisted.

“It does not matter,” he replied. “Magistrates are coming to arrest me for sacrilege. I must be gone before they arrive.” He lifted himself into the saddle.

Kosori moved in front of the horse. “Wait! Wait!” She wanted to tell him that she had not blamed him, that the priests had drawn their own conclusions. But she didn’t know the words. And she had no voice.

Takeyu’s eyes narrowed. “Do you believe I am at fault for what happened here?”

She shook her head. No! She thought. No, I don’t!

“Your report—where did it say the djinn came from?”

She hesitated. Then looked away.

His lands. The report said, truthfully, that the spirit was from the Iuchi provinces. Takeya was able to identify it because it had come from the lands of his people. It was retreating toward Unicorn lands. They’d discovered that together.

But that didn’t mean she blamed him! She looked up one final time, as if all she wanted to say, her eyes could speak where her hands could not. That he’d understand.

Takeya closed his eyes. “Mother was right. In spite of the Emperor’s judgment, the Phoenix would still see our traditions outlawed.”

Her eyes widened. No! No!

Mayu turned, casting Takeya’s back to Kosori. “No one will even try to understand us. Why should they bother?”

“We are but outsiders to them.”

Mayu galloped at a wordless command, leaving Kosori in a dust cloud. She felt like a banner fraying helplessly in the wind. Because of her ignorance, she’d driven away one who would have been her ally. And perhaps her friend.

If only she had known better, chosen her words more wisely, it would not have come to this. But there was nothing to be done about it. A bell could not be unrung.

An arrow, once released, would never return on its own.