

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Characters

Maps

Chapter 1: Blood Ties

Chapter 2: The Winter Prisoner

Chapter 3: Out of the Sea

Chapter 4: Blood Chains

Newsletter





WRITTEN BY Kouko Shirakawa



Seven Seas Entertainment





KOKYU NO KARASU © 2018 by Kouko Shirakawa All rights reserved. First published in Japan in 2018 by SHUEISHA Inc., Tokyo. English translation rights arranged by SHUEISHA Inc. through TOHAN CORPORATION, Tokyo.

Illustration by Ayuko

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Amelia Mason

cover design: H. Qi

INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner

INTERIOR LAYOUT: Jennifer Elgabrowny COPY EDITOR: Catherine Langford PROOFREADER: Stephanie Cohen

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: T. Burke, Callum May

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

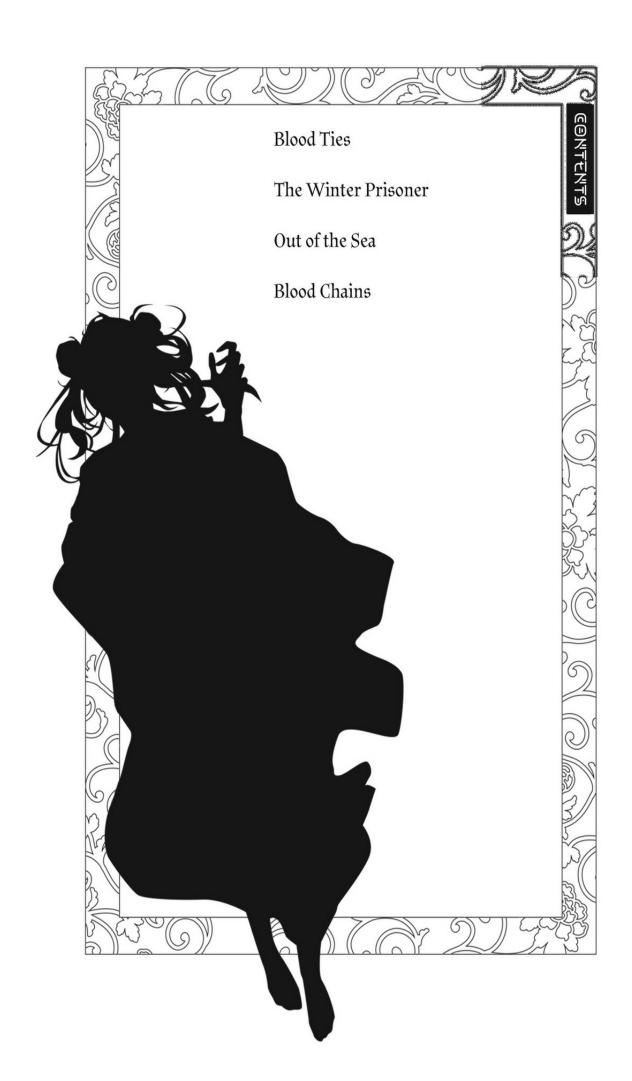
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

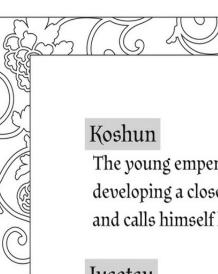
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-88843-657-8

Printed in Canada

First Printing: July 2024 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1





The young emperor who recently ascended the throne. He is developing a close relationship with the Raven Consort, Jusetsu, and calls himself her friend.

Jusetsu

The current Raven Consort. A mysterious and solitary young woman with mystical abilities.

Eisei

A eunuch who pledges absolute loyalty to Koshun.

Jiujiu

Jusetsu's lady-in-waiting. A gentle girl who's prone to sticking her nose into things.

Onkei

A eunuch who acts as Jusetsu's bodyguard on Eisei's orders.

Tankai

Jusetsu's other bodyguard.

Ishiha

A boy eunuch. Originally from a minority tribe in the west.

Shiki

A scholar working at the Koto Institute. Formerly the moderation vice-envoy in Ga Province.



Banka

The Crane Consort. One of Koshun's consorts who still has an innocent side to her. Fond of Jusetsu.

Choyo

Banka's father and member of a powerful clan from Ga Province. Most senior member of a minority tribe that originated from the land of Kakami generations ago.

Hakurai

A shaman and the founder of a new religion known as the Eight True Teachings.

Injo

The young shrine maiden of the Eight True Teachings.

Reijo

Former Raven Consort. Deceased.

Gyoei

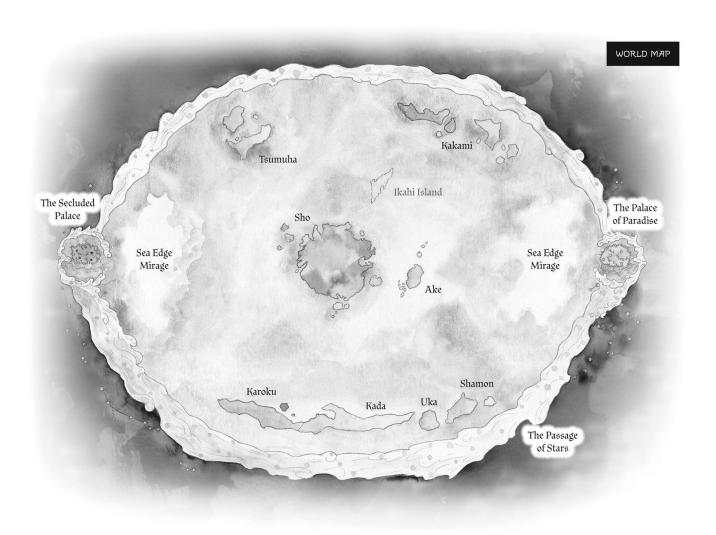
Former Winter Minister. Deceased.

Senri

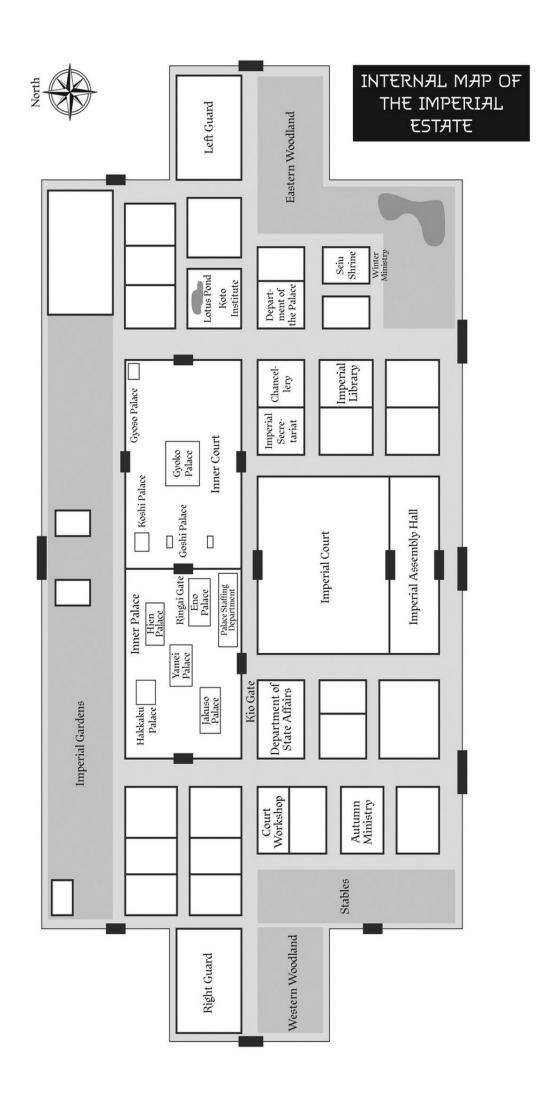
Current Winter Minister. One of Jusetsu's allies.

Kajo

Granddaughter of Koshun's beloved master and grand chancellor, Un Eitoku. Also a childhood friend of Koshun.









AN EERIE SILENCE hung in the air, much like that of early dawn.

The incredible mound of skeletons and black robes was now submerged in muddy water. Both the collapsed gate and the people who stood frozen to the spot were soaked through from the rain.

A drop of water fell from the point of Koshun's chin. His skin was cold and covered in goosebumps. It wasn't because of the rain that had soaked him to the core, however. There was another reason. A girl stood before him, dressed in a black robe. The faint sunlight that was seeping in through the clouds now the rain had come to a stop was making her silver hair glisten. It almost looked like it'd been sprinkled with silver dust. Her face was turned toward Koshun, but her eyes weren't looking at him. Instead, she was gazing at the star raven perched on his shoulder.

Koshun tried to call out her name, but he found himself tongue-tied. All that left his lips was a raspy groan.

The girl was Jusetsu, but at the same time, she wasn't.

The Raven.

What could have possibly happened? What had become of Jusetsu?

A ferocious storm was surging inside of Koshun. He knew he had to act right away. He needed to come up with an idea—and yet somehow, he couldn't even bring himself to blink.

Someone stepped past him.

"Onkei. Tankai," a cold, caustic voice called out. It was Eisei. The pair of eunuchs who were next to Jusetsu swiftly made their way over to him. "Take the Raven Consort to the Yamei Palace," he ordered.

Upon hearing this, both men blinked as if they'd only just come back to their senses.

"Huh...? But Attendant Ei..." began Onkei, glancing over at Jusetsu's face. Her features were subtly illuminated by the faint sunlight. She took no notice of him whatsoever and kept her eyes firmly fixed on the star raven.

Suddenly, however, the sunlight became much more intense. The clouds had disappeared, and the sun had come out. Jusetsu scrunched up her face, seeming aggravated by its brightness. She let out an anguished cry as she staggered back, her legs wobbling beneath her.

"Niangniang!"

Jusetsu began to topple over, falling to one side. Just as she was about to hit the ground, Onkei caught her in his arms. Her limbs hung limply, and her eyes were closed. It looked like she had lost consciousness.

"Take her," Eisei demanded again, his voice even more adamant now.

Onkei nodded. He picked her up, and he and Tankai ran in the direction of the inner palace. Jusetsu's golden chicken Shinshin followed behind them, its wings flapping in the wind.

"Sunlight is poison for us," muttered the star raven on Koshun's shoulder—or rather, the Owl.

Eisei returned to where the emperor was standing and moved close to him, as if to be awaiting Koshun's instructions.

Koshun let out a sigh of relief. *I'm so glad I have Eisei by my side*. The emperor felt blood rush through his body, relieving him from the tension that had overwhelmed him just moments earlier. His mind then sprang into action at last. He needed to come up with a way to fix what was happening. Everything had crumbled around him. How could he even begin to explain this situation to anyone else?

There was no way to hide Jusetsu's true identity anymore. Her silver hair was proof that she was a descendant of the previous imperial family—and now it was public.

The crowd nearby began to buzz. In a matter of moments, Koshun and the others had found themselves surrounded by their chatter.

The air was full of questions. "What was that horde of skeletons about?" "Who was that silver-haired girl?"

More people flocked there from every corner of the imperial estate, and they

could even spot a cavalry's worth of military officials coming splashing through the mud.

Koshun gulped. "...Tell the Winter Minister—since he was leading the ritual—and the general of the estate guard what has happened," he instructed Eisei, his eyes staring straight ahead.

It wasn't right for Koshun to explain what happened here—he had to be the one that other people reported things *to*. Otherwise, it'd make people suspicious. After all, people tended not to accept what higher authorities told them as the truth.

"Tell people that Jusetsu is a shrine maiden—a shrine maiden who serves Uren Niangniang. That will suffice."

After receiving his commands, Eisei left Koshun's side. The emperor then ordered his attendants—who were acting as his bodyguards—to go back to the inner court, and turned back the way he came.

As they hurried toward the Yamei Palace, Tankai glanced over at Onkei running beside him. His face was deathly pale and his lips were pursed. He wasn't saying a word. Tankai then shifted his gaze to Jusetsu in Onkei's arms. She showed no sign of waking up anytime soon. Her face was so devoid of color, and her limbs hung so limply it made him worry whether she was even breathing—but when he looked carefully, he noticed her eyelids twitching every now and then, and her chest was rising and falling too.

But still...

Her long, silver hair was hanging over Onkei's arm, swaying back and forth as he dashed ahead.

To Tankai, it was a strange sight. It was extremely beautiful—but he also knew this color was a taboo.

Had she been a descendant of the Ran family all along? he wondered. Tankai could only assume Onkei already knew. He didn't seem surprised by her silver hair, at least.

I'm sure that from here on out, things are going to get complicated, thought Tankai. But that's not the problem.

What in the world was going to become of Jusetsu? Before she lost consciousness, she seemed like an entirely different person.

"Hey, do you know what's happened to niangniang?" Tankai asked.

Onkei didn't even look at him. His silence suggested that not even he was in a position to answer that question.

The group arrived at the Yamei Palace to find Jiujiu loitering about in front of the palace building. Upon seeing Jusetsu in Onkei's arms, her eyes widened with shock.

"Niangniang! What happened? Is she hurt...?"

The woman wasn't surprised by Jusetsu's silver hair either. *Jiujiu must have known as well,* Tankai assumed. He was initially startled by the idea—but on second thought, it would have been highly unlikely that Jusetsu's lady-inwaiting, the person who waited on her hand and foot, didn't know the truth.

"She passed out," Onkei said simply before making his way inside. He sounded exhausted.

He placed Jusetsu on her bed and gazed down at her, looking anxious. Seeing Onkei—someone who never lost his cool—with such an expression on his face filled Tankai with anxiety too.

Jiujiu announced she was going to change her out of her wet clothes, so forced the eunuchs to wait on the other side of the curtain.

"Did something bad happen?" she asked. "I could tell things were kind of rowdy outside of the inner palace, but Hua Niangniang—I mean, the Mandarin Duck Consort—told us to stay inside our palaces."

That must have been to avoid any further chaos from unfolding, and explained why it had been so quiet as they made their way back to the Yamei Palace. If word about what happened got around, even the inner palace would've descended into uproar.

"The Mandarin Duck Consort was as wise as ever. If people knew that there was a throng of corpses lashing out, everyone would have lost their minds and run away," Tankai said.

"Corpses?" Jiujiu asked.

This was going to be a nuisance to explain. Tankai looked at Onkei for help, but the man just stood there, looking down in silence. It didn't seem like he was paying any attention to the conversation—which left Tankai with no choice but to continue trying on his own.

"The ritual worked. I think. The gate collapsed, but..."

How could he even describe the scene? He thought there was a huge wave of black surging toward them, but then he realized it was a horde of skeletons in black robes. The closer those skeletons got, the more they started to look like living people again. How was he supposed to explain what such a bizarre sight was like?

"The graves of the Raven Consorts were in the imperial gardens," Onkei began in a soft voice. "Their dead bodies appeared from that direction, to kill niangniang for breaking the barrier."

"To kill *niangniang*?!" Jiujiu said in something of a shriek. "Did they attack her? Is that why she fainted? Oh, but she must have gotten away okay since the two of you were there to help. She doesn't look hurt either."

A pained grimace came to Onkei's face. "She didn't get away unscathed."

"Huh? But you said she just fainted!"

"I wasn't able to offer her any assistance whatsoever. I was completely useless," Onkei said in a strained voice, clenching his fist. His hands were shaking.

Tankai hadn't been able to help either. What was the point of him being her bodyguard? In fact, Jusetsu was the one who protected him and Onkei.

Jiujiu opened the curtain and stared at Tankai and Onkei apprehensively. Tankai glanced down at the bed. Now dressed in her nightclothes, Jusetsu was lying down, her face still pale.

Onkei drew closer to the bed, then kneeled down beside it. He gazed intently at Jusetsu's face. Jiujiu went to the other side of the curtain, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

She tugged on Tankai's sleeve. "What happened to her?" "How would I know?" Tankai snapped, annoyed.

Jiujiu backed away in shock.

"I...really have no idea, Jiujiu," he repeated, more gently this time. His voice was feeble now—he was at an utter loss.

Jiujiu opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, but closed it again and looked back at the bed. She probably wanted to ask Tankai whether Jusetsu was going to be all right... but he couldn't answer that question.

Tankai felt like he had a suffocatingly heavy weight on his shoulders. He looked around the room, hoping he could get the feeling to subside.

"Come to think of it, where's Ishiha?" he asked. "It's not like him to let Shinshin out of his sight."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jiujiu, sounding panicked. "That's right.

I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"He's not back yet. He suddenly dashed outside to chase after Shinshin... Oh, Shinshin's here now though."

Having finally noticed Shinshin resting its wings on top of the flowerpatterned rug, she crouched down beside the bird.

"He still hasn't come back...?" asked Tankai. "Shinshin flew over to niangniang. That silly kid must have gotten lost on the way there."

There was no way he could have left the inner palace though, thanks to the guards who blocked off all the gates.

"Kogyo is searching the area for him. I was just thinking about joining her when you all arrived home," Jiujiu explained. Kogyo was a court lady who worked at the Yamei Palace.

"Why don't I go lend a hand? If he was chasing after Shinshin, I assume he'd be somewhere to the west."

The gate that Jusetsu was at was on the northwestern side of the imperial

estate. Jiujiu, however, didn't agree with Tankai's conjecture.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "He headed east. Shinshin suddenly hurried out of the building, flapped its wings, then immediately began to fly toward the east side of the imperial estate."

"The east is where the inner court is located, isn't it? That's the opposite direction from where niangniang was."

"I know, but trust me. That's the way Shinshin went," Jiujiu responded, sounding annoyed. It wasn't as if she was getting her east and west mixed up. Maybe Shinshin had flown to the east, changed direction, and headed over to Jusetsu in the west.

"Then I may as well look in the east for now."

Nothing would get done if the two of them kept going around in circles, so Tankai left it at that and left the palace building. Directly to the east of the Yamei Palace was the inner court where the emperor lived. If you headed northeast, you'd come across the Hien Palace, while the Eno Palace was located toward the southeast. Tankai tried searching the area surrounding the two consorts' palaces, but he found no trace of Ishiha. He even asked the eunuchs and court ladies who worked there if they had seen him, but their answers were a resounding no.

Even so, it wasn't like Ishiha was new to the inner palace, and the grounds were only so big. Tankai had shrugged the issue off, telling himself the boy would be back before he knew it—but when night fell, there was still no sign of Ishiha.

Once the sun had set and semi-darkness had engulfed the area surrounding the Yamei Palace, Jusetsu woke up—or at least, her attendants wished it would be Jusetsu.

The person who lay before them was, in fact, someone quite different.

"The Raven has awoken," the Owl declared, his voice coming from the star raven's beak.

Koshun was reclining on his divan while the bird sat on the table in one of the rooms of the inner court.

"What do you mean by that?" Koshun asked curtly.

"The Raven Consort's heart has burst open and flown away. In her place, the once-restrained Raven is making an appearance." "Was it Kosho's forbidden magic that made her heart burst open...?"

"Well, it is one consequence of it," the Owl replied. "That forbidden magic was designed to kill the Raven Consort who managed to break the barrier. It may not have killed her, but..."

Her heart was now elsewhere.

"... When you say it 'flew away,' where exactly has it gone to?" Koshun asked.

"I wouldn't know."

"Is there any way to get it back?"

"I wouldn't know," the Owl repeated.

Koshun frowned and hung his head. The situation was even worse than he thought.

"Well, putting that aside—why do you look like a star raven?" he asked, changing his line of questioning.

Up until this point, the Owl had been incarcerated and had been communicating with the emperor through a large snail shell. It had been a long time since Koshun had heard his voice though, so he'd started wondering what may have happened to him.

"I was punished." "Punished?"

"They found out that I'd been sticking my nose into this. I've been banished—exiled, if you will. I'm not permitted to return to the Secluded Palace ever again," the Owl said.

The rules of the Secluded Palace stated that gods were strictly forbidden from interfering with human affairs. The Owl had been imprisoned for violating this restriction in the first place, and now he was a repeat offender. That must have

been why he was banished.

The Owl's younger sister, the Raven, had also been banished— which was why she'd ended up in Sho.

"Just like the Raven, then," Koshun reasoned. "So, why did you take *that* form?"

The emperor didn't know what the Owl was supposed to look like, but he doubted he naturally resembled a star raven.

"We gods don't have physical forms like you humans do. We can't communicate with people usually—the only exception is when we speak to an oracle."

"An oracle... Do you mean a shrine maiden, like the Raven Consort?"

"Precisely. You can hear me because I left my mark on you. I could communicate with others if I were to use a human-shaped apparatus, but it's not worth the effort—they're too hard to operate. Using a bird is more convenient."

"So you chose that star raven instead."

"Exactly," said the Owl. "It's useful to be able to fly."

The Owl seemed quite laid-back, considering he'd recently been exiled from his home.

"Getting banished doesn't bother me," the Owl continued, seemingly having noticed Koshun's mild bewilderment. "You can't do anything in the Secluded Palace anyway. You can't even make your voice heard properly. That place brings me nothing but frustration."

The Owl wanted to save the Raven—so much so that he readily accepted his punishment.

"Is the current situation good for the Raven? Or bad?"

The Owl was silent for a while. "It's not...good. At the end of the day, she's still inside a shell. But there *are* positives. We can communicate now—as long as she's inclined to do so."

"Do you think you'll be able to understand each other?"

After all, for many years, the Raven had been trapped inside the body of the Raven Consort and given flowers that were poisonous to her.

"The Raven understood me. She called for me. So at the very least, my words can reach her."

In that case, he'd have to ask her how they could get Jusetsu back.

Just as Koshun was about to get to his feet, Eisei returned to the room. He was visibly exhausted, likely as he'd been running around trying to fulfill Koshun's orders.

Eisei kneeled by Koshun. "The Winter Minister and the general will report back to you as soon as they have completed their investigations," he announced.

Koshun nodded, although he knew he had a better grasp of what had happened than they ever would. This was just a formality.

"How are things in the imperial estate?" he asked.

Eisei explained the situation further. "The onlookers who had gathered have left, and the palace is finally beginning to settle down. The Raven Consorts' bones have been collected and returned to the area where their grave was, for the time being."

Kosho's forbidden magic had caused the corpses of the former Raven Consorts to attack Jusetsu. Reijo must have been among them. It was horrific to think her body had been used for such malevolent ends. She'd been like a surrogate mother to Jusetsu.

Perhaps that explained why Jusetsu had broken down. The memory of Jusetsu bawling on the ground came to Koshun's mind. The thought of her in such a state made him choke up. He should have run straight over to her. He didn't know if it would have changed anything, but even so, he *should* have done it.

I have to do everything I can to help her now, he thought. That's the least I can do.

"I have an additional report to share with you, Master. This one has nothing

to do with the command you issued me." Eisei had a severe look on his face. He looked even more exhausted than he had before.

"What? If it's about the roof of Goshi Palace collapsing, I already know."

As he ran over to Jusetsu, a pillar of water had burst into the sky, seemingly in the direction of the Goshi Palace. He wasn't sure if that was the cause or not, but the roof of the Goshi Palace had given way. He'd been notified of its occurrence, but the details were still unclear.

"No, it's not that. Well, it has to do with that incident, I suppose. Hakurai and Injo have disappeared."

"Oh..."

They'd needed Hakurai to help break the barrier, and Injo had been shut away in one of the rooms in the inner court as a hostage to force him to cooperate. Since the barrier had been broken, Koshun had forgotten about them.

"Did they take advantage of the chaos to make a run for it?" he asked.

"Perhaps, but something else has been brought to my attention that is slightly more concerning."

"Which is?"

"Ishiha has gone missing too."

Koshun scowled at that. "What do you mean?"

Eisei looked behind him. "I've brought one of the eunuchs who was keeping an eye on Injo with me."

A solitary boy eunuch was at the entrance of the room. The way he was kneeling on the ground made it look like he was about to grovel for the emperor's forgiveness. Being good friends with Ishiha, he was the one sent to the Yamei Palace as a messenger every now and then so the two of them could see each other. His name was Gyokuji.

"Come here," said Koshun, ushering him inside.

Gyokuji promptly trotted over to Eisei before halting behind him and getting to his knees once again. The boy's face was almost blue. He must have been

responsible for letting Injo get away.

"What happened?" Koshun asked as calmly as he could possibly could, trying to make sure he didn't intimidate the boy. Such an effort wasn't really needed, considering how quiet and composed the emperor's voice was to start off with —but Gyokuji still looked like he was about to burst out crying. No—his eyes were already welling up with tears.

"I'm s-so sorry," he said, his voice shaky. "It was my f-foolishness that caused this..."

"It's all right. If I had been that worried about them escaping, I would have put someone stronger on guard, such as a military officer. It's not much of an issue."

Although Injo was technically a hostage, Koshun hadn't expected her to try to escape. Hakurai had even offered to assist because he wanted to avoid the girl ending up as the ao god's sacrifice. What was the point in lending a helping hand only to run away once the work was done? It left Koshun with several questions.

Those questions, however, were cleared up once he heard what Gyokuji had to say.

The boy choked on his words as he described what had happened.

"Sh-shortly after the ritual began..."

A great roaring sound startled Gyokuji. At that time, there was no way he could have known that Jusetsu had just broken the barrier that was preventing her from leaving the estate, and that the sound he heard was the gate collapsing.

"What was that?" asked the other eunuch who was guarding Injo as he apprehensively scanned their surroundings.

It didn't take long for the area to erupt in a frenzy of commotion, and it seemed somewhat rowdy outside of the inner court too. And although it was faint, the two eunuchs could also make out some sort of cry or howl in the

distance.

"I'm going to take a look," stated the other eunuch, suspecting something had gone awry.

With that, he ran off, leaving Gyokuji by himself. The boy felt even more anxious now. Assuming Injo would be feeling the same, he turned around to find her peeking out of the lattice window in the door, her fingers pressed against the glass.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know..." Gyokuji had no choice but to say.

All of a sudden, she shifted her gaze to the area behind Gyokuji. Her deep black eyes were fixed on something.

There was a voice behind Gyokuji. "Hello there, daughter of the Hatan clan."

Startled, the young eunuch jolted around to find an elderly eunuch standing there. At least, he *assumed* this man was a eunuch—the robe he was wearing was dark gray and his face looked familiar.

The man's skin looked smooth despite his advanced age, and his face was lacking in expression.

Gyokuji searched his memories. It has to be him... "Ui...?" he asked.

It was Ui, the keeper of the treasure vault. Gyokuji had seen him a few times before, but that was it. They'd never spoken to one another. Gyokuji also had no clue about his true form, or that he'd vanished, declaring that the ao god had summoned him.

"Hello there, daughter of the Hatan clan," Ui said once again.

That was when Gyokuji finally realized that he was talking to Injo.

"The ao god is calling you," the man continued. "Quick, come."

Gyokuji had no idea what he meant, but he could tell that Ui seemed to be asking Injo to go with him.

"Is that a command from my master, Ui? Or from Attendant Ei?" Gyokuji asked, but Ui didn't react. Instead, Ui simply glided toward the doorway, acting

as if he hadn't even heard the young eunuch speak.

Gyokuji had no idea what to do. Ui was his superior and had been working in the imperial estate for far longer than he had.

That was when Ui unlocked the door like it was the most normal thing in the world for him to do.

"Um, hold on..."

Understandably flustered, Gyokuji attempted to stop him, but the door swung right open from the inside and knocked him out of the way. Gyokuji fell onto his backside with a thud. By the time he picked himself up from the floor—forcing himself to endure the pain—Injo had already turned the corner of the corridor. There was no trace of Ui.

Gyokuji went pale and screamed, exasperated by his own blunder. He hurried after her, but Injo was quick on her feet. She escaped the palace building and kept running, showing no sign of hesitation. She was heading for the Goshi Palace. The girl ran along the passages, dashed up the steps of the palace building, then hurried through the doorway. Gyokuji followed her.

Once inside, Injo paused. Gyokuji began to approach her, but then froze in shock. The stone floor beneath Injo's feet was glowing faintly. In reality, it was swaying gently, like a pool of water brimming with light.

Just as Gyokuji was about to call out to her, a piercing cry echoed from behind him, and something big and gold rushed inside the palace. He could hear the beating of wings, and the big gold thing landed on the floor with another cry.

It was a golden chicken—the same one that lived at the Yamei Palace. Why is it here? Hearing more footsteps, Gyokuji turned around.

Ishiha was hurrying over. "Shinshin..." he panted, his shoulders heaving up and down with each labored breath.

That was the golden chicken's name, but it wasn't the bird that reacted to it—instead, Injo did. She quickly lifted her head and looked in the direction the voice had come from.

Ishiha had now come inside. When he saw Gyokuji, he looked taken aback—

but it didn't even come close to the expression of utter disbelief that came to his face when he saw Injo.

"...Ayura?" he asked.

Injo blinked repeatedly. "Ishiha."

"Why are you here?" said Ishiha. While he seemed shaken up, Injo just looked happy.

The two of them exchanged a few words in what Gyokuji assumed to be their native tongue. He couldn't understand what they were saying.

The golden chicken then let out a shrill cry, making Injo jump. She looked at the bird with a troubled look on her face. "Hey,

can you take that bird away? The god doesn't like it."

Gyokuji figured she was speaking to him, since she was now using a language that he could understand. "The god?" he asked. The golden chicken let out a furious caw, as if in protest.

Gyokuji suddenly felt as if the ground was shaking beneath him. He looked down.

It's wet?

The floor was submerged in water. Suddenly, the golden chicken started flapping its wings again, and golden feathers drifted down from it. Water surged up out of the floor like arrows, narrowly skimming past the golden chicken. Gyokuji stepped back and retreated toward the doorway. He clung to a pillar and slid to the ground.

The floor wasn't covered in water at all—the floor had become water.

The water swirled around Injo, spraying into the air. Arrow after arrow of water appeared, aiming at the golden chicken.

The golden chicken spun around, flapped its wings to speed up, and soared up into the air. The bird then darted outside, successfully dodging the water arrows as it made its way out. Shinshin then soared right up into the sky, leaving the Goshi Palace behind.

Gyokuji noticed that there were now dark clouds hanging in the sky—which was peculiar, considering how sunny it had been that day. This change must have happened very quickly.

The sound of water became more ferocious, prompting Gyokuji to look back inside. Injo was circled by a whirlpool that was rising higher and higher into the air. He couldn't even understand what was happening anymore.

Then, there was a sudden, loud jolt. It almost felt like something was thrusting up against the ceiling. Gyokuji ducked down and clung onto the pillar as tightly as he could. A splash of water hit his cheek and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Ayura!" Ishiha called out.

Gyokuji opened his eyes again. A large, swirling pillar of water had smashed through the palace building's roof. The eddying water was so loud that it almost sounded like a roar. He couldn't see Injo, but he assumed she was inside the water pillar. Ishiha tried to reach out to it, but the maelstrom was so ferocious that it was creating a great deal of spray and wind, preventing him from getting any closer.

Gyokuji was paralyzed with terror. He got the distinct impression that he was witnessing something that transcended human understanding. He trembled with fear.

The water pillar looked more like a wriggling snake. It would undulate, elongate itself, and howl. It almost felt like the water was alive.

She's going to be eaten, isn't she?

Just as this fear crossed Gyokuji's mind, he heard what sounded like glass shattering. The water pillar burst, sending splashes of water down in all directions.

Is it gone?

There, where the column of water had stood just moments earlier, was Injo.

There were still ripples moving in the water that acted as the palace's floor.

Ishiha ran over to her. Both of them were very shaky on their feet. At that same moment, however, the water moved by itself, and a wave formed. It rose

toward the ceiling and gently circled Injo's body.

"Oh..." Injo began, but she barely had the chance to make another sound before she was dragged beneath the water's surface.

Injo reached out for Ishiha. He grabbed hold of her hand and tried to pull her back, but he just ended up being dragged toward her instead. Water rose from Ishiha's feet and wrapped around him like ivy. It continued to surround them before eventually appearing to engulf them entirely.

And with that, they disappeared—taking the soft sounds of water with them.

Gyokuji stared in blank amazement. Everything had happened so quickly—but he didn't get the chance to think through what had happened and how.

He immediately heard clothes rustling beside him, bringing him back to his senses. He looked up to find a man he didn't recognize standing by his side. The stranger was around forty and had fabric covering his left eye. He didn't look to be a eunuch, and there was no way this complete stranger was supposed to be in the inner court. Even so, Gyokuji wasn't in the right state of mind to challenge the man. The events that had unfolded right before his eyes had left him too shaken up.

"That stupid ao god..." the man groaned. He then swiftly turned back the way he came and exited the palace building.

Gyokuji took a few deep breaths to get his breathing back to normal, then slowly rose to his feet. He took a look around— there wasn't a single drop of water in the area. All that lay beneath his feet now was cold, dry stone.

But when he looked up, he could see that the roof had indeed collapsed, allowing the blue sky to peek through.

Once Koshun finished listening to Gyokuji's report, he dismissed the eunuch and leaned back in his divan.

The man he mentioned at the end must have been Hakurai.

Was the water pillar the ao god's doing? While its objective was unclear, there must have been some link between the pillar and the barrier's destruction. Could that explain why Hakurai offered to help?

"Injo and Ishiha knew each other?" he wondered aloud.

They had to be more than just vague acquaintances. Now that Koshun took the time to consider this, he realized the two of them had similar physical characteristics. Were they both from the Hatan clan?

The ao god took them both—but Koshun had no idea why.

He let out a sigh and shut his eyes. There was so much that he didn't understand, which made it hard for him to work out what to do now. One wrong move, and there'd be no going back. The very thought terrified him.

Suddenly, a gentle aroma drifted through the air. Koshun opened his eyes and saw Eisei the eunuch just about to put some tea down on the table.

Eisei had been preparing tea while Koshun was listening to Gyokuji's story. As always, the tea he made smelled wonderful. It had a mellow flavor and sent a warm, comforting sensation down Koshun's throat.

"I'm especially grateful that I have you around today," the emperor said softly, cup in hand. The comment brought a smile to Eisei's face.

Once he'd finished drinking the tea, Koshun stood up. "I'm going to the Yamei Palace," he announced.

"Now?" Eisei asked. "Don't you want to take a break?" "There will be rumors flying around about this incident at

tomorrow's imperial council meeting. There are questions I need to ask beforehand."

The fact that Jusetsu was a descendant of the Ran lineage had now been made blatantly obvious in the eyes of the public.

While Koshun had already scrapped the law that ordered relatives of the Ran Dynasty to be executed, the commotion would be too significant for the imperial court to overlook.

I have to protect her at all costs.

Koshun got the Owl to perch on his arm—in his star raven form, of course—and then began making his way to the Yamei Palace. The sun had already set, and dusk was beginning to settle over the imperial estate. Not bothering to

bring a lantern, Koshun hurried ahead, weaving his way through the shadows.

As always, the Yamei Palace was surrounded by darkness. The only light it emitted was the glow of the lamps indoors, faint and indistinct.

When Eisei announced the emperor had arrived, someone swung the door open in panic.

It was Tankai. "My master..." he said, quickly getting to his knees—but Koshun just looked toward the back of the room, a hint of confusion in his gaze.

There was a curtain hanging over the bed. Onkei and Jiujiu were standing next to it. Jusetsu was on top of the bed, her hand pressed against her forehead as she hung her head dejectedly.

"Jusetsu," Koshun called out, but she didn't react. He glanced down at the Owl.

"Raven," called the Owl.

This time, Jusetsu lethargically lifted her head and slowly turned to look at him. Frowning, she scowled at the Owl with an aggravated look in her eyes. She seemed so different from the Jusetsu that Koshun knew. *Perhaps it's people's temperaments that make them look the way they do rather than their physical features,* he considered. The girl in front of him resembled Jusetsu, but at the same time, she didn't at all.

"Are you here to kill me?" Jusetsu—or rather, the Raven— asked him. There was anger and fear in her voice.

"Kill you?" said the Owl. "I'm not sure yet—but I'm not here to do my Burier work. I've been banished."

"Banished...?" repeated the Raven, giving him a distrustful frown.

Only Koshun could hear the Owl's voice, which meant that Tankai, Onkei, and the others were just staring at Jusetsu and Koshun skeptically.

Koshun proceeded toward the center of the room and sat down in a chair. The Owl flew over to the seat opposite him.

"Uren Niangniang is currently controlling Jusetsu's body. That's who's speaking," Koshun explained plainly and calmly. "Jusetsu's heart is elsewhere.

Uren Niangniang's older brother is inside this star raven, but I'm the only one who can hear what he's saying."

Tankai and the others were baffled by this, but there was no time for him to worry about that.

"Raven, I have some questions for you. Where is Jusetsu's heart, and how can we get it back?" Koshun asked in a straightforward manner.

"I don't know."

The Raven's response was curt. Jusetsu's voice had always sounded terse, but it had had a unique gentleness to it when she herself was still inhabiting her body. It was only now, in the absence of this softness, that he remembered how much kinder it made her sound.

"You must," the Owl cut in.

The Raven turned her face away.

The Owl continued. "You were the Headlander at the Secluded Palace. It was your job to guide souls the way they needed to go. Hearts and souls are basically the same thing. There's no way you don't know where her heart is or how to get it back."

The Raven didn't answer him.

"I just want you to state whether there's a way to do that. You don't need to tell us how," said Koshun, already backing down. There was no point persistently pushing the Raven if she didn't want to answer. It was more important to him to find out if getting Jusetsu back to normal was even a possibility.

"We're searching for the missing part of your body, Raven." His words made the Raven turn around with a start.

"We have a good idea of where it might be," he continued. "Jusetsu was planning on heading there once she'd broken Kosho's barrier."

The Raven glared intently at Koshun, looking wary. Her eyes exuded suspicion. "Stop lying," she spat, her voice full of hatred. "I already know. Why would I fall for your tricks a second time? No, a *third*, in fact."

As soon as she said this, Koshun sensed what felt like a sharp

gust of wind rushing through the air. He closed his eyes and heard a ferocious whacking sound. When he opened them again, Eisei was standing by his side, and all he could see was the closed doorway standing before him.

The Raven had shut him out. This was all too familiar—after all, the first time he met Jusetsu, she did the same thing.

Koshun heard wingbeats, and a moment later, the Owl landed on his shoulder.

"She's been tricked by people so many times. It's no surprise that she's learned not to trust so easily."

"There was the incident that led to her banishment, as well as what Kosho did, wasn't there?" Koshun asked.

The Raven had been banished after a dead person had deceived her into bringing them back to life. Then, she'd ended up getting shut away inside of the Raven Consort's body thanks to Kosho. When Koshun thought about it that way, he almost felt sorry for her.

"She's stupid, but pitiful too." Although the Owl's tone of voice was cold, there were still traces of sadness and love in the way he spoke about her.

Koshun stared at the black doorway for a short while. "We're going to the Eno Palace," he announced.

With that, he turned around. If he wanted to save Jusetsu, he couldn't afford to waste any time.

Oblivious to the emperor's urgency, however, the night wore on.

Bright morning light poured into the hall. The members of the imperial court all looked very serious. Meiin, the grand chancellor, frowned apprehensively, and even the usually mildmannered Gyotoku was pale from stress. The Winter Minister, Senri, and the general of the estate guard—being the chief of the division responsible for defending the gates to the imperial estate—were updating the imperial court on what they knew of the events that transpired. Koshun had already heard what they both had to say.

According to the Winter Ministry, the conducted ritual was intended to honor the gate god. More specifically, it was a purification ritual to drive away bad luck that the gate god was predicted to bring. The collapse of the gate, the appearance of the large army of corpses, and the Goshi Palace's roof caving in were all misfortunes caused by the gate god's wrath—but fortunately, they managed to drive out the evil before any lives were cost and kept the damage caused to a minimum. At least, that was how the story went.

The general used the damage and the testimonials of those who witnessed the day's events to compile this report. These onlookers spoke in detail about the horde of corpses and the gate collapse. Their vivid recollections of the emergence of this large group of skeletons were especially terrifying for everyone to hear. It would have been far easier to rationalize it all if they were attacked by a rebel army, but these events, however, were beyond comprehension. That was what made it hard to figure out how to proceed. Nobody knew what conclusions to draw from what they were hearing. The members of the court just sat there,

visibly mystified.

Koshun gazed at the faces in the crowd, but he wasn't really concentrating on what he was looking at. He was maintaining the same calm and collected expression that he always did, but cold sweat beaded at the nape of his neck.

He was at a crossroads. He was either going to save Jusetsu's life, or he wasn't.

"So..." Meiin began, "who was the shrine maiden who defeated the corpses and destroyed the water pillar using just one arrow?" That was the most important thing. Meiin wasn't going to let himself get distracted by strange phenomena like walking corpses

or water pillars bursting up from the ground. "Those who saw her claim she had silver hair."

"That's right." The general nodded. Still, he didn't know the answer to Meiin's question himself, so he looked over at Senri for help.

"She's a shrine maiden," he answered calmly.

"I already know that," Meiin said. "I hear she works for Uren Niangniang."

"Indeed she does. She's from the Winter Ministry," Senri responded without hesitation. He was surprisingly composed.

"But what's her background?"

"Her name is Ryu Jusetsu. She's sixteen and a former house servant. The golden chicken selected her to act as Uren Niangniang's shrine maiden."

"The golden chicken?"

"Uren Niangniang's messenger. It's a golden chicken with golden feathers, and..."

"Does she have any connection to the Ran lineage?" Meiin cut in, going straight to the crux of the matter. Everyone in the room looked nervous.

"I don't know," Senri replied. He'd adopted a rather standoffish attitude and seemed completely relaxed.

Meiin's eyelids twitched nervously. "That can't be true." "She was kidnapped by slave dealers before she was old enough

to understand what was going on around her and ended up as a house servant, so there's no way for any of us to know."

"Do you *really* think that's a good enough response?!" Meiin snapped, enraged—but instead of reacting with similar fury, Senri's gaze softened.

"If it's not, then I shall offer up my head," Senri said.

Meiin was unsurprisingly taken aback. Everyone else was too. "What...?"

"I'll shoulder the blame," the Winter Minister continued. "Someone else can take my place, but no one can take hers. Let me ask you this—could any of us have done what she did? Do you know anyone who could have beaten that swarm of cadavers and shattered the water pillar with a single arrow?"

Meiin was at a loss for words. No one else said a thing.

"There's nobody who could replace her," Senri asserted decisively.

Meiin shamefully averted his gaze. "I've...heard people say she's a consort from the inner palace called the Raven Consort," he said, glancing in Koshun's

direction. "Can you comment on that speculation?"

"The title 'Raven Consort' is just the name she's commonly known by. She isn't actually a concubine," explained Senri. "She's only in the inner palace because there's a shrine to Uren Niangniang there. The shrine has been there since the days of the previous dynasty. Uren Niangniang used to be more revered than she is today, and the shrine maiden who served her was held in high regard as a result. I imagine she was of great support to the consorts of the inner palace, considering the trials and tribulations that their positions entail. They must have really trusted her. In fact, they still do— it's just that stories from the inner palace are never made public."

"I've heard such rumors before," said Meiin, giving Senri an imposing look.

"The Raven Consort was punished for causing a disturbance not too long ago, wasn't she?"

"She wasn't the one who *caused* it. She just happened to get dragged into the situation. The inner palace is sealed off from the rest of the world, so those sorts of spats happen all the time. If were to rattle off every disturbance that has occurred in the inner palace, we'd be here all day."

Unsure how to respond to that, Meiin fell silent. Whenever Senri was speaking, he felt like a gentle, calm breeze was blowing through him.

"If this Ryu Jusetsu does possess mystical powers, then she might put a curse on us if we executed her," somebody piped up. Since a gruesome horde had actually appeared, the threat of a curse could no longer be laughed off.

Meiin gave the person who made that comment a sharp glare, then shifted his gaze to Yozetsu Jikei, who was seated in the corner. The man's lips were pursed in a sullen fashion, and so far, he hadn't said a word. Jikei, who had recently taken on the role of the salt and iron envoy at Koshun's request, had once acted as a chief vassal in the Ran Dynasty.

"Would you like to share your own view on this matter, Yozetsu?" Meiin asked politely. To some extent, he respected Jikei—but he seemed wary of him as well.

Jikei unfolded his arms, the look on his face stern and his brow still furrowed. "What is someone like me—a disgraced traitor to the Ran lineage—going to

have to offer you?" he asked solemnly.

Meiin looked disappointed. Jikei had dismissed the discussion. Doing so was tantamount to abandoning a surviving member of the Ran lineage.

He knows exactly what he's doing, thought Koshun. Jikei couldn't come out in defense of Jusetsu. He himself may have turned against the Ran Dynasty and left the imperial court, but the Yozetsu family were once important enough to work as the emperor's chief vassals. If he stood up for Jusetsu, he could be suspected of treason. They'd never be able to save her if it came to that.

Meiin looked over at Koshun, seeking his verdict. Koshun used his eyes to give Eisei, who was waiting behind him, a signal.

Eisei reverently held up a tray and stepped forward. There was a letter on it.

"I have received a plea from the Mandarin Duck Consort," Koshun stated serenely.

```
"A plea...?"

"Go on. Read it."

"I shall," said Meiin, opening it up.
```

In the letter, the Mandarin Duck Consort detailed how the concubines of the inner palace relied on Jusetsu, including the Magpie Consort and the Crane Consort, who were both pregnant. As the person responsible for the affairs of the inner palace, she volunteered to receive any punishment that were to be administered instead. She also noted, however, that there was no law that required someone to be punished simply for having Ran blood. Although her letter was an emotional appeal, Kajo made sure to use logical and objective arguments as well.

The night before, Koshun had opened up to her about everything that happened, asked her for her advice, and convinced her to write this plea.

Meiin read the letter with a somber look on his face, then passed it to Gyotoku, seated beside him.

Meiin then he looked up. "I believe there is some truth to what the Mandarin Duck Consort says. Contrary to how things used to be, the law no longer states

that an individual must be immediately beheaded just because they are part of the Ran lineage. That said..."

The wrinkles on Meiin's brow deepened and he was quiet for a moment—although Koshun knew that there was a lot more he wanted to say.

"If removing the people's anxiety is our aim, I believe executing her would be the best course of action," Koshun said simply.

"It's the easiest option. However, we must not disregard the law—no matter who the matter involves. The physical and mental wellbeing of the Magpie Consort and the Crane Consort is also a concern." At this point in time, the safe delivery of the Magpie and Crane Consort's babies was of the utmost importance. No one could risk doing anything that might get in the way of that.

Fortunately for Jusetsu, Kajo was the highest-ranking consort, a daughter of the distinguished Un family, and was on her side. It was also lucky that this trouble had unfolded at a very crucial time—specifically, during the pregnancies of two of the emperor's consorts.

"Can I say something?" Gyotoku, who'd been watching on in silence, chimed in at last. "It concerns something quite different. Word about what happened yesterday has spread to the area surrounding the imperial estate in just twenty-four hours. Imperial officials who witnessed the events with their own eyes shared the news with their close family, who told their neighbors, who then went on to tell *their* neighbors... Now, Ryu Jusetsu is the talk of the town, with everybody referring to her as the beautiful shrine maiden who defeated all the monsters. I expect there will be folk songs about her before too long."

Since ancient times, there had been a tendency for noteworthy events, whether political or public, to be turned into folk songs and disseminated to the public in that manner.

Word spread quicker than I expected, thought Koshun.

The emperor had gotten Eisei to convince the onlookers that Jusetsu was just a shrine maiden. He knew that if those people combined what they witnessed with the idea that she was a shrine maiden, word about her mystique would inevitably spread far and wide.

"If she were to be executed now, the people would be inclined to rebel. That being said, mishandling this kind of situation could also lead to a riot. The way the Ran lineage has been eradicated has always been extremely unpopular with the public. I believe that in this scenario, showing sympathy would be the optimal choice."

Gyotoku was a moderate individual and hated the idea of violence. Not only that, but his own niece—Kajo—begged for Jusetsu's life to be spared. It made sense for him to take her side.

"People are very shaken up over what happened yesterday. Some are even speculating that the Ran Dynasty's deep-seated resentment caused it. I actually believe that offering Jusetsu our heartfelt protection might help dispel those fears and quell the backlash."

"That's taking it a bit too far," said Meiin, but it was clear from the look on his face that he was giving the risks and benefits of executing or punishing Jusetsu careful thought.

Gyotoku looked down at the floor, his expression unusually gloomy. "Fear has the power to control people's decisions," he muttered quietly, his voice sounding much more strained than usual.

Meiin pressed his lips together and watched him closely—he was usually so easygoing.

"We already have a precedent for this—the Flame Emperor and the former empress dowager. They had their own way of governing this land. I'm in no position to say whether it was right or wrong. That said..."

Gyotoku paused, and a hint of distress suddenly appeared on his plump face.

"As you already know, my older brother—the Mandarin Duck Consort's father—disliked the world of imperial officials so much that he chose to become a sea merchant instead. It has incredible ups and downs—one day, you're on top of the world, and the next, you could have your head chopped off. He hated that. It's so easy for your life to be taken away from you. To tell the truth, I'd grown sick and tired of it as well. I considered dropping everything to become a merchant like my brother did on more than one occasion—but I'm still here. Why? Because I had trust. I trust in His Majesty."

With that, Gyotoku looked up. The look on his face now was one of pure desperation.

"Personally, I hope to witness virtue, rather than bloodshed. I would prefer to see this country ruled by righteousness rather than fear. I've always believed that His Majesty would be the ruler to make that happen. It's for that precise reason that I am here today."

His voice oozed with passion. Koshun let out a quiet sigh of admiration.

I've been underestimating Gyotoku.

He never realized that man had so much passion inside of him. Who would have known that someone so mildmannered and conflict-averse possessed such fervor?

It was obvious from the way everyone was looking at each other that Gyotoku's fervor had spread. Meiin, who was deep in thought, was the only one who was frowning.

"Your Majesty?" Meiin then said, looking back at Koshun. Everybody else did the same. They were asking the emperor for his verdict.

"I agree with Gyotoku," Koshun declared.

Although Meiin looked conflicted, the others looked pleased.

Koshun was more than relieved to see this was the case.

"But..." Meiin persisted, refusing to back down quite so easily. "We can't just leave things the way they are."

"Of course not." Koshun nodded. "Like Gyotoku says, I think we should portray to people that we're protecting her."

"What do you mean by that?"

"By creating a place for her in the system. As things stand, her role is vague and unregulated—that's why this confusion arose in the first place. We need to give her a position that everyone will be able to understand."

"Are you going to give her an official rank?"

"Not quite," said Koshun. "I'm going to come up with a new role."

That meant assigning her a position not already stipulated in the administerial code. The emperor could directly appoint someone to those special positions without consulting anyone else.

Meiin lowered his gaze thoughtfully.

Koshun continued to speak. "This ordeal has encouraged me to rethink my approach to religious ceremonies. My grandfather, who detested everything supernatural, stopped performing divine rituals and kept the gods at arm's length. As a result, the Seiu Shrine is deserted. However, I see now that consoling the spirits of our ancestors, worshipping our gods, and carrying out divine rituals are not things that we should neglect. If we want to be able to remain humble and reflect on our experiences, it is important to realize that sometimes there are things that are beyond human understanding."

Koshun paused there and looked in front of him.

"I shall have the Seiu Shrine repaired and give Ryu Jusetsu the job of presiding over the divine rituals. Winter Minister, I want you to look into which ceremonies she needs to perform. Please let me know your findings. We will do whatever is necessary."

"Understood," said Senri, bowing.

Koshun stood up and got down from his platform, signaling the end of the imperial council meeting. Everyone bowed to him in unison.

Soon after Koshun left the hall and started making his way down the corridor, he came to a halt—he could hear somebody following him. When he looked round, he discovered it was Meiin. Noticing how fearful the man looked, Koshun got Eisei to give the two of them some space and called him in closer—close enough for them to be able to whisper to each other.

"If there's something troubling you, just say it," said Koshun.

"I have had the opportunity to meet this 'Raven Consort'..." Meiin had met Jusetsu several times when she'd come to the outer court. "Not only have you been aware of the girl in question for a long time, Your Majesty, but I also believe the two of you are on close terms. Did you really know nothing about her identity?"

Koshun stared at him. "If by 'close terms' you're implying that we've slept together, then that could not be further from the truth," he replied calmly, not mincing his words.

Meiin awkwardly lowered his gaze.

"The Mandarin Duck Consort is very fond of Ryu Jusetsu," Koshun continued. "She dotes on her like a little sister. I thought the 'ears' you inherited from Eitoku would have told you that."

A pained expression came to Meiin's face. The former grand chancellor, Un Eitoku, had obtained intel through the court ladies and eunuchs who worked in the inner palace. Koshun suspected that the information network had not been passed over to his son, Gyotoku, but to his son-in-law Meiin instead. Gyotoku was too good-natured.

"To answer your question, no, I didn't know her true identity. The inner palace was the last place I would have expected to find someone from the Ran bloodline."

"But..." Meiin began, but he cut himself off. "Yes, you make a good point there."

Thanks to his rational nature, Meiin tended to accept people's arguments fairly readily as long as they made logical sense. The idea of a Ran descendant being placed in the inner palace was preposterous. It would be like deliberately throwing them to the wolves.

As reasonable as he was, however, Meiin had no qualms about asking tough questions.

"Are you therefore claiming that you had no ulterior motive for abolishing the decree that called for the capture and killing of all members of the Ran clan?"

"I did not," Koshun replied, keeping his response brief. Since he was always concise in the way he spoke, it would look suspicious if he suddenly started giving long-winded answers. "I believe I explained why I did that at the time."

"You said you wanted to eliminate unnecessary stipulations from the criminal code—that if you left it how it was, it would just end up becoming lengthier and lengthier. You're quite right, I remember that now."

Koshun nodded. "Was there anything else you wanted to add?"

"No, that was all." Meiin took a step back and placed his hands together in a gesture of respect. "I do apologize for taking up your valuable time. My doubts have now been cleared up."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Just as Koshun was about to walk away, Meiin made another comment.

"Once again, I am deeply impressed by your foresight."

Koshun turned around. Unusually for him, Meiin had a smile on his face. It was a characteristically intelligent-looking one, but not in an unpleasant way—his smile had a degree of warmth to it, the kind that made you feel like you could share anything.

"I've been lucky enough to have wonderful vassals around me," said Koshun simply, before going on his way. This was how he truly felt.

As he walked along, Koshun let out a small sigh. He must have been tensing up his whole body without realizing it, because his back had felt very stiff. Now, though, this tension had finally loosened slightly.

As relieved as he felt, however, there was still more work to do. Koshun whispered to Eisei, who was following him from behind. "Call Shiki and Senri to the Koshi Palace. Then, send a messenger to Saname Shin."

There were still many problems left to solve, but Koshun was confident that Shiki and Senri would be able to help.

That said, that still left one big problem that he needed to solve—the problem of the Raven.

Late that night, Koshun visited the Yamei Palace.

Inside, it was even darker than usual. Koshun noticed that there were partitioning screens in front of the lamps.

"Niangniang—or rather, Uren Niangniang—hates the light, you see..." Jiujiu explained, looking embarrassed.

The Raven was sitting in the corner of the room, as far away from the lights as

one could get, clutching her knees. Her silver hair was tied up, and she was wearing Jusetsu's familiar black robe. Jiujiu must have gotten her dressed.

"That girl did my hair like this, insisting that I had to wear it up," grumbled the Raven from the corner. "It *hurts*," she added, her face like that of a petulant child.

"It was a real challenge. You wouldn't have believed the fuss she kicked up over something so minor," Jiujiu said.

Not only that, but she also screamed whenever she was hungry—which was a problem, considering she didn't know how to use chopsticks or spoons properly. Then, she would throw a tantrum over not being able to eat properly, and resort to eating with her fingers.

"She's like a toddler."

"We don't understand chopsticks," said the Owl from his perch on Koshun's shoulder. "We survive on the fruit that grows on the trees in the Secluded Palace, so of course we don't know how."

"Make her something she can eat without them," Koshun said to Jiujiu. "Have there been any other issues?"

"No. But..." "But what?"

Jiujiu looked like she was about to cry. "Uhm... Niangniang will go back to normal, won't she? She'll go back to the way she used to be?"

Koshun looked at the Raven, who swiftly turned her head away. "I'll make sure of it," Koshun told Jiujiu in a straightforward manner.

Jiujiu looked somewhat reassured. "What about Ishiha? You don't know where he is, do you?"

"Not yet."

Jiujiu looked disappointed. Her emotions showed on her face right away, which made them quite easy to read.

"Ishiha's that kid, isn't he?" the Raven called over from the corner of the room. "That Hatan kid. That wretched White Turtle took him out of spite." Her words brimmed with resentment.

"Out of spite?"

"The Hatan people are my oracles. My first oracle was from the Hatan clan..."

"Your first oracle...?" Koshun thought back. "Do you mean the first Winter Sovereign?"

After being banished from the Secluded Palace, the Raven came to this land and selected a Summer Sovereign and a Winter Sovereign. That was how these two sovereigns came into being.

"When I first washed up here, nobody could see me or hear me. Not until I met that oracle. Finally, I was able to talk to people..." the Raven said slowly. "Without an oracle, I'm useless. I can't say anything. I can't even receive offerings. I'm helpless. It's the same for the White Turtle. The idea of oracles being killed scares us more than anything else. That's why the White Turtle got angry and hateful. I felt the same way."

The way the Raven spoke was even more childish than Koshun previously thought. Her story was a little vague.

"The ao god got mad...? Because his oracle was killed? By you?" he asked.

"Not by me. The Hatan killed them. They attacked Hi and murdered his oracle. After all, the Hi ruler was the man who tricked me."

"Hi..."

That was an ancient dynasty that Jusetsu was said to be related to as well. That dynasty was said to have had a strong faith in the ao god.

Koshun tried to piece together what the Raven was saying in his head.

The Raven had been banished after being coaxed into reviving a dead person's soul—and it sounded like that person was a ruler from the Hi Dynasty. As a result, the Raven got the Hatan clan to attack the Hi Dynasty, causing its downfall. The ao god's oracle was also killed. This led the ao god to hate the Raven—just as the Raven hated the ao god.

"Does that mean the ao god killed your oracle too?"

"Yes. He's so sneaky and mean." The Raven scowled. "He manipulated the siblings into fighting with each other and had my oracle killed."

Koshun felt like he'd heard a similar story in one of the tales Jusetsu had told him—a story about the Summer Sovereign, his younger brother, and the Winter Sovereign. In the end, the Summer Sovereign had killed the Winter Sovereign, and the era of warfare began. In other words, the ao god had also instigated the demise of a dynasty.

"Is that why you fought with the ao god?" he asked.

"I won," the Raven said, sounding strangely proud. "I'd never lose to someone like the White Turtle."

"But you lost part of your body, didn't you?" said the Owl.

The Raven gave him a fierce glare. "That's why Kosho was able to do whatever she wanted with me. He's such an idiot, and yet he's *still* thinking of ways to get payback! That dummy will face the consequences."

Even though she was still scowling at the Owl, tears suddenly started brimming in the Raven's eyes. Her face turned bright red, and she bit her lip. The more she spoke, the clearer it became to Koshun that she wasn't very smart.

"Kosho... Kosho was a slave, ever since she was little. She was a scrawny, sickly-looking child. She was weak, pitiful. She was an oracle who served me and me alone. I was so pleased I'd finally found my oracle. Kosho was all alone, so I was her only friend— her only ally. But then, she..."

Sitting there with her arms wrapped around her knees, Raven began bawling like a baby. It felt a bit strange seeing someone act that way in Jusetsu's body—Jusetsu would *never* have cried like that. "You both met the same fate, then," said the Owl said, astonished. "I mean, Ran Yu took advantage of Kosho too, didn't he?" "If only... If only I'd gotten that missing part of my body back,

I never would have been shut away," the Raven said, sniveling. Large teardrops fell from her eyes.

"What would happen to you if you did get it back...?" Koshun asked quietly.

The Raven looked at him, teary-eyed. She blinked, causing tears to slip down her cheeks. "I'd be myself again," she said.

Koshun formed his own interpretation of what she meant by this.

"So...you'd go back to your original form? If that were to happen...what would become of Jusetsu—or rather, the body you're in right now?"

The Raven cocked her head to one side. This gesture resembled one that Jusetsu would make.

"Nothing. I'd be able to get inside my oracle—and get out again too. That's all. I'd come and go like a passing wind."

This "passing wind" simile didn't sound like something the Raven would have come up with herself. Koshun wondered if she was just imitating something one of her oracles had said.

Putting that aside, it didn't sound like Jusetsu's body would be damaged in any way if the Raven did get her missing half back. That offered some relief to Koshun.

"It's understandable that you can't bring yourself to trust people after everything you've been through, Raven. I'm going to try my very hardest to gain your trust."

The Raven quietly and suspiciously looked at Koshun.

"You want your missing half back. I'm correct in assuming that, aren't I?"

The Raven gave the emperor a firm nod.

"We want that for you too. By setting you free, we want to give Jusetsu her freedom as well," said Koshun. He spoke slowly so that he'd be easy to understand.

The Raven frowned slightly, but she still listened intently to what he had to say.

"Since we are so determined to set Jusetsu free, we are committed to finding your missing half, no matter what it takes. Doing so will benefit us. Do you understand?"

The Raven stared at Koshun as he spoke, not moving an inch. He couldn't tell whether or not she was thinking things through.

"Getting my missing half back...will be good for you too?" the Raven said uncertainly.

"Exactly," Koshun replied with a nod. "It'd be to our benefit, so we're not going to betray you."

The Raven's eyes darted around the room. She looked baffled. She placed her hands on her knees and fiddled restlessly with the hem of her skirt.

"Raven," the Owl called out at last, making her jump. "I came here to save you. You know that, don't you? We were both born from the same sea bubble. We're in this together."

The Raven widened her gaze in astonishment. She looked at the Owl with her deep, black eyes. "Even though you're mad...?" she asked.

"I can't bring myself to be mad at you anymore, Raven. I'm an idiot too. I've been banished. Staying by your side is the only option I've got left."

"Staying by my side..." she repeated. "Just the two of us," the Owl said.

The Raven's mouth hung open, but no sounds came out. Another tear suddenly trickled down her cheek, falling to the floor. Koshun could sense that something cold and frozen that the Raven had been harboring inside of her had finally thawed.

I understand it now, he thought. The Raven is scared of being alone.

Only her oracles could talk to her, get to know her, or understand her. Without an oracle, she had no one else to reach out to. That scared her more than anything.

The Raven carried on crying, but she still wasn't making any sounds. The tears just fell from her eyes in silence.

Koshun briefly considered the loneliness these gods must have experienced—and how frightening it would be to go unheard for ages, with no way of making people even notice your existence.

Having suddenly stopped crying, the Raven began speaking again in a soft voice. "Souls... They go across the sea and are led to the Secluded Palace...

Then, they all pour out from the Secluded Palace and into the Passage of Stars.

They drift about, fall into slumber, then come falling down as a new life..."

The Raven explained all this in a gentle manner.

"But souls that haven't yet ended their lives aren't able to go to the Secluded Palace. Instead, they get dragged into the Passage of Stars, are engulfed by its current, and simply drift about."

Koshun looked over at the Raven, startled. The Raven was looking at him too.

"Right now, the girl's soul is in the Passage of Stars," she said.

The Passage of Stars. In the star-scattered sky that sat above the sea was a river of stars. Legend said that those shining stars fell down onto dry land and were reborn.

"Are you telling me that Jusetsu...is drifting about up there?" The Raven nodded.

"Is there a way to pull her back?" Koshun asked. "There is," the Raven said flatly.

There's a way to get Jusetsu back. Feeling uncharacteristically enthusiastic, Koshun's heart began to race.

"Then what is it?" he asked.

The Raven's answer, however, made Koshun freeze.

"You can call her back by using one of her blood relatives."

Koshun couldn't remember how he made his way back, but before he knew it, he found himself in one of the rooms of the inner court.

One of Jusetsu's blood relatives.

The Raven's words came flooding back.

There was no way she had any remaining relatives. The entire Ran clan had been killed, save for Jusetsu.

He firmly believed that most problems could be solved if approached wisely enough, even if they seemed impossible at first glance. The way he managed to

prevent Jusetsu's execution was one such example.

But there was a problem here—the dead could not be brought back to life. This situation wasn't one he could use his wits to circumvent.

He felt like he was sinking deep into the dark depths of the sea. There was no light. He couldn't see a thing.

Feeling like he was going to be consumed by the darkness, he grabbed hold of the back of a chair.

"Master?" Eisei called out worriedly, but Koshun could barely hear him.

The emperor held his forehead in his hands. His palms were excruciatingly cold. He found himself looking down, and there, on top of the small table in front of him, sat a Go board. The game was in progress, the stones all sitting there, waiting for someone to take their next move. It was the game he and Jusetsu had been playing one session at a time.

We're never going to finish it, are we? It's all so stupid.

A whimper escaped Koshun's lips.

Once Eisei escorted Koshun to his bedchamber, he inspected the palace building. The only sounds that could be heard were Eisei's footsteps against its cold stone floor. All he could think about was Koshun—how terribly unwell he looked and how, for a few moments, he seemed completely exhausted with worry. It wasn't hard to figure out what was paining the emperor so much.

A blood relative...

If they couldn't find one, Jusetsu's soul couldn't come back, and her body would remain an empty shell. If Uren Niangniang left Jusetsu's body, she could die.

Maybe that's all right, Eisei thought. Jusetsu not existing was the ideal scenario. It'd be the best thing that could happen to Koshun.

Despite that, he could hear a little voice in the back of his head questioning if it was truly all right to let that transpire. Since there was a chance he was Jusetsu's half-brother, he might have been the only person who could save her. Was he really just going to leave her to die? Could he really just sit back and

watch?

Of course I can.

He forcefully shook off these questions, but the annoying little voice nagging at him wouldn't go away.

He was finding it hard to breathe. What was he supposed to do? Nobody was going to give him the answers he wanted—not even Koshun.

When Koshun arrived at the Winter Ministry, he was greeted by all of the ministry's subordinates, but there was no sign of Senri. He and Shiki had left the imperial capital under Koshun's orders, and the two of them were on their way to Je Island.

The subordinates led Koshun to a building in the back of the Winter Ministry, and they entered one of the rooms. An old man was sitting up on the bed. It was Ho Ichigyo. After breaking the barrier, he had collapsed and had been laid up in bed ever since.

"How are you doing?" Koshun asked.

"Don't waste your breath asking me how I am," the man said. Ho had become even thinner lately, as if he had shrunk. "I'm just a good-for-nothing—I wasn't even able to help the Raven Consort when she was in danger. And to think that she was a descendant of the Ran lineage all along... I can barely believe it..."

Misty-eyed, tears began to trickle down Ho's cheeks. "I never expected to cross paths with another member of the Ran lineage, after abandoning Hyogetsu..."

Ran Hyogetsu had been Ho's beloved apprentice.

"Ho Ichigyo... There's something I want to ask you, considering you know more about shaman magic than anybody else around," Koshun began calmly. "According to Uren Niangniang, Jusetsu's soul is currently in the Passage of Stars. She says that in order to call her back, we'd need to find one of her blood relatives. Do you know if there's any other way of doing so?"

Ho blinked his teary eyes, looking conflicted. "Well... While it's possible to invoke the soul of someone who has passed away, the same does not apply to

souls of those who are still alive. Souls of the dead and souls of the living are vastly different things."

As expected, he was quick to respond when asked about shaman magic—but that wasn't the answer that Koshun hoped to hear. His eyes clouded over with disappointment.

"Doesn't the Raven Consort have any blood relatives?" Ho asked worriedly.

"Of course not." Koshun snapped, his tone of voice relatively aggressive by his standards.

Silent, Ho's eyes widened in shock.

"Unless there's another remaining member of the Ran clan around, that is," the emperor continued, making his voice softer this time.

"But Your Majesty..." Ho began hesitantly, "I don't know whether it was her mother or father that was descended from the Ran clan, but perhaps she has some blood relatives on the other side of her family?"

"It was her mother who had the Ran blood...but I don't know who her father was. She doesn't seem to have any ideas either. After all, her mother was a prostitute."

Ho looked down, turning things over in his mind.

"That doesn't mean we can't identify who her father was.

It's far too early to come to that conclusion. I can't make any promises, but there might be a way of finding out."

Koshun was confused. "What makes you say that?"

"The prostitution district is split up according to the status of the clientele. The northern division is where you can find commoners from the imperial capital or those who are in the city for work. Those with considerable status or wealth go to the southern division. Prostitutes in the southern division must be well-educated and excellent performers. If they're versatile enough as entertainers, the women sometimes get bought out as private courtesans. If the Raven Consort's mother was a prostitute from the southern division, then it may be easy to track down her father—depending on how we go about it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"If she was a well-known prostitute, her details would be easy to find. There was always gossip about who their clients were. Do you happen to know what the Raven Consort's mother was called?"

"Her name should be listed in the execution logs..." "I'm talking about her working name."

"Uhm... Well, I could look up the names of all the entertainers."

Prostitutes were registered with so-called entertainment institutions that were in charge of managing musicians and prostitutes. That said, only those who worked for respectable brothels had their names recorded in such archives.

"I'd have to look through some rather old records," Koshun went on. "It would take some time, but..."

Koshun stopped mid-sentence. A better idea had just come to him.

"Maybe Jusetsu told her attendants in the Yamei Palace what her mother was called," he said. There was a chance Jiujiu and the others already had the answer he was looking for. "It'd be quicker if we just asked them outright. Let me get somebody to check. Sei?" Koshun looked behind him. Eisei was standing there, stony-faced.

"Send a messenger to the Yamei Palace," the emperor ordered. "Understood," replied Eisei before leaving the room.

Then, Koshun looked back at Ho. "If I were to find out her name, how would you identify her father?"

"I'd use the connections I formed while working as a scribe in the prostitution district."

"But..." Koshun stared at him. "Isn't it difficult for you to get around, given your health?"

Ho chuckled, his entire face crinkling up as he did so. His smile was weak and frail, and yet there was a certain serenity to it at the same time. "For all these years, I've wasted my life being selfish—but now, it feels like I've found a

purpose at last. Saving the Raven Consort would make me feel somewhat less guilty for what I did to Hyogetsu and Gyoei."

The look on Ho's face was a picture of tranquility. It was as if he finally discovered what would bring him peace. Koshun couldn't help but feel moved.

That was when the emperor realized Ho hadn't gone on the run because he wanted to stay alive. It wasn't that he had a life he desperately wished to cling to. All along, the man was simply scared to die—a passive motivation, but a motivation, nonetheless. That was only natural. Anyone feared death when it was staring them right in the face.

A short while later, the messenger returned. Onkei was accompanying him.

"Niangniang's mother was named Ogyoku."

Onkei had recalled Jusetsu's mother's name with perfect clarity. Koshun felt a tiny glimmer of hope inside, albeit only a faint one. He found himself clenching his fist in determination.

"Ogyoku... Ogyoku... Now, where have I heard that name before?" Ho murmured, but the memory seemed to elude him. "The older you get, the harder it becomes to recall things... You never forget what you learned when you were young though."

"Master," said Onkei, on his knees. "Please, let me help you save niangniang."

"Onkei," Eisei snapped, his piercing voice flying through the air. "That's for our master to decide, not..."

Koshun gently raised his hand to hold Eisei back. "Fine. You may go to the prostitution district with Ho." The emperor paused for a moment, then added, "And Sei too."

It would be wise to have Eisei around as a precaution in case Ho's health took a turn for the worse.

"In that case..." said Ho, getting down from his bed. Noticing how uneasy he was on his feet, Eisei couldn't help but dash over to assist him, but Ho's footing remained undeniably shaky. How was he possibly going to be able to do his job?

"I must be on my way," Ho announced, having mustered all the enthusiasm

he could gather. It was as if he'd sensed Koshun's concern from across the room.

With that, Ho left.

The three of them passed through one of imperial estate's gates in their horse and carriage.

"Attendant Ei," said Onkei. Until that point, he'd been so quiet that you could hardly tell he was there at all.

Eisei just glanced at him, not responding. "Why didn't you tell him?" Onkei continued. Eisei was silent for a moment. "About what?"

"What niangniang's mother's name was. Wasn't it you that asked her about it in the first place?"

"You've always been a marvelous eavesdropper, haven't you?" Undeterred by Eisei's sarcasm, Onkei stared fixedly at him, not budging an inch. Eisei began to regret ever assigning him as Jusetsu's bodyguard. He tried to remember what drove him to make such a decision. Onkei was skilled, scrupulous, and dedicated to obeying Eisei's instructions. Most importantly, though, he liked how Onkei had a strong moral character.

That choice backfired, Eisei thought to himself. It's precisely because of his unwavering moral compass that he's so devoted to the Raven Consort.

Eisei had the urge to click his tongue in disapproval. Why had he been so stupid as to ask Jusetsu for her mother's name? Onkei had been right there by her side.

"I'd forgotten it."

"Why would you pretend not to know something when you do?" Onkei asked, practically ignoring Eisei's response. "What are you hiding?"

Eisei turned his face away.

"If you know who her mother was, then maybe you know who her father—"

"How would I possibly know that?" Eisei spat, causing Onkei to go quiet again. His tongue was sharp, and the look on his face was just as piercing.

The air inside the horse-drawn carriage turned icy and tense. "Oh! I just remembered something," said an inappropriately cheerful voice, abruptly disrupting the frosty atmosphere. It was Ho.

Taken aback, Onkei turned to look at him. "What is it?" he asked.

"Speaking of the name 'Ogyoku'... When I was arrested, the madam of the brothel..." Ho began, looking at Onkei with a disconcerted expression on his face—but in a matter of seconds, Eisei had clamped his hands around Ho's neck and tightened his grasp. Ho sounded like he was choking.

"Stop right there, you senile old fool," said Eisei. Ho grimaced.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

Onkei pulled Ho out of Eisei's grip in a panic. Ho hacked violently, while the young eunuch checked that he was all right.

Onkei shot Eisei a reproachful glare. "What were you thinking? Don't you have a shred of respect for our master's orders?"

As one would expect from Eisei's own underling, Onkei's tone of voice was cold and teeming with derision. When he saw how pale and out of breath Eisei seemed, however, a more questioning look came to his face.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" asked Onkei.

Eisei was wondering the same thing. He buried his face in his hands and hung his head. He couldn't hold himself together. He knew it was wrong, but that didn't change anything. He wanted to kill Ho—and he wanted to do it *now*.

"O-Ogyoku was...the prostitute who stole Eisei's mother's

prized customer from her, after he'd insisted he was going to buy her out..." Ho explained, still choking.

"Enough," Eisei snapped incisively, leading Ho to clam up with fear for a moment—but then, the older man gave Eisei a sharp glare.

"I'm not staying silent," he countered, his voice shaky.

"I said *enough*," repeated Eisei looking up. "The Raven Consort... That *girl's* father is no longer around. He's dead. A prostitute stabbed him. He was a good-

for-nothing. We're cut from the same cloth, I'm sure. Like father, like son, as they always say."

Onkei froze for a moment. "D-does that mean...?"

"I don't have any definitive proof, so I could be wrong, but so what if we have the same father? I'd still never dream of helping her."

"Attendant Ei."

"It'd be in our master's best interests for things to stay the way they are," Eisei continued. "Her presence causes nothing but harm. It's for our master's own sake."

"...But Attendant Ei," said Onkei, his face pallid. "What about you?"

"What?" replied Eisei with a frown, struggling to understand what Onkei was asking him.

"What would you be doing if you put our master's interests aside?" Onkei asked slowly. "How do you feel about this, personally? Why don't you take some time to consider your own feelings, without using our master as an excuse?"

"An excuse?"

"You're using him as an excuse to avoid stating any of your own wishes."

Eisei was lost for words. My own wishes?

"I don't have any..." he said.

Every move Eisei made was for Koshun's sake. Everything he did was for him. As such, his own feelings were irrelevant. All that mattered was whether something benefited Koshun or not. To Eisei, that was the be-all and end-all.

"You're uncertain," said Ho. "You're not sure what to do. I can tell that much. Has that ever happened before? If His Majesty's needs are your only priority, then why are you hesitating?"

Infuriated, Eisei got the urge to strangle Ho's skinny, scrawny neck again— But why am I so angry in the first place?

There was only one explanation. Onkei and Ho's words hit him where it hurt.

They picked up on how uncertain he was feeling and confronted him with it.

I shouldn't really have any reason to worry and doubt myself,

Eisei thought, and yet that's all I've been doing. He'd convinced himself that the key to concealing his doubts was to disregard them completely. He'd kept telling himself that was the natural thing to do.

Why, though, was he so plagued by uncertainty? What did this all come down to?

Deep down, he had known the answer all along. He bit his lip, finding himself forced to admit the truth.

He wanted to save her.

For all this time, there'd been a feeling in his chest that had never gone away, like a flickering lamplight in the midst of a fierce storm that never extinguished, not even when it seemed on the brink of going out. The idea that the two of them were related had been repeating in his mind. Eisei was an orphan and would never bear children of his own. If his suspicions were true, then Jusetsu would be the only family he'd ever have. Koshun was important to him, yes, but this was something different entirely.

It was for that precise reason that he wanted to avoid accepting it.

Eisei closed his eyes and said nothing. The horses' hooves clopped along, and the carriage's wheels clattered noisily, sending vibrations through his body. His shoulders and knees swayed back and forth as the carriage advanced. For the first time in a while, Eisei felt truly aware of his physical body. He'd neglected thinking about the blood and flesh he was made up of for so long. It disgusted him. The only thing he cared about having was a pure mind—and yet here he sat, a real, living person with flesh, muscles, and blood pumping through his veins. He didn't know why, but for the first time in his life, he found himself realizing just how special that truly was.

After opening his eyes, he called out to Onkei. "Stop the carriage. Take me back to the imperial capital."

Onkei was bewildered by this sudden command. "But what about the prostitution district?"

"We don't need to go. The brothel Ogyoku worked at was destroyed when she was executed, and those who worked there were also punished and driven out of the imperial capital. It's no longer possible to confirm exactly who the Raven Consort's father was—but if I am her half-brother, then I have no other choice."

Onkei's eyes widened in amazement. "Attendant Ei. Does that mean...?"

"I have to ask for our master's permission," Eisei murmured, looking down at the palms of his hands. There wasn't anything on them—it was just strange to think that the blood inside him may have been connected to that which ran through Jusetsu's veins.

Once they were back at the imperial capital, Eisei wasted no time in heading to the inner court where he knew Koshun would be.

"That was alarmingly quick," said Koshun, looking at Eisei suspiciously.

He was sitting in his divan reading a letter. The moment Eisei saw him, the eunuch practically collapsed onto

Surprised, Koshun went to say something, but quickly shut his mouth again. He then rose to his feet, walked over to Eisei, and got down on his knees as well.

I can't allow him to kneel to me, Eisei thought, but no words came out. He was crying. Although he insisted it was for his own sake, the reality was Eisei had practically been deceiving the emperor. He knew what Koshun really wanted, and yet he turned a blind eye to it and kept his lips sealed.

It was *Eisei* who caused Koshun to suffer such despair. It was crucial that he apologized for it.

"There's...something I've been keeping from you," Eisei said, his voice strained.

Koshun simply stared at him, not saying a word. He placed his hand on Eisei's shoulder. It was warm.

Eisei remembered him doing this same thing before—a long time ago, back when Eisei had run into Koshun after fleeing his abusive shifu. Koshun hadn't

asked him any questions. Instead, he simply placed a calm hand on Eisei's beaten and bruised shoulder.

It was just as warm back then.

The Winter Prisoner

JUSETSU WOKE up to darkness.

Her entire body was submerged in water—she could tell that by the way it felt against her skin. Strangely, it wasn't cold.

There was a steady stream of water, and it felt like she was lying in a river. The river was shallow, and half of her body was still above the surface. Her surroundings were completely dark, save for the subtle, faint light emanating from the surface of the river. Jusetsu pressed her hands to the river bed and pushed herself up.

There are fireflies here though...

Masses of glowing souls wavered and plunged toward the bottom as the current pushed them along. The lights they emitted were so subtle that it looked like they were about to fade away at any moment—and yet, they didn't.

Jusetsu tried reaching out to some of them. From close up, the souls' glow had a blue tinge to them. She touched one of them with her fingers, but it slipped through her grasp and drifted away. There was no heat to it, but it wasn't cold either. It simply felt like *nothing*. She tried to watch for where it was going, but all she could see was the wide river and the dark sky stretching out before her. There was no apparent destination in sight. The river went on as far as the eye could see.

All of a sudden, Jusetsu noticed that this area was completely silent. Not a single sound could be heard—there was no gentle gurgling of water, no breeze blowing past. She couldn't even hear any birds or insects chirping nearby.

She never realized a river this quiet could even exist.

Where am I? Jusetsu asked herself. What happened to me?

Then, she remembered the crowd of ghastly Raven Consorts, and the events of that day came flooding back to her.

Am I dead...?

Jusetsu took a look at her hand. Despite having been submerged in the river, it appeared perfectly dry. She clenched her fist, but she didn't have much

strength to do so. Her body was right there, but it felt so peculiar—as if it wasn't quite real.

Jusetsu gazed at her surroundings. Was this where someone ended up after death—this desolate, dark river?

"Look at that," said a voice.

It was so sudden that Jusetsu spun her head around in shock. A petite young girl dressed in a black robe was standing right behind her. The girl's face was worryingly pale with dry, white lips. She was extremely thin as well, making her eyes look disproportionately large.

This girl pointed in front of her, and the state of her hand gave Jusetsu a shock. Each of the girl's fingers had been torn off at the center joint, and blood dripped from the stubs that remained.

"When the star falls down, another life will be created," said the girl, prompting Jusetsu to look where she was pointing.

A faint light was sinking beneath the water's surface, swaying from side to side as it went under.

"Look, those too," she added, pointing at another light.

That one, too, quivered as it sank into the river. When Jusetsu looked carefully, she realized that several other orbs of light nearby were doing the same thing.

"Souls that have been guided to the divine palace are washed out into this river, cleansed, and funneled along before falling back down as a new life in due course." The girl's voice was crystalline, fragile, and indistinct—almost as if it could fade away at any moment. "All I ever do is watch them..."

The girl lowered her hand and looked at Jusetsu. Her eyes were dark and empty, like the hollow of a tree.

"You broke my barrier, didn't you?" she went on, her voice slow and faltering. The look in her eyes became even darker.

Before she realized what she was doing, Jusetsu grabbed the girl and pushed her down. Water splashed about.

"Kosho...!"

A strong sense of conviction washed over Jusetsu. She *knew* it was her. Jusetsu had no idea why she was there, but all the anger and hatred she'd been harboring toward Kosho immediately came to a boil and burst out of her.

Even after being pushed, Kosho's facial expression didn't change, and neither did the look in her hollow-looking eyes.

"Choka will be so disappointed. If he hates me, it'll be your fault."

"Choka?" Jusetsu asked.

"The person who gave me my name." "You mean...Ran Yu?"

Kosho flinched at that, furrowing her brows. "You can't go around saying his name like it's nothing."

"Is that not allowed?" asked Jusetsu. "Is 'Choka' Ran Yu's courtesy name, then?"

Kosho glared up at Jusetsu, looking annoyed.

I'm the one who should be annoyed here, thought Jusetsu, continuing to shake the young girl by her collar.

"What do you mean, 'it'd be my fault'? All of this is your fault!

All of it!" Jusetsu yelled.

Kosho was the one who shut the Raven away inside the Raven Consorts and created a barrier to stop Raven Consorts from leaving. *She* was to blame for all of Jusetsu's suffering.

Jusetsu's rage was so intense that she couldn't find the

words to express it. She thought of how all the Raven Consorts had suffered, the way Reijo had suffered, and the love she had for her.

"Reijo..." Jusetsu murmured in something of a groan, and she let go of Kosho. Tormenting this girl wasn't going to undo the anguish that Reijo had gone through. This disheartening realization made her feel empty inside.

"Why did you shut away the Raven? Why did you shut away the Raven Consorts?"

Kosho gave Jusetsu a questioning look. "To stop them from escaping, of course. Whether you're dealing with birds or insects, if you don't keep them caged up, they flee," she replied in a matter-of-fact manner.

For a moment, Jusetsu found herself lost for words.

"Wasn't there anything specific you were trying to accomplish? How could you...?" Hadn't this girl spared a thought for the people's lives she was affecting? Jusetsu gave her a hard stare.

"If they got away, it'd cause problems for Choka. I wasn't going to run away, but I had no way of knowing what would happen after I was gone. I had no choice but to shut them away. Even the bird Choka gave me flew away because I didn't keep it locked in a bird cage. 'Birds are meant to be caged up,' Choka told me. He..."

"Was *Choka* the one who told you to chop off your fingers and set up a barrier?"

Kosho went quiet.

Jusetsu pressed harder. "Did Choka tell you to shut the Raven away inside your body and suffer every night there was a new moon? Did *he* order you to perform forbidden magic and utilize the Raven Consorts' dead bodies as weapons?"

An infuriated groan escaped Kosho's lips. She was glowering at Jusetsu now. "Don't even suggest such a preposterous idea," she said.

"What?"

"I did it all for him, and yet he showed me no gratitude whatsoever. He just insisted that he never asked me to carry out such acts. He was a liar. I know it was what he really wanted, but he simply couldn't bring himself to admit it. I went through with it regardless—I knew it was what he wanted. He never gave me orders anyway. He said I didn't need to listen to orders because I wasn't a slave anymore, and he promised me he'd never issue any either," muttered Kosho, shaking her head and darting her eyes about as she did so. She almost seemed nervous.

Suddenly, Jusetsu found herself unable to tell just how old Kosho was.

Initially, the girl appeared to be about the same age as her, but now, she looked more like an elderly lady *and* an exhausted forty-something at the same time. She still had the eyes of a young girl, but her skin was rough, cracked in places, and sagging.

"Urghhh..." Kosho moaned as her body swayed from side to side.

Before she knew it, Jusetsu scrambled out of her way.

Kosho sat up and staggered to her feet. "The gods loathed me for using forbidden magic and forbade me from entering the Secluded Palace. I have no choice but to stay here, endlessly roaming about. If only my body hadn't been pickled with salt, I could have gone back to Choka..."

After she'd died, Kosho's body had been pickled—by none other than Ran Yu, who'd feared she'd come back to life.

"Choka..." she repeated.

Kosho's hands were concealed by her black robe, but every time her body swayed from side to side, blood would drip from her severed fingers, almost like tears.

Jusetsu realized now that Choka was all Kosho'd ever thought about. Other people meant nothing to her. No matter how much

Jusetsu tried to convince her how much torment, sadness, and resentment she had caused to the Raven Consorts who'd succeeded her, it would never get through to her.

She'd never be able to comprehend that other people had feelings too. That was all invisible to her. The only thing Kosho could consider was how things would look through Choka's eyes.

Kosho began aimlessly trudging along the gloomy, neverending river. Would she continue wandering like that for all eternity, just as she had been all this time? Was that to be her punishment?

"Until Choka saved me...I wasn't me..." Kosho said, almost whispering now—but with no sound of rushing water to drown them out, her words were crystal clear.

"My father was a thief, but when he was arrested, my mother and I were both made to work as slaves. Once you're a slave, the only way you can get out is by receiving a pardon. I spent day after day hulling paddy rice with a pestle, even when my skin was torn and my hands had blisters. Criminals wear red clothes—did you know that? Dressed in red, you pound away with pestles from morning until night. You pound and pound, but it never ends... The Raven was the only one I had to talk to."

"The Raven...?" asked Jusetsu.

Kosho stopped and looked around. "At night, I'd hear her calling me from the darkness. I was the only one who could hear it. She was so happy to have someone to communicate with. I was too... Oh, I was really happy..."

Kosho looked down as she reminisced.

"But then...Choka came. He saved me. I became the most important person in his life, and he became mine. No matter how beautiful his other consorts were or if he fathered children with them, at the end of the day, I was indispensable to him. I was the only one who was irreplaceable... No matter what I did, he'd always forgive me in the end—and I forgave him too."

Kosho giggled, like she just recalled something amusing. What did he do? Jusetsu wondered, but she didn't dare ask. "That's why I always forgave him, no matter what he'd done.

No matter how much he hated me or feared me, I knew he'd never leave me."

That was when Jusetsu realized that Kosho was now right in front of her. Jusetsu backed away from her, but Kosho reached out and grabbed hold of Jusetsu's arm. Her half-severed fingers dug into her skin. Jusetsu wondered whether Kosho was still in pain from that—after all, there was still blood oozing from the wounds and trickling down.

"I never listened to a single request from Choka, so why did he fear me so much? What possessed him to gather all those shamans together, create a palace for the ao god, and even pickle my corpse with salt? I did so many irresponsible things for him. I even cut off my own fingers, and I died from those injuries... Why, then, would he do that to my body...?"

Kosho's eyes were glowing with a strange, piercing light, and her face was so emaciated that it looked more like a bare skull.

It wasn't hard to imagine what Choka was so scared of.

He'd been terrified by Kosho's reckless single-mindedness. Choka simply wasn't going to accept all her thoughtless actions just because they were for his sake. It wasn't as if they'd even benefit him in the first place—Kosho was only doing what *she* thought was in his best interests.

Like a chick chasing after its parent, Kosho had fervently adored and devoted herself to the man who'd saved her. She may have even viewed him as a god. Being worshipped in such a way, however, was unbearable.

"What a hopeless person he became," Kosho said, continuing. "He used to be so strong... When I first met him, he wasn't scared of anything..."

Jusetsu could see herself reflected in Kosho's eyes, but Kosho wasn't actually looking at her. Jusetsu shrank away, pulling free from her grasp.

I have no time to waste listening to these nonsensical ramblings. Jusetsu took another look around. Going by what Kosho had said, they were likely in the Passage of Stars. Kosho had been rejected by the gods of the Secluded Palace and had ended up roaming about in here instead.

But why am I here too?

"You're not dead, so your soul can't be led to the Secluded Palace," said Kosho, as if she read Jusetsu's mind. "Unless one of your blood relatives calls for you, you won't be able to make it back. You'll have no choice but to wander endlessly about, like me."

One of my blood relatives? Jusetsu thought. There's no way I have any of those.

The thought of roaming this river for all eternity like Kosho made her whole body go cold. The icy sensation began with the tips of her fingers and quickly spread throughout every inch of her being.

Once again, Kosho reached out her hand and seized hold of Jusetsu's wrist. "You're related to Choka, aren't you?"

Kosho's mouth was gaping open. It took Jusetsu a moment to realize that this was actually a smile. It was certainly a menacing one.

"Let's stay together, then," Kosho said.

Jusetsu's wrist squeaked as Kosho tightened her grip around it. Blood slid down Jusetsu's palm and fell into the water beneath them. Covered in goosebumps, Jusetsu tried desperately to shake herself free. Kosho hurriedly pulled her hand away, causing her to stumble slightly. Jusetsu turned around and ran.

"This is where new lives are formed, you know..." Kosho called after her. Faint yet clear, her voice resonated sharply in Jusetsu's ears. "One day, Choka will be reborn too."

She sounded happy, as if she was excited by the prospect. "I'm sure I'll be able to tell it's him. If I find him, I'm going to grab hold of him and never let him go."

Her shrill cackle echoed through the air. It sounded like it went on forever. She sounded like a bird cawing. Her laugh carried on ringing through the air long after she went quiet, and it continued to haunt Jusetsu as she charged forward. She couldn't look back now. Her whole body felt freezing cold, and yet she was oozing with sweat. She couldn't stop trembling. Jusetsu had a vivid sense that she came face-to-face with the immeasurable determination of the girl who'd abused her power to keep the Raven Consorts and the Raven restrained for all those years.

All of a sudden, she felt like her legs were sinking into the mud. By the time she noticed what was happening, it was up to her shins. The river was now a bottomless swamp, and no matter how hard she tried to pull her legs out, they wouldn't budge. Instead, they continued to sink in deeper and deeper.

Jusetsu writhed about, but the more she struggled, the deeper she sank. Before she knew it, she was submerged up to her torso.

I'm drowning.

At this rate, she was sure she'd sink to the bottom. No, if she sunk down any further, she wouldn't just drown—she'd suffocate in the mud.

She tried to move her arms to swim away, but the water just splashed about. Her body didn't get any closer to the surface. Eventually, only her head remained above the river's surface. Water splashed against her cheeks and seeped into her mouth.

Am I going to die? Jusetsu wondered, but she wasn't sure that was even possible here.

Her head slipped beneath the water. It was dark, and she couldn't see a thing.

That was when a vision of someone she knew came to mind— the face of a certain young man. No sound passed her lips, but she shouted his name anyway.

"Koshun!!!"

I wish he'd call my name, she thought. She got the most peculiar feeling whenever he said it.

If only he'd call out to her, she would have been able to go anywhere she liked.

Jusetsu closed her eyes and reached out her hands. She knew she was only sinking deeper and deeper, but she felt as if she was rising instead. In fact, she couldn't even tell which way was up anymore. She couldn't sense the shape of her body—where her arms were, or her legs. She couldn't move her limbs. It was as if her body was dissolving, vanishing for good.

Everything was about to disappear. She was even forgetting her own name.

But then...she heard a voice.

One single, solitary voice, calling out to her from the darkness.

"Jusetsu... Jusetsu..."

It was calling her name. The voice was calm, gentle. Familiar. It had a quiet warmth to it, like a faint ray of sunshine shining down on her otherwise cold surroundings.

That's right, she thought. My name is Jusetsu.

Her heart's core returned to its original form. She remembered how it felt to

be inside her body again.

Her fingers could move again. She could feel her eyelashes trembling.

Jusetsu opened her eyes. "Jusetsu."

The first thing she saw was Koshun's face peering down at her. He seemed somewhat surprised, but the young man's face was always so expressionless that it was hard to tell for sure.

Jusetsu blinked a few times, then slowly took a look around. She was in the Yamei Palace.

She was lying down on her bed with Jiujiu, Onkei, Tankai, and Kogyo standing around her. Ishiha was nowhere to be seen. Eisei, however, was standing right next to her bed. In fact, he wasn't just standing there—he was also holding her hand.

What's going on? Jusetsu asked herself—but her shock was so intense that all the doubts and questions in her mind were drowned out by it.

Possibly having sensed Jusetsu's surprise, Eisei put on a discontented frown and released her hand from his grip.

"I take it you are back," he said.

"Did you know, Jusetsu?" asked Koshun.

"Know what?" Jusetsu replied, still confused—but Koshun just nodded at her, looking somehow satisfied with this answer. "Really, though, what's happening? I'm..."

"After breaking Kosho's barrier and her forbidden magic, your heart flew away—according to the Raven," Koshun explained.

"The Raven...?"

"We used the Raven's magic to call you back. With Eisei's help."

"The Raven's magic? Eisei's help? Huh?" Jusetsu asked. Koshun shot a look at Eisei, who—still looking displeased—said nothing.

Jusetsu placed a hand on her forehead and looked up at the ceiling. She tried to recall her memories.

I was with Kosho, in the Passage of Stars. Kosho claimed that unless one of Jusetsu's blood relatives called for her, she wouldn't make it back.

"I...met Kosho, in the Passage of Stars. She said that unless one of my blood relatives called for me, I'd be stuck there forever."

Eisei clicked his tongue.

Jusetsu looked at him. "Did you just tut at me?" He didn't answer.

"I remember you asking for my mother's name some time ago," she said. "I did find that strange."

"...My mother was a prostitute," began Eisei, looking very disgruntled. "She was cast aside by the man who was supposed to buy her out and took her own life. That worthless man was my father—and your father too."

Jusetsu thought over what Eisei had just told her. "But I never knew my father," she said.

"That's irrelevant," Eisei responded, sounding irritated. "That's the reality of what happened, and there's nothing we can do about it."

Only a blood relative could have called Jusetsu back from the Passage of Stars—in which case, what Eisei was claiming *had* to be true. Jusetsu gave him a look of disbelief, and the expression on his face grew even more disgruntled.

There's no need to look at me like that, Jusetsu thought to herself. She hadn't yet come to terms with the fact that they were siblings, and he was making her feel like stubbornly rejecting the notion.

"I've done what I needed to do, so let us leave it at that. After all, we had different mothers. I have no intention of playing happy family with you," Eisei snarled.

"Me neither," agreed Jusetsu. "Well, that's that, then."

She pushed against the bed to lift herself up. Jiujiu lent her a hand. Jusetsu was struggling to muster up much strength. It was almost like her body and heart weren't yet in sync. She spent a few moments clenching and unclenching her hands, bringing the feeling back to them.

"Now then, what was that about the Raven?" asked Jusetsu. "If she helped

call me back, then I assume you had the opportunity to speak with her."

"She inhabited and made use of your body while your heart was elsewhere. And yes, we did get to talk to her."

Jusetsu looked down at her own body. "What did the Raven use it for?"

"I promised her we'd find her missing half," Koshun said. "I see."

Jusetsu stared at her palms. Was the Raven still inside of her? Ho Ichigyo had suggested that the Raven Consort might be able to converse with the Raven since she was her shrine maiden, but Jusetsu didn't know how to go about doing that.

"I've sent Senri and Shiki to Je Island to look for it." "All the way to Je Island?" she asked.

"Senri is very well-versed in their local folktales."

"Well, I know that much."

Senri suffered from poor health. Won't the wintertime sea winds be bad for his health?

"It has also been exposed that you are a descendant of the Ran lineage," Koshun said, sounding indifferent.

It took a moment for those words to sink in for Jusetsu. "What did you just say...?"

"You probably don't remember, but crowds of people saw that hair of yours."

Jusetsu touched her head. Her hair was loose. She grabbed hold of a few strands and took a look for herself—it was silver. The blood drained from her face.

Koshun carried on speaking, unfazed. "The imperial court has already come to a resolution regarding the issue. You shall not be punished. Instead, I am creating a new role to appoint you to. You will be the ritual coordinator, tasked with administering divine rites."

This solution seemed too simple to believe. Jusetsu was dumbfounded. Koshun, on the other hand, was wearing the same composed expression that he always did. Jusetsu stared at him, transfixed.

There's no way it could have been solved that easily.

Jusetsu was certain the situation hadn't been as straightforward as his casual tone was trying to suggest. He must have exerted a great deal of mental energy, worked tirelessly, gone to great lengths, and enlisted the help of many other people in order to make that happen.

The thought of the ridiculous trouble he'd put himself through left Jusetsu tongue-tied.

"Senri and Gyotoku's oratorical skills were a great asset. Kajo and the others were a great help too," he said.

"Is that right...?"

"Of course, I have Sei to thank as well."

"I was just working for you, master," Eisei cut in coldly. Koshun smiled awkwardly.

"I...need to say thank you," said Jusetsu.

"You do indeed. Perhaps you could send Senri a letter?" "No..." Jusetsu felt choked up. It was hard for her to get the

words out. "It's you I need to thank."

Koshun closed his mouth and looked at her.

"There's no need to thank me. It wasn't just for your benefit, after all," he said in his usual, impassive tone of voice—but Jusetsu noticed him avert his gaze in a slightly hesitant manner. "That said..."

"What is it?"

"That game isn't going to finish itself." "Game...?" Jusetsu paused for a moment. "Oh!"

He must have been talking about the Go game they were playing by way of letters.

"Let's...carry on," said Koshun, speaking like a child who didn't quite know what he was supposed to say. He never verbalized his own personal desires, so

perhaps he really didn't know how to say it. "All right," said Jusetsu. She didn't know what she was supposed to say in this situation either.

"Fine," Koshun said simply, giving her a nod.

Then, the look in his eyes softened, and a slight smile spread across his face.

A powerful sea wind howled past Hakurai's ears. He was standing on a headland, looking out at the sea. The waves before him were rough. All of the boats were moored at the harbor, none of them preparing to venture back out onto the water. They didn't want to run the risk of getting shipwrecked if they headed out at the wrong moment. Instead, they had to wait until the wind conditions were more suitable for sailing—something which could take days. The port town's bawdy houses were likely teeming with sailors.

"Sir?" a young boy called out, making Hakurai look behind him.

Ishiha was standing there, a medicinal plant in hand. "Is this what you meant by goldthread?"

Goldthread rootstock had medicinal properties. It alleviated digestion issues and could also stop bleeding or reduce inflammation.

"Yes. Now, go and dig up the roots."

"Understood," Ishiha replied, nodding obediently. He was wearing sea swallow attire—a hemp jacket tied with thick straw rope tied around his waist and a pair of short pants.

"Where is Ayura?" Hakurai asked him.

Ishiha pointed toward the beach underneath the headland. "She's collecting shells, sir," said Ishiha.

Hakurai sighed. "The shells around here won't be worth anything." He'd already told her this countless times.

"She's great at finding pretty shells. The children love it," said Ishiha.

"It'd help them more if she'd collect medicinal plants instead." "You can leave that to me," Ishiha said.

The boy was a hard worker. He was putting in a tremendous amount of effort —enough to make up for Ayura's lack thereof. The two of them were like siblings. He was the diligent, scrupulous brother, and she was an absent-minded sister.

Hakurai and Ishiha made their way down the mountain, the latter with a plant basket on his back. The beach extended along the base of a steep cliff, and numerous caves had been carved out there from erosion from the sea. These caves had straw curtains hanging over their entrances. Hakurai made his way inside one of them, tearing the curtains down as he went. The inside of the cave was full of jars and baskets, and a young boy was sitting at the back. He was grinding medicinal plants inside an earthenware mortar with a wooden pestle.

The boy looked up. "Did you find them?" "Yeah."

Ishiha took the plant basket off his back and walked over to the other boy. The boy took the goldthread plants out of the basket and took a look at them.

"Put them in this basket," that boy said, picking up a basket from behind him and offering it to Ishiha. The goldthread plants had to have their delicate roots removed and would then be dried.

"How was the sea?"

Hakurai was the one who answered. "It'll be like this for another two or three days. No boats have left either."

"It's strange," the boy said. "The waters around Je Island are usually the calmest you can find at this time of year. If we can't fish here, then making medicine is our only option."

This boy was a sea swallow—a sea dweller who went from fishing spot to fishing spot like a migratory bird. Usually, sea swallows built huts out at sea to live in, but in busy ports like that of Je Island, they'd come ashore instead and take up residence in caves like this one.

This boy—Natari—belonged to the Dako clan. Some time ago, Hakurai had saved him when others were ganging up on him.

It was always impossible to predict where and how you would cross paths with someone again.

After Ishiha and Injo—or rather, Ayura—were kidnapped from the Goshi Palace, Hakurai found them stranded on a riverbank near the imperial capital. Since the ao god communicated through rivers, ponds, the sea, and other large stretches of water, Hakurai suspected that the pair would end up beside some expanse of water and had gone on the hunt for them.

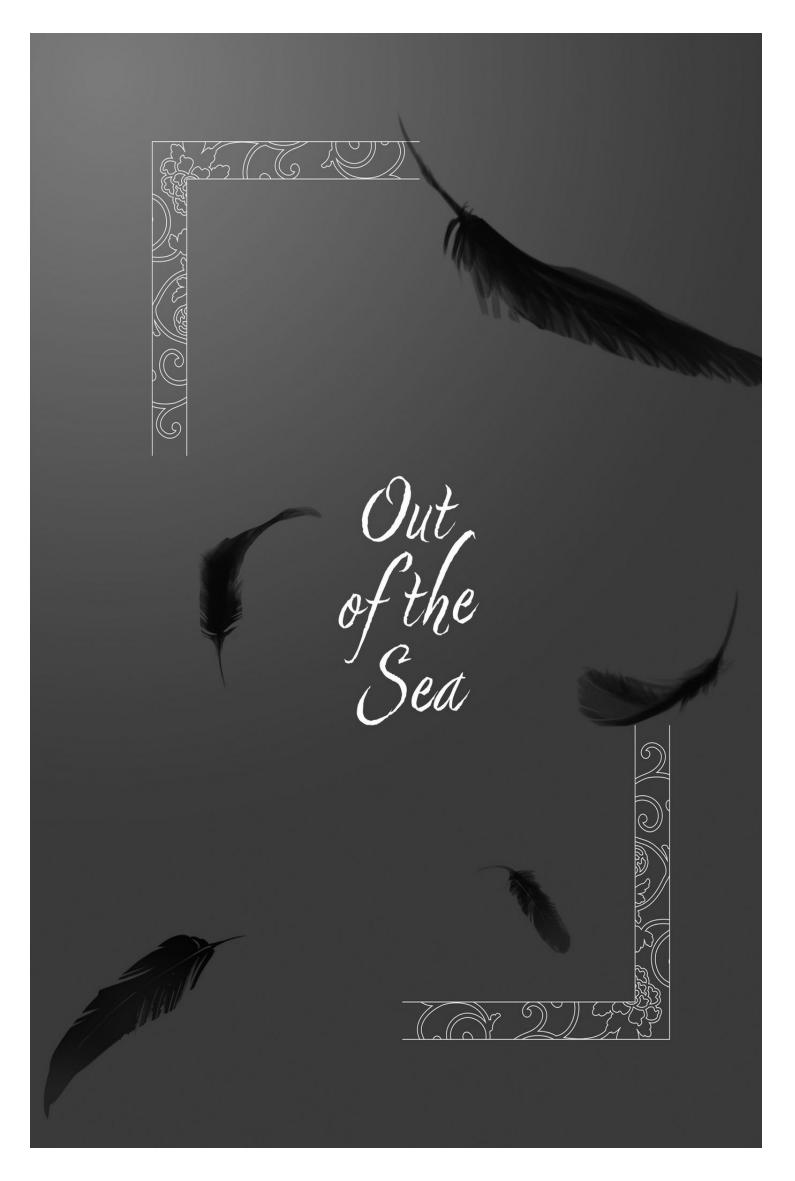
Ui—the ao god's apparatus—was there too. He told Hakurai and the two children to make their way to Je Island, claiming it was the ao god's order—and so, Hakurai took Ayura and Ishiha there. It was on the island that he encountered Natari once again.

Since Natari was indebted to Hakurai for helping him, the three of them were now being taken care of by the Dako clan. At first, Ishiha wanted to go home to the Raven Consort, but there was something getting in the way of that—the ao god's command.

"The god says that we must locate the Raven's missing half. It should be somewhere at the bottom of this sea," Ayura had said, passing on the ao god's words. "He says that if we don't, he will eat both Ishiha and I."

Something must have driven him into a corner, thought Hakurai. Perhaps he had been shot and injured by the Raven's arrow. Still, that was precisely why the situation was so risky. A wounded animal was always the most dangerous.

Hakurai felt like he was taking care of a wild beast that he had no idea how to handle, and he had the impression that *he* was the one who was actually going to be devoured.



HEAR THE Raven Consort has awoken," said Yozetsu Jikei.

He looked over at Koshun, who was sitting in front of him in the Koshi Palace. "That's good to hear."

"It is indeed," said Koshun with a nod, keeping his response brief.

"I feel pathetic for not being able to help."

"There's no need for that. In fact, I highly appreciate you biting your tongue in that imperial court meeting," the emperor added.

If Jikei had begged for Jusetsu's life to be spared at that time, Meiin never would have backed down. Still, it must have been infuriating him to resist speaking up.

Koshun's words brought a bitter smile to Jikei's face. "I expect the rumors will reach the far north in the next few days."

"Won't the snow get in the way of that?"

"To some extent, but that doesn't mean that no information will reach them. There are salt and fur traders around, after all."

The origins of the Ran lineage could be traced directly back to the Northern Mountains. As a result, many tribes in that region favored the Ran Dynasty. Koshun had to keep a close eye on how those people reacted when news about what happened made its way to them.

"I've ordered the local authorities and moderation envoys to stay alert, but even so..." Koshun said, trailing off.

Since the region was mountainous and blocked off by heavy snowfall, it was difficult to discern what was truly going on there.

"We Yozetsu folk have had a deep relationship with the Northern Mountains for generations," explained Jikei. "We use firewood from the trees on the mountains in the salt manufacturing process. When spring came, felled timber would be floated down meltwater streams and was transported all the way to the waters of Kai Province. They use boats nowadays though. Anyway, they were given salt as a reward since they couldn't obtain it up there in the

mountains. We've been doing that since time immemorial. It's a give-and-take relationship."

Jikei continued from there. "The only troubling thing is that there isn't just one tribe there. I only ever deal with one or two of them—the people I know are all very grateful that you keep the ironmakers of Do Province in check. However, I know little about the majority of the tribes... It's easy to assume that they're enemies, but you never know if they're working together behind the scenes—or if it's the other way around. It's a real bother."

Different tribes had disputes over hunting jurisdictions and who owned the woodlands. Rather than come to a compromise by discussing these issues, these tribes tended to use conflict to force their opponents to surrender and take charge of them, which increased their tribal power. This pattern repeated over and over until only a few powerful tribes remained. These strong tribes weren't stupid enough to fight each other now—instead, they maintained an appearance of camaraderie through intermarriage. However, it was impossible for an outsider to know what was really going on between them, and sometimes tribes that were supposedly hostile to each other would actually exchange information in secret. They used this deliberate ambiguity to keep each other in check—and it had an added benefit of preventing interlopers from knowing what was really going on in the region.

Jikei explained all this to the emperor as well.

"Do you know what's most essential when staging a rebellion?" Jikei then said. It sounded more like he was checking Koshun's knowledge rather than asking a real question.

"Money, surely," the emperor responded.

Jikei gave him a deep nod. "It's not that hard to gather comrades. As long as you have enthusiasm, they'll come. But without the funds, it won't last. You need a large amount of money in order to procure weapons and buy provisions. Not only that, but you need a consistent flow of those resources. That's why getting the backing of wealthy merchants and prosperous families is such a necessity."

When the Ran lineage had revolted, the Yozetsu family, being salt merchants,

had acted as their supporters.

"If those in the far north were to take action, no salt merchants would support them financially. They have no reason to want the current imperial court to collapse. Even in the unlikely scenario that such a movement *did* occur, I would hear about it. I don't know exactly what goes on in the minds of my fellow merchants, but... Considering the pros and cons, none of them would jump at the opportunity to join hands with any scheming northerners. However...I can't speak for any wealthy clans."

Koshun was silent for a moment. "What are your views on Ga Province?"

Jikei gave Koshun a questioning look. "Are you referring to the Saname clan? I can't imagine the father of your esteemed consort would even *dream* of betraying you, considering his daughter is pregnant with your heir."

"No, it's not that I'm scared they would rebel—but if they see this as an opportunity to end the bloodline of the Ran Dynasty, then they may stir the pot behind the scenes. Choyo isn't the sort of man who'd foolishly let a good opportunity get away."

If an uprising were to be staged with the goal of bringing the Ran lineage back to power, all it would take to end it would be to kill Jusetsu. No matter how big or small the uproar was, the moment such an uprising occurred, Jusetsu's execution would become unavoidable.

"I see." Jikei crossed his arms and grumbled. "So that's a matter of concern for you."

"I've already sent the eldest son of the Saname family back to Ga Province to look into the situation. He was previously staying here in the imperial capital."

"Their eldest son...? Really?" Jikei slapped his knee in disbelief. "Are you telling me that there's a father and son in the Saname family who are at odds with one another? That may be useful."

Koshun gave Jikei a slight nod.

"Even so, it's vital that this doesn't come to anything. Let's leave Ga Province to the eldest son of the Saname clan, and I will deal with the north."

"No," interjected Koshun. "If you're active in that region, people may suspect you of treason."

There were probably plenty of members in the imperial court who still didn't trust Jikei. Some might have assumed that he was plotting something alongside the tribes in the far north.

"If they do, then that means the northerners themselves will assume that I want to rebel too. Does that not work in our favor? I shall go and do some investigating. No need to worry, Your Majesty. I assure you, this old vassal of yours knows when it's time to flee." Jikei laughed merrily at that.

Jusetsu's silver hair glistened in the morning light. Every time the comb slid through her hair, it gleamed like sunlight sparkling on the surface of a pond.

Staring at her reflection in the mirror, she grimaced. "I'm going to dye my hair today."

"Whaaat?!" whined Jiujiu, who'd been untangling it for her. "But why? It'd be such a shame."

"I can't stand how shiny it is. It makes me feel so unsettled too—I don't feel like myself."

Jusetsu had been dyeing her hair black for so long that the sight of these silver strands was jarring. It felt like she was looking at a complete stranger in the mirror.

"But you've finally got the opportunity to keep your natural color. Why don't you postpone it for just a little longer? You might even get used to it."

Jiujiu skillfully brought Jusetsu's hair together and styled it into her usual hairstyle.

"Which hairpin or dangling hair ornament shall we use? They all go with your *black* hair..." Jiujiu picked up a hairpin, looking confounded.

"Even more reason for me to dye it back," Jusetsu commented. "How about jade?" somebody cut in. It was Tankai, poking his head through the curtains. "I think a jade hairpin would look nice."

"Excuse me, Tankai," snapped Jiujiu. "I'm in the middle of getting niangniang

dressed for the day."

"Who cares? She's already fully clothed." Tankai barged inside and stood behind Jusetsu. He picked a jade hairpin with a flower pattern carved into it up off the tray. "Here you go. How about this one?"

"Isn't this red coral stone one prettier?" countered Jiujiu. "If we put it in niangniang's hair, it'll look like a camellia in the snow."

"Oh, that's not a bad idea."

The two of them deliberated over which accessory to choose. They picked up different hair decorations and tried matching them against Jusetsu's new hair color.

Jusetsu, however, simply didn't care. *I wish they'd hurry up,* she thought, looking across at the curtain. It was then that she noticed the faint outline of someone standing on the other side.

Although she couldn't see them clearly, she could tell by the silhouette alone who this person was—Onkei.

"Hey, Onkei. Which do you like?" Tankai called out to him, holding up one of the hairpins.

The silhouette hesitantly placed a hand on the curtain, but immediately withdrew it again.

"You're such a pain," said Tankai, striding over and yanking the curtains open to reveal Onkei standing there with a glum look on his face. Tankai dragged him over to Jusetsu's side.

Now that Jusetsu thought about it, she hadn't gotten the chance to speak to Onkei properly yet. She had only returned to her senses the night before. Koshun gave her a rough explanation of what happened, but it was taking a lot of effort for her to truly grasp the situation and comprehend it.

Jusetsu stared at Onkei—the man looked stricken with grief. "What's wrong...?" she asked, but the look on Onkei's face only grew more anxious.

"He's been like this the entire time. Because he wasn't able to protect you," said Tankai, answering on Onkei's behalf.

"From Kosho's forbidden magic? Well, that was inevitable. I'm sure things would have been different if I'd been attacked by a *living* opponent."

"You're right, logically speaking. But even so..." Tankai trailed off.

"Hmph." Jusetsu tilted her head to one side slightly, then beckoned Onkei to come closer. Onkei kneeled beside her. "You don't help me get dressed, do you?" she asked.

"Huh...?" Onkei's eyes widened. "Well, no." "Nor do you tie up my hair." "No."

"If I were to be injured while getting dressed or having my hair done, it'd have nothing to do with you, and there'd be no reason for you to shoulder the blame for it."

Sensing what Jusetsu was trying to say, a meek expression appeared on Onkei's face.

"This is exactly the same in this scenario," Jusetsu added. "I understand," said Onkei after a pause, lowering his gaze.

"I'd totally help you get dressed and do your hair if I had permission though," Tankai interjected.

"Absolutely not," Jiujiu responded, glaring angrily at him. "Not your permission, Jiujiu."

"I wouldn't mind Onkei helping, but not you."

"I don't see what the difference is," Tankai shot back. "You two couldn't be more different."

"Oh, I'm glad to see how lively it is in here," said a new, calm voice.

Jiujiu and Tankai both turned around in a fluster and got to their knees. Kajo was standing in the doorway, accompanied by her ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs.

"When I heard you'd woken up, I couldn't wait to see you. So here I am, paying a visit first thing in the morning, amei."

Unsurprisingly, word had reached Kajo extremely quickly. "I was planning on

coming to visit you," said Jusetsu.

"I suspected that might be the case, so I thought I'd beat you to it," Kajo said, laughing. "Please, take some time to recover. I wouldn't want you overexerting yourself."

It's not like there's anything wrong with me, Jusetsu thought, but she knew it wasn't appropriate for her to be wandering about, anyway. She'd attract unwanted rumors, no matter what she did.

"Anyway..." Kajo narrowed her eyes and looked over Jusetsu. "Your hair looks like fresh snow, gleaming in the sunlight. You'll never run out of outfit options to choose from now!"

At that, one of Kajo's ladies-in-waiting emerged from behind her and came forward, holding a tray. A bright blue robe sat on top of it. Kajo picked it up and unfolded it. The garment was made of blue brocade fabric and had twin fish and ivy embroidered into it.

"Even a bright, gorgeously embroidered garment pales in comparison to your beauty, amei. It'll highlight your silver hair beautifully." Kajo held the robe up against Jusetsu.

"And that's not all..."

Kajo then turned around and took some hair decorations from the tray that a different lady-in-waiting was holding. She held a silver hairpin and a dangling hair ornament, both embellished with dark blue gemstones.

"These are from the Crane Consort, and those earrings over there are from the Magpie Consort. They're both desperate to see you, amei." Kajo placed the hairpin in Jusetsu's hair herself, then smiled. "That looks wonderful on you."

"Thank you..."

Jusetsu wasn't simply thanking her for her compliment with those words. She was also expressing the deep reverence and gratitude she had for Kajo. If it wasn't for her thoughtfulness and kind nature, Jusetsu would have been dragged to the gallows by now. Jusetsu knew there were plenty of other people she had to thank too.

Kajo just smiled back at her. "Well, that's all I needed to say.

Please take it easy," she said, then breezily walked away.

How much would it take to repay her? Jusetsu thought as she watched Kajo leave. Could I ever make up for all that Kajo and my other kind allies have done for me?

Late that night, Koshun paid Jusetsu a surreptitious visit.

The only person accompanying him was Eisei. Jusetsu didn't know how to act around Eisei now.

Jiujiu had acted surprised when she discovered he was Jusetsu's half-brother, but she didn't seem to find the idea too far-fetched. "I can sort of see it now," she'd apparently said—although Jusetsu didn't understand what there was to see.

Jusetsu tried as hard as she could to avoid Eisei's gaze as she sat down in the chair up against the wall, next to the lattice window. In front of it sat a Go board. Koshun had come to continue their game.

Jusetsu placed a stone on the surface of the board on her own.

Senri wasn't here to advise her now.

"I assume Senri has reached Je Island safely?" said Jusetsu. "I'm sure I'll receive an update soon. As soon as I do, I'll let you know." Koshun put down his next stone, not appearing to have put much thought into it. He was always quick to make his next move. "The foreign trade director is on Je Island, you see."

"The foreign trade director?"

"To put it simply, he's the superior authority when it comes to overseeing trade. Since Je Island is the gateway for trade, that's where the department for foreign trade is situated. The foreign trade director is in charge of that department, and that's a position to which I can appoint an individual at my own discretion— just like the salt and iron envoy. The current foreign trade director is called Fu Jakuho. He's really adaptable, and you can count on him for almost anything."

"Oh..." she said, trailing off.

Trade—in other words, buying from or selling to foreign merchants—probably demanded some amount of flexibility.

"I'd like to join them on Je Island as soon as I can," Jusetsu said. While they'd deduced that the missing half of the Raven had likely sunk in the sea near Je Island, there was no proof of that being the case. Not only that, but while the missing part was said to exist in the form of a black sword, it wasn't as if they could scour the entire seabed with a fine-tooth comb to find it. In reality, only the Raven knew whether it was there, which meant that Jusetsu had to be the one to go. Now that Kosho's barrier was broken, the next step was for her to travel to Je Island. That had

been the original plan, after all.

"First, we should wait until news arrives from Senri and Shiki," Koshun said. "Having advance knowledge of how the situation on Je Island appears would be to our benefit. Venturing onto the island without knowing what's going on would be like charging into a battlefield unarmed."

Koshun was a cautious person. Je Island wasn't necessarily a dangerous place, but it still may have been risky for Jusetsu and the Raven.

"I'm concerned about the ao god and Hakurai's whereabouts too," he added.

"Oh, yes..."

I wonder if Ishiha is safe? Jusetsu wondered. Where was he, and how was he doing? During the daytime, she used a hair she found on his pillow to try to track him down, but it only led her as far as the Goshi Palace.

"And then there's the matter of the Saname clan. What does Choyo have planned?" Koshun wondered aloud.

Jusetsu groaned. She'd forgotten about that. There were so many different things she had to consider.

"I've already sent Shin to go and see him. I'm just waiting for him to report back."

"Shin... Was that the eldest Saname son?" she asked.

Shin was Banka's eldest brother—the one she criticized as being arrogant. But even so, to Jusetsu, it seemed like he took the status of being an heir very seriously and took pride in that role.

"Even so..." said Jusetsu, staring at Koshun.

By the time Jusetsu had come up with something to worry about, Koshun had already acted on those concerns.

"Shin is on your side, at the very least," he said.

"Well... That's good to hear."

Jusetsu had only met him once or twice. Shin may have rebelled against his father, but was that really enough to turn him into one of Jusetsu's allies? Koshun seemed confident in that.

"Aren't you going to make a move?" "What?" Jusetsu responded.

Koshun pointed at the Go board. "It's your turn," he said. "How was I supposed to make a move when we were discussing something so serious? Give me a moment, won't you?"

Jusetsu glared at the board. Koshun watched in silence as she frowned, contemplating what to do. Eventually, Jusetsu put down a stone with a groan. A few moments later, Koshun made his next move as well, without commentary. The only sounds that could be heard were Jusetsu's occasional grunts and grumbles and the clinking of stones as they were placed on the board. Things were peaceful and calm. Koshun maintained the upper hand but didn't make any moves to clinch the deal.

Jusetsu had captured stones and had hers captured in return. She looked down at the Go board, which was gradually becoming covered with stones. If only we had a bigger board, thought Jusetsu. I wish the board was so big that this game could go on forever.

By the time their game was finished, it was almost dawn. With neither of them having resigned midway through, they played until there were no more moves that could be made and then counted the stones.

Jusetsu had won.

Koshun made his way back to his quarters before the sun was set to rise. Judging by the time, it was doubtful he'd get the chance to sleep before his imperial council meeting. He hadn't looked tired—in fact, he'd looked totally unfazed—but Jusetsu couldn't help but wonder if he'd be all right. She lay down on her bed and gazed up at the ceiling in a daze.

If I find the missing part of the Raven...

What would happen if she recovered it? If the Raven got her missing half back and Jusetsu was free?

And once that happened, what path was she supposed to choose?

Until very recently, Jusetsu had only had one option—exile.

That was the only path that had been offered to her.

However, the fact Jusetsu was a descendant of the Ran family was public now—and it happened in quite an ostentatious fashion, no less. *Everyone* knew her secret.

If Jusetsu were forced to flee the country, it would likely reflect poorly on Koshun.

Koshun created the role of ritual coordinator to give Jusetsu a reason to stay in the inner palace. Would everything work out fine as long as she accepted that job?

It was doubtful. It may have helped iron out some wrinkles, but she wasn't safe yet. Her position would undoubtedly remain volatile, leaving her swaying back and forth like a pendulum.

Koshun would be forced to agonize over it and work hard to find a solution every time a problem arose.

Jusetsu closed her eyes and sighed.

It was at that very moment that she heard a voice.

"Jusetsu," called out the voice of a somewhat sleepy-sounding young girl.

Jusetsu couldn't quite tell where the voice was coming from. It seemed like it

was echoing in the darkness that surrounded her.

"Jusetsu... Will you find my missing half?" the voice asked apprehensively.

Jusetsu recalled what Kosho said—about how the Raven would call to her from the darkness at nighttime.

"Are you the Raven?" Jusetsu asked.

"I am."

So this is what the Raven sounds like, Jusetsu thought to herself.

Her voice was different from how she'd imagined it to be. The Raven sounded young, helpless. Jusetsu had imagined it to sound far more sinister and frightening.

"I'm going to look for it," Jusetsu said.

"Where?"

"Je Island."

The Raven said nothing to that.

"If I get close, will you be able to track it down?" Jusetsu asked.

"I'll recognize it. It's part of me, after all..."

"You'll be able to return to your original form as long as we locate it, won't you? You'll leave my body."

"Yes."

The sooner we find it, the better, then.

Once it'd been found, Jusetsu had to choose which path she wanted to take.

"Je Island...is on the border," the Raven said quietly, her voice threatening to fade into the darkness.

"On the border?"

"Of the Secluded Palace and the Palace of Paradise. There are boundaries in place, so I can't go any further than Je Island. If I do, I'll be scolded very harshly."

"Scolded? By whom?" Jusetsu asked.

"By those at the Palace of Paradise. They've gotten mad at me countless times before, when I was fighting with the ao god."

Jusetsu was surprised to hear that even gods had places they couldn't travel to.

"It's funny that humans can come and go, and yet a god can't," she commented.

Humans benefitted from trade. Such things probably weren't necessary for gods, though.

Jusetsu had another question. "Long ago, you and the ao god caused Ikahi Island to sink, didn't you? Did they get angry at you for that as well?"

"They did..." The Raven sounded so exceedingly dejected that it made Jusetsu giggle. It felt strange to be talking to the Raven. "When I get my missing half back, I'm going to fight the White Turtle without encroaching on territory that I'm not supposed to."

"What?" Jusetsu stopped laughing. "Fight?"

"Of course," she said, as if it was obvious. "This time, I'm going to defeat him."

"Wait. You can't do that."

The Raven was planning to start a battle within the bounds of the territory she was authorized to be in. That fight would be vicious enough to submerge an entire island—and such an encounter had the potential to cause immense damage to the land of Sho.

"Do you want to plunge this entire country beneath the sea?!" Jusetsu snapped.

"If I don't defeat the White Turtle, he will defeat me... He hates me."

Koshun had told Jusetsu that they were at odds over the murder of an oracle. Did that mean that such a battle would be inevitable, no matter what they did?

What am I supposed to do?

Jusetsu's expression clouded over as she stared fixedly at the ceiling.

Koshun received a report from Shiki and Senri several days later. Alongside

this update, Senri also sent a personal letter addressed to Jusetsu. When Jusetsu opened it, the sight of Senri's unfalteringly clear and gentle brushwork put her mind at ease.

"I had been worried that the sea winds would be cold during the wintertime, but the weather here is even milder than that in the imperial capital. The climate has proven to be far more pleasant too. I shall bring you back a shell from the beach as a souvenir," the letter said.

To travel to Je Island from the imperial capital, one had to take a boat down the waterways, proceed from there to the river, and then follow the river down into the sea. They then headed south along the shore until they reached port of Ko Province— which was located opposite Je Island—where they could transfer onto a passenger boat that traveled to and from the island itself. Thanks to the waterways, Je Island could be reached without having to take a big detour around the sea—and as long as the weather wasn't too bad, you would arrive in about five days.

Before the waterways were constructed, most people traveled to Je Island by sea. Unfortunately, many boats traveling there ended up shipwrecked. The sea currents were more complicated than usual due to the numerous small islands dotted around the area, and in some spots, the currents were as strong as those found in rivers. Further still, there were few ports to flee to if the weather suddenly took a turn for the worse. Sailors needed to keep a careful eye on the weather, and at times, waiting for favorable winds or tides could extend their journeys by days.

Despite these hazards, there was always a high volume of boat traffic to and from the island. Je Island was a trade center, and cargo that arrived on its shores needed to be transported back to the mainland. If a traveler was carrying a large assortment of goods, it made more sense to travel by sea than land. Allegedly, people who lived near the water would keep an eye out for foreign treasures from shipwrecked boats washing up on their shores. Shiki had heard as much from a sailor during his voyage.

As he continued on his way, Shiki felt the humidity in the wind rising. By the

time he boarded the passenger boat to Je Island, it was so warm that he had to take off his jacket.

"I expected the sea breeze to be cool, but this is actually quite pleasant," Senri said, sounding relieved.

Shiki knew that the Winter Minister's health was poor, but he didn't know much else about him. He heard that Senri used his eloquence to silence Meiin during the last imperial council meeting, which helped save Jusetsu. Senri's slender build gave Shiki the impression that the man might have an anxious disposition like Meiin, but once he spoke to him, he quickly discovered how affable and friendly the Winter Minister was.

The order that Koshun gave Shiki was simple yet confusing at the same time —"accompany the Winter Minister to Je Island."

The emperor effectively told him to act as Senri's assistant—which begged the question, what was Senri even here to do?

"I am going to investigate folktales regarding an underwater volcano," Senri had told him, without any hesitation.

Shiki was clueless.

Among the things he was clueless about was the fact it had never occurred to him that Jusetsu was actually a descendant of the Ran lineage. Had keeping such an individual in the inner palace just been a gutsy move, or was there another important reason as to why she needed to be there? Shiki figured it was probably the latter. No matter how brave Koshun was, there was no need for him to deliberately put himself in danger. Still, Shiki couldn't even begin to imagine what that reason might have been.

"Oh, you can see the port now. It really is quite big, isn't it?" Senri called out.

One of Je Island's ports was now visible from their boat.

There were numerous vessels already anchored there.

"All those ships are rather large—I suppose they must all be from abroad? I can't see any small ones like this one."

"That port is meant for large ships. Since it's an inlet with deep water, it can

accommodate larger ones with deep drafts. Small boats like this one typically use the port in the bay a little further around the way. The water's shallower there."

"Oh, I see. So it's a matter of sea depth."

Je Island had been a bustling hub for boat traffic for generations. Long ago, the inland port had been more prosperous than it was now. After all, people hadn't learned how to construct such large ships until more recently. The bay was created by a sandbar at the mouth of the estuary that separated it from the open sea. This formation meant that its waves were calm, and its water was shallow, making it perfect for anchoring small boats.

"The area surrounding the big port over there is called Banbo and is apparently where the foreign merchants stay. You'll notice that it's surrounded by a mud wall. You're not supposed to enter or leave the area without permission, so be careful."

"Understood," said Senri politely. "You're very knowledgeable, Reiko. It's a great help to me."

"Yozetsu told me about it. He seems to be on fairly good terms with the foreign trade director who's stationed here, and said he would send him a letter too..."

Since Shiki and Senri had been so busy planning this sudden trip, a letter would be the quickest way to reach him.

"Is that right...?" Then Senri suddenly narrowed his eyes. The sunlight gleaming off the surface of the sea so brightly that it was almost blinding.

"Is something wrong?"

"I was just thinking about how wonderful connections with people can be."

"What?" asked Shiki.

"You never know where and how you're going to meet someone, or whether they'll be able to help you. It's so curious how one single person can lead you to another, and then another, and another..."

How one person can lead you to another...?

Shiki placed a hand onto his other arm as he gazed out over the water. His little sister was still there, pulling at his sleeve.

"Do only living people count?" asked Shiki. The words simply tumbled out of his mouth.

As nonsensical as that probably sounded, Senri didn't look at him strangely in the slightest. In fact, he had a tender look in his eyes.

"No," he said. "It applies to the dead as well."

When they arrived at the port, there was a man there to greet them. He was a small-framed man, likely in his fifties. Shiki assumed him to be one of the foreign trade director's inferiors.

"How nice to see you, sirs. I take it you are Reiko, and you must be To. I am Fu Jakuho, the foreign trade director."

Shiki was shocked. He didn't expect the man himself to come welcome them in person.

"I usually prefer to make repellant officials' lives miserable when they come and visit, but I have to honor Yozetsu's request," Jakuho said with a cheerful laugh.

It was impossible to tell whether the man was joking or serious. He spoke in a frank manner, but the look in his eyes seemed like he was shrewdly trying to size up Shiki and Senri. His body moved as skillfully as a seasoned martial artist, but he didn't have the air of a military official or a public functionary. Shiki found it impossible to deduce what kind of career trajectory led Jakuho to this point.

"I've known Yozetsu for years. I owe him quite a lot. Take a look over there..." Jakuho pointed across the beach. There was a pine grove in the distance, and the sandy coastline appeared to stretch on further past it. "Once upon a time, a salt merchant tried to set up some salt pans there. They took the shore from the fisherman. For decades, the people fought over what they wanted this coastline to be used for—fishing, salt production, or as a dock. When the fishermen were no longer able to fish here, it was impossible for them to make

a living from their trade. Do you know what they turned into instead?" "Piracy?" Shiki answered.

Jakuho looked impressed. "Correct. The fishermen became pirates and attacked the trade ships that were sailing in the area. The authorities tried to crack down on it, but it was a useless game of cat and mouse. Then, Yozetsu, who came to the island for trading purposes, managed to talk to that salt merchant who bought up the beach and convinced him to pull out. The pirates took their beach back and were able to become fishermen again." Jakuho cracked a smile. "That's why I owe so much to him."

Shiki stared at the expression on Jakuho's face. "Does that mean...that you were a pirate too?"

"Oh, did Yozetsu tell you that already? I was the chief pirate, in fact," Jakuho casually admitted.

Shiki was taken aback.

"Once we went back to being fishermen, it became my duty to negotiate with public functionaries," Jakuho explained. "We had a rather large dispute, I can tell you that much... His Majesty must have gotten wind of it because he then appointed me to the role of foreign trade director. Strange things do happen now and then, you know."

Jakuho laughed. It was a sunny, cheerful sound, which seemed to fit the temperate island atmosphere.

This harbor where the passenger boats docked was filled with people who looked like the island's residents. Although they were dressed fairly similarly to commoners in the imperial capital— mainly wearing short, white hemp robes with pants—they did seem to be more lightly dressed, which was likely due to the disparity in climate.

"I take it you were born and raised here on Je Island, then?" asked Senri. He had been examining his surroundings with great interest during Jakuho's explanation.

[&]quot;I am, yes."

"Do you know a lot about the folktales that people tell around here?"

Struggling to discern what Senri's intentions were, Jakuho tilted his head to one side. "That's a tricky question," he said. "I wouldn't say I'm *especially* knowledgeable..."

"In particular, I want to know more about the volcano at the bottom of the sea near Je Island."

"Well, well!" Jakuho's eyes widened. "The underwater volcano, you say?"

"I want to know whether it really *did* erupt in the distant past—and if it did, I want to find out *where*," explained Senri.

"Ahh, so that's why you asked me about folktales. You want to see if there are any legends that could offer you some clues."

"That's correct."

"But you're here on His Majesty's orders, aren't you? What in the world is he trying to do?" asked Jakuho.

"He's worried whether there are any signs that it may erupt again. According to an ancient text that was recently uncovered in the imperial court, its eruption was what caused Ikahi Island to sink. When I conducted some research into folktales, it appeared there was an underwater volcano in this vicinity as well, so I decided to check for any signs that one may be here."

Although Senri spoke confidently, Jakuho still looked perplexed.

"You did? As the Winter Minister? I don't know much about the imperial court, but I thought the Winter Minister was the minister of worship," he said.

"I am," said Senri. "Reading ancient texts is part of my job, and I know more about folktales than anybody else in the imperial court. That's what being the minister of worship entails."

"I understand." Jakuho scratched his neck. "I don't know much about ancient texts and folktales, you see... But if it's the underwater volcano you want to investigate, I should be able to help you there."

"Really?" Senri's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

Jakuho appeared to point even further down the beach than he had before. "There's a terrific fishing spot on the sea to the northeast. You can catch fantastic fish there. Why? Because the water there is shallower than anywhere else. Why is that? Well..."

Jakuho looked at Senri.

"Because of the underwater volcano?"

"Correct. The bottom of the sea is elevated, so it's much less deep there. We know there's an underwater volcano in that spot because it *supposedly* erupted before, but I've never heard of such a thing actually happening. If it did, it must have happened a long time ago. There are no coherent legends about it."

"Is that right?" replied Senri, but his eyes were wandering through the air. It looked like he was pondering something.

A short while later, Senri directed his wandering gaze toward Jakuho once again. "Foreign trade director," he said. "I have a request to make of you. Please take me to the family who has been traditionally entrusted with the role of overseeing divine rites."

"Divine rites?"

"The family who has served deities, received oracles, and have led the island's festivals of worship. The sort of family who'd act as the focal point of the island's population."

"The family of the island chief, then?" offered Jakuho.

"That, or a family that plays an assistant role to the chief, since there are often different people in charge of political affairs and worship."

"Either way, it'll probably be a sea merchant family you want to speak to...
This island has long been led by sea merchant families instead of fishermen's bosses. Well, I'm sure most sea merchant families started out as fishermen if you traced their heritage back far enough..."

Jakuho turned around and called over one of his inferiors who was standing behind him before turning back to Senri.

"I'll have this fellow to take you to them. His name is Cho, and he knows a lot

about the sea merchants on this island. I get him to coordinate things and manage the more tedious negotiations, so he's good at gaining their trust. He's familiar with what's going on behind the scenes as well."

This public functionary named Cho was an older man in his sixties. He was even smaller than Jakuho himself and had a kind face. He didn't appear especially quick-witted, but perhaps that was why he was so useful. People would be more likely to let things slip to an old man who seemed a bit simple.

"There's one old sea merchant family known as the Jo family. They've fallen a bit in the world now, but they used to be considerably prosperous. People even say they were the former chiefs of this island," claimed Cho. His round eyes were bleary, and his voice sounded a bit hoarse—perhaps caused by excessive alcohol consumption.

"The Jo family..." Senri muttered to himself. "Oh, of course. The Jo family."

"Do you know of them?" asked Shiki.

"Yes, to some extent," replied Senri with a nod.

"As for whether or not they had anything to do with divine rites... Let me think..." Cho tilted his head to one side, appearing hesitant. "Island dwellers follow the god of the sea, but..."

"In any case, how about you just use them as a starting point?" Jakuho suggested.

"That's a good idea. Now then, Cho. Please show us the way."

Jakuho was surprised by Senri's enthusiasm. "You've only just arrived," he countered. "How about you take a short rest?"

"Oh no, thank you. I wouldn't want to let this opportunity go to waste." Senri thanked Jakuho politely, then hurried Cho along. "Is it this way?" he asked as they started making their way to the Jo family residence. "Oh, that way, is it?"

There were several roads leading off from the port. Some were steep, and others were gentle, but all of these roads were narrow slopes. None of them, however, offered a clear view of what was ahead. They were more like a maze. Along the roads stood crowded houses surrounded by tile-topped walls made

of piled-up stones and hardened mud. These walls had probably been constructed to protect the homes from strong sea winds. Even as the men made their way up the street, the wind blew against them, bringing with it the salty scent of seawater.

"Are we really in that much of a rush?" Shiki called out as he attempted to keep up with Senri, who was marching on ahead.

"I don't have the patience to loiter around," replied Senri. He huffed and puffed from the uphill trek.

"Let's take our time," said Shiki. "The house isn't going anywhere." He was worried about Senri's poor health.

"You're very welcome to catch up with me later, if that's how you feel," said Senri before charging on ahead.

"Wait, that's not what I..."

He's unexpectedly stubborn, Shiki thought to himself.

Shiki trudged along without issue. He was a rather large man, and in shape as well. His legs were so strong that he didn't even get out of breath.

By the time the group reached the Jo family's home, Senri looked completely exhausted. His face was a worrying shade of white. Thankfully, the Jo family residence was surrounded by pine trees, providing ample shade. Shiki persuaded Senri to take a rest.

"Are you all right...?" asked Shiki.

"I'm sorry," Senri said as he leaned back against a tree trunk. "No, there's no need to apologize..." Shiki replied. "If it really is that urgent, then I'm happy to act accordingly."

Senri fell silent for a few moments. "I'm just desperate...to save one young girl," he murmured softly. "I believe that was the previous Winter Minister's wish too. It's a way to atone for the sins of all the Winter Ministers who came before me."

"Their sins...?" asked Shiki.

"The way they forced so much suffering onto young girl after young girl for so

many years, and that they believed that was the right thing to do for our country. I carry the sins of all the Winter Ministers who preceded me. While the Raven Consort is alone, at the same time, she is far from isolated—for she shoulders the suffering of all the past Raven Consorts. If push came to shove, it'd only be fair for the Winter Minister to offer up his own head in place of the Raven Consort's."

Shiki had heard that Senri had made this same suggestion during the imperial council meeting. It was clear he hadn't been bluffing.

I understand now, Shiki thought. It suddenly made more sense to him. He may have known nothing about the situation, but he could see that Senri was determined. Perhaps that was why the man was so calm about accepting whatever fate would be thrown his way.

"The Raven Consort is asleep for now, but I'm sure she'll wake up eventually. I'm getting ready for when that happens."

It must have been true that the Raven Consort lost consciousness during the incident. People said she possessed mysterious powers because she was Uren Niangniang's shrine maiden, but it seemed like she and the goddess had an even deeper connection.

Shiki paused at that. "You can explain the details to me later. You need to uncover some folktales surrounding the underwater volcano as soon as you possibly can, correct?"

Senri stared at Shiki and nodded. That was all he needed to know for the time being.

"All right. Well then, let's go."

Senri's complexion was looking much healthier now. Cho had been standing around aimlessly, but Shiki ushered him to move along again. The trio headed toward the gate to the Jo residence.

The head of the Jo family was a cheerless man. He was probably the same age as Senri, give or take a few years, but he was shockingly unfriendly for a sea merchant. He didn't seem to possess any of the wisdom or nobility one would expect someone with his level of experience to have developed.

The inside of the Jo home was dark and damp. There were several storehouses outside, but they were all lopsided and seemingly on the brink of collapse. It didn't look like they got much use.

Jakuho had admitted that the Jo family had gone down in the world, but Shiki didn't expect things to be *this* bad. The only sea merchants Shiki knew were powerful, influential traders, so the state of things here shocked him.

"What is it that you want? I know you asked me before about... Is this about the same issue?" the head of the Jo family said in something of a whisper.

"Before...?" Shiki repeated.

"No, this is about something else," Senri answered the man. He turned to Shiki to give a brief explanation. "He was asked a few questions about a necklace belonging to the Raven Consort a short while ago. One young girl from this family was a Raven Consort."

"Really ...?"

Senri addressed the head of the Jo family again. "Sir, we are currently investigating folktales related to an underwater volcano located in the vicinity of Je Island. There are several such legends that are passed around here on Je Island—for example, one about a stepmother who incurred the wrath of the god of the sea and sank to the bottom, where she then foamed at the mouth. I believe that specific story has a connection to the Jo family."

"I see." The head of the family was slow to react.

"Do you know of any other local legends that have to do with the sea or the sea god?"

"Let me think..." The head of the family cocked his head, looking visibly disinterested.

"I've heard your family has a great deal of history."

"It's just an old family," the man replied, laughing in a selfdeprecating manner. At long last, he was displaying some sort of emotion. But as he continued, his voice became listless, and his words were more of a sigh. "The story that has been passed down in our house is the one about the necklace. As

the tale goes, our business gradually declined and is no longer viable. My sons ran out of patience with this house and left the island. The Jo lineage's legacy on this island will end with me. I suppose that necklace really *did* bring a curse upon us."

"If it's the house that's cursed, then I'm sure your sons will be successful after having left it," Senri said offhandedly.

"Huh?" The man's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "But if there's no one left to worship at our family shrine, our family will be as good as extinct..."

"The more history a family has, the more things there are to haunt them," Senri offered. "One way to avoid that burden is to just shake yourself free."

"Huh..."

Senri's straightforward way of putting things left the head of the Jo family goggling in astonishment.

He hadn't expected Senri, being the minister of worship, to assert that he simply abandon the family shrine. That was where he prayed for the souls of his ancestors, and it was considered of utmost importance for the family to continue to protect it.

"Is it imperative that people perform memorial services for their ancestors on Je Island?" Senri asked.

That question made the head of the Jo family chuckle slightly. "Well, yes... My own family may have fallen apart, but family

ties are strong on this island. There are two things we've held in reverence since ancient times—the souls of our ancestors, and the god of the sea. For both sea merchants and fishermen, holding religious services for the sea god is a must."

"There must be a family that administers those services then. Is it yours?" asked Senri.

"No. That'd be the Sho family." "The Sho family...?"

"That family also went to ruin some time ago. Nowadays, there's just one old lady living on her own in their shabby, run-down old house." The head of the

family scrunched up his face like he just found a stain on a white sheet. "She manages to make ends meet by peddling her questionable 'fortune-telling' services to people."

"Is that so..." said Senri, leaning forward. It seemed like this had intrigued him. "Fortune-telling services, you say?"

"Her main customers are the sailors and prostitutes at the port. She's good with words, but her fortune-telling abilities are rather dubious. She originally comes from a family of shrine maidens, but now, she's stuck with this," explained the Jo family head.

"Shrine maidens? In the female line?"

"So they say. It's the men who inherit the house, but they pick the most suitable girl in the clan to take care of religious services. Some say those girls were once revered like living gods."

"Living gods?"

"That's ancient history now. It wasn't in my grandfather's or great-grandfather's time, but even further back than that. It was my grandfather who told me about it, but I don't remember the story very clearly. By the time he was a just a child, the Sho lineage was no longer responsible for religious services—they were just tasked with handling smaller prayers."

The head of the Jo family was now speaking far more smoothly than he had been when Senri and Shiki first arrived.

"On this island, there are no written records of those sorts of things," he continued. "We rely on oral accounts. I think that's why these stories take on lives of their own, even when they're passed down. Sea merchants *do* keep some trade records, however."

"Did your family keep any?"

"Yes—and a family tree too. This island has a long-established association with the land of Ake, so I believe we've adopted some of their culture and beliefs. Isn't that right, Cho?"

Cho was sitting in the corner of the room when the head of the Jo family

called out to him. Initially, Shiki couldn't understand why he was asking him, but once he heard Cho's answer, it made a lot more sense.

"Yes, that's right. Some of the customs here are similar to those back in my hometown."

"Your hometown? Do you mean...?" Senri turned back toward Cho.

"I'm from Ake. Well, a small island off Ake, to be precise," Cho explained.

Senri's eyes suddenly began to glitter with fascination. "A small island off of Ake... To the south? It's an archipelago, isn't it? Why did you end up here?"

Cho blinked, looking perplexed. He looked to Shiki for help. "We can leave that discussion for later," Shiki said to Senri.

"If the Sho family were the ones in charge of religious rites, then why don't we pay them a visit?"

"Yes, that's a good idea," responded Senri, and he nodded obediently. "I'm sure that family has some oral histories that have stood the test of time. Families like that are often obliged to follow established worship procedures in minute detail."

"I wouldn't expect too much," the head of the Jo family cut in. "I doubt that old woman knows much about those kinds of things."

"I'd suspect otherwise. Religious services are restrictive by nature—they leave a deeper legacy than you might think. It's definitely worth a try." Senri grinned. "Thank you very much for your help. I wish your family all the best."

It was a simple farewell, but it felt like a burst of fresh air— perhaps because those words came from the Winter Minister, or just because of his friendly personality.

The Jo family's patriarch gave him a faint smile back—and as he did so, the shadowy room seemed to brighten up to some degree.

The Sho family home was located on a rise overlooking the entire port. It was undoubtedly an impressive residence in its prime, but now, it was no more than a dilapidated hovel that looked far from livable. Its roof was sloped, and its wooden walls splintered. There were no doors, and its pillars were rotting.

Cho walked past the decaying house and headed around the back. A shingle-roofed hut stood there with a straw curtain hanging at its entrance.

"Are you there, ma'am?" he called out.

"Is that you, Cho? What's the problem?" came a reluctant voice from inside.

"You've got a visitor. Two big shots from the imperial capital."

"Big shots" is bit of an overstatement, thought Shiki as he waited for the old woman's response.

"The imperial capital...?" She poked her head out from behind the straw curtain. With deep, creased wrinkles nearly obscuring her eyes, the woman had an eccentric look to her. Her dry, white hair was tied back, and she wore a necklace of shells and animal fangs around her neck.

"You don't want me to tell your fortune for you, do you?" she asked, staring suspiciously at Shiki and Senri.

Her gaze then settled on Shiki's arm. "I don't do exorcisms, you know," she added, startling him, and prompting the man to clutch onto his sleeve. *Could she see his sister's hand?*

Cho waved his hand in front of his face dismissively. "They're not here for fortunes *or* an exorcism! They want to ask you about old folktales."

"Folktales?" The old woman looked even more suspicious now. "Whyever would you want to do that?"

"We're investigating the legend of the underwater volcano," Senri said, taking a step toward her.

The old woman looked up at him. "The underwater volcano..." "Yes—to be specific, whether anything happened on this island roughly a thousand years ago in connection to it." The woman's eyes opened wider at that.

"You know something, don't you?" Senri's tone of voice was calm and unruffled.

The woman glared at him. "What are you going to do with this information?" "I'm going to use it to save a young girl."

The woman was dumbfounded. Once she realized Senri was serious and not just making a joke, she relaxed her brow, relieved.

"I still can't understand what this is all about, but I can share a folktale or two, at least," she said. "If you can tolerate a dirty home, then come on in."

As soon as they went inside, it became apparent that "dirty" wasn't an exaggeration. The small room had nothing but straw mats covering its earthen floor, and even those were blackened with mold. There was a water jug and an iron pot sitting nearby, alongside several baskets containing leaves, roots, and what looked like dried wood. There were also many bundles of plants and branches hanging from ropes suspended from the beams overhead. A strange medicinal smell was in the air—presumably coming from those.

Senri looked around the room. "These are medicinal plants for herbal remedies—licorice, gardenia fruit, and peppermint leaves... Did you pick them yourself? That must have been hard work." He probably recognized the plants so quickly because of his own health issues.

"I buy them from sea sparrows. It'd be tough for me to venture into the mountains at my age."

"Oh, is that right? I still haven't met any sea sparrows," he commented.

"On this island, they take residence in caves when they come ashore. If you'd like to meet them, you should."

Once again, Senri's insatiable fascination with an endless amount of topics had caused him to veer off topic.

"Never mind that," interrupted Shiki. "What about the underwater volcano?"

"Oh yes, let's start with that," said Senri, not even flinching as he sat down on one of the moldy mats.

Shiki lowered himself beside him, and upon seeing that, the old woman seated herself opposite them. She held onto a nearby jug for support as she wearily lowered herself to the floor, most likely because she had bad knees. Cho stood near the entrance, looking bored.

"They say that the Sho lineage descended from the sea god," the old woman

began, fiddling with her necklace of shells and fangs.

She then closed her eyes, as if attempting to recall the distant past.

"A long, long time ago, we presided over divine rites as the sea god's oracles and assisted the island's rulers. We did that for generations. This is a trading island, so it's essential that people can travel safely by sea. We're superstitious people, so that's why we pray to the sea god. Anyway, the family that conducted divine rituals was highly esteemed. On the other hand, illfated families were shunned. Just look at the Jo lineage, for example. They kept a stone that was meant to be offered up to the sea god and incurred the god's rage. Their family was hit by disaster after disaster, and at that point, everyone stopped associating with them. They were made into social outcasts, and things gradually began to fall apart for them. That family should have abandoned this island and left right away."

The old woman paused there. She reached for a fang on her necklace and stroked it.

"Did the same happen to your family?" Senri asked.

The old woman swiftly looked up at him.

"Yes. We enraged the sea god and were barred from conducting rituals. That would have been in my great-great-great-great grandmother's generation, or thereabouts. One girl from our clan eloped with a foreign sea merchant, killed the local merchant she was engaged to, and fled—and that was that. She'd already got her ancestors' approval to marry that man, after all. There are rituals for that."

"We have those sorts of rituals in the imperial capital as well. We predict the auspiciousness of a marriage in the presence of ancestral spirits."

"Exactly," she said. "When I say she got her ancestors' approval, what I mean is that she predicted how the marriage was going to play out. Calling it off at that point is an insult to your ancestors and is blasphemous toward the sea god. Blasphemy tends to carry a heavier punishment than murder—at least it does on this island. But that's how our family met our downfall. Until that point, we were revered as living gods. In fact, the underwater volcano you're so intrigued by is what gave us such a status in the first place."

Stunned, Senri leaned in closer. "Please, do continue," he said. "It's not a story worth making a fuss about, mind you. Around

a thousand years ago, a girl from my family managed to calm the underwater volcano. That's why we started being referred to as living gods."

"She calmed it...? Had it erupted?" he asked.

"That's right. Off the shore of this island, a volcano lies at the bottom of the sea. All of a sudden, black water started gushing out from the sea—high into the sky like a mountain—and a cascade of pebbles pelted down on the surrounding area. The seawater came to a boil and stones bounced on the sea's surface. After the turbid water spouted out, vapor rose into the air, and the area was enshrouded in mist for three days and three nights. The volcano continued to erupt at intervals, filling the area with a peculiar stench. Red stones covered the water's surface, and the sea grew murky. Clouds gathered and hung over the volcanic smoke, and the island was enveloped in darkness, day and night. Then, the girl—a shrine maiden—prayed to the sea god for help and successfully quelled the volcano. The fishermen, who hadn't been able to go out and fish, as well as the sea merchants who hadn't been able to sail, were over the moon. The girl was deified and swamped with offerings and donations, even long after the issue was dealt with. From then on, this family's shrine maidens were treated with great respect—or at least, until that elopement."

The last few words that the old woman uttered were teeming with resentment.

"She betrayed this island. Its people turned on the Sho family overnight and persecuted us. People even started questioning whether the underwater volcano ever erupted at all, claiming that it was all a lie and the whole thing never happened. By that time, there was nobody left who witnessed it with their own eyes, so there was no way to argue otherwise. That's why the people who live here today know nothing about the eruption. Even I, as I tell this story, am not entirely certain what's true and what's not."

The old lady hung her head and fidgeted with her necklace using her fingertips.

"No, there must have been an eruption," said Senri. "That's the reason

everybody knows that there's a volcano there in the first place. There are still several legends circulating about it."

"Is that right?" The woman looked up at him with her narrow eyes and blinked. "I'll take your word for that. You're a big shot from the imperial capital, after all."

"Whether I'm a big shot or not depends on your perspective, but..."

"What?"

"I don't have any authority, so I'm of no use to anybody who wants me to use my influence to assist them," Senri admitted.

The old woman chuckled. "That only makes you *more* trustworthy in my eyes."

Senri smiled at her. Shiki simply watched on in stunned silence.

This man truly is one of a kind, he thought.

Whether it was the head of the Jo family or this eccentric old woman, Senri had a gift for putting people at ease. He didn't coerce them into opening up to him—instead, he coaxed their walls into dissolving like snow slowly melting in the sun, and they willingly opened their hearts to him.

No wonder His Majesty puts such trust in him.

Once the woman had stopped laughing, her face suddenly turned serious. "I'm only saying this because it's you, and nobody else would ever believe me, but..."

"What is it?"

"Lately, the waters have been getting rougher. Many boats are delaying their departures from the port. More sailors are soliciting my fortune-telling services and buying medicines from me in order to stave off their boredom than usual. I'm very grateful for the business, but..."

"Do you have any idea why the waves have gotten like that?"

The old woman lowered her gaze as she diffidently fidgeted with her necklace. "It usually indicates that the sea god is on the rampage."

"The sea god?" he asked.

"I'm still a shrine maiden—even if I am a poor excuse for one. I can feel these things. It's terrifying. I'd prefer to believe that this isn't an omen of an impending catastrophe, but that possibility is still playing on my mind... I'm scared."

The old woman's voice was almost a whisper as she made her confession. She was clutching onto her necklace for dear life.

"What did you make of that?" Shiki asked Senri as they walked out of the gate to the Sho family abode. He was referring to the old lady's comment about the sea god being on the rampage.

Senri appeared to think to himself for a while, staring up into space, but he never actually answered.

Shiki decided to pose a question to Cho instead. "Is the sea really that rough?"

"Well, yes," Cho said, stroking his lightly bearded chin. "I have noticed how much choppier it's become as of late. I can understand where the old lady's coming from. I get the feeling that the sea god is going wild too. I don't know if it's a sign that something bad is going to happen though..."

"Oh, I didn't know you were a shrine maiden as well!" Shiki commented jokingly.

Cho didn't laugh. "I was a seafaring mourner." "A what?"

"An oracle for sea voyages," explained Senri, turning his head. "It's a custom over in Ake. Whenever they go out to sea, they must always be accompanied by one man whom they force to live like a mourner. This man doesn't comb his hair or rid it of lice, and he allows his clothes to become soiled with dirt. He's not allowed to consume meat, nor is he permitted to go near women. That man is called a 'seafaring mourner' since he dresses like and resembles one. If the voyage goes well, the seafaring mourner is rewarded—but if they encounter difficulty, he's killed."

"What?!" Shiki was shocked. They kill him? How disturbing.

"It's a way of offering prayers to the god," Senri explained further. "The man

would humble himself like a mourner and pray for the safety of the voyage. If they found themselves in danger, the seafaring mourner would be killed for not showing enough restraint."

"I always exercised plenty of restraint," said Cho, "but once, our boat found itself in a storm, and I was almost killed. Not wanting to be murdered, I jumped into the water. It's better to die in the sea than be slain by another's blade. I'm a seaman, so if I'm going to die anywhere, I'd prefer it to be in the sea."

"But you survived, didn't you?" asked Shiki, before realizing how redundant this question was—the man in question was standing right in front of him.

"I did. I washed up here and the islanders came and nursed me back to health. The sea merchants found me extremely useful since I could understand the language of Ake." Suddenly, Cho appeared to remember something. "That reminds me..."

"What is it?" Senri asked.

"There's a beach where people tend to get washed up. It's where I was found too. It just so happens that the sea currents carry people there. Of course, it's not just humans that get washed ashore, but also other things too, like bits of wood from shipwrecked boats or discarded containers. The dead as well."

People who fell out of boats and drowned, people who were overwhelmed by waves while fishing, people who threw themselves off headlands—according to Cho, their bodies washed up on that very same shore.

"But recently, there's been a complete lack of corpses drifting onto the beach."

"Isn't that just because nobody has died?"

"No. It wasn't just human bodies that washed ashore, but different fish as well—deep-sea fish and big sharks from faraway shores. Nowadays, you don't even see any of *them*. It's all very peculiar," Cho said.

"Could it be because the sea currents have changed?" Senri contemplatively placed his fingers on his chin.

"If that was the reason, then nothing would be washing ashore whatsoever—

but pieces of wood and bowls and such show up, just as they always have. There's been no change there."

"I see..." Senri pondered this for a short while before swiftly looking over at Cho. "I'd like to see the area where the underwater volcano lies. Do you know anywhere that I could get a good view of it from?"

"The headland ahead of us should be a good spot for that." "Could I ask you to take us there?"

"It'd be my pleasure," responded Cho as he began to walk ahead.

There was a singular road leading from the hill where the Sho family home stood on the headland, so it didn't seem like it would take long to get there. The narrow road took the men through a thick forest. When they came out on the other side, they felt the sea breeze blowing against their skin. The waves sounded much louder here, and there was a large expanse stretching out in front of them. They were now standing on top of a rugged, rocky headland.

"It's around there," said Cho, pointing out to shore.

Shiki, however, couldn't tell how the area he was pointing at differed from the sea surrounding it. It wasn't as if the water was a different color, and the current didn't look any different either. "You wouldn't know just by looking at it," said Senri. It seemed

like he was thinking the same thing.

"At dawn, fishing boats gather there—so you'd be able to tell then," Cho explained.

"I wouldn't want to get in the way of their fishing, so could you take me out there during the daytime?"

"Over there?" Cho asked questioningly. "Yes," Senri replied with a nod.

"I'd be happy to, but...unless you dive underwater, you won't see any more than what you can see from right here."

"That's all right. I'm just obliged to check everything properly," replied Senri.

"Well, I can't say I envy you."

Shiki listened to the two of them chatting behind him as he stared down at the view beneath the headland. Below them was a beach where he could see children picking up shells. They were mostly boys, but there were some girls too. With them was one lone man.

Shiki grasped onto his arm. He could sense his younger sister behind him, pulling at his sleeve.

...Hakurai.

The man on the beach was, without a shadow of a doubt, Hakurai—the main reason his sister had been killed, and Shiki's archenemy. His arms shook.

"Cho, sir..." Shiki began, pointed down at the beach. "Are they local to this island?"

"Hmm? Who? Oh, them? They're sea swallows. They live in the nearby caves, like the old lady from the Sho family said. That's only at this time of year though. They don't stay in one place for very long, after all."

"Will they stay here for a while?"

"Until the beginning of spring, I expect." "I see," said Shiki, clutching at his sleeve.

"Do you need to speak to them about something? I can take you down there if you'd like."

"No, there's no need for that." Shiki replied in such a stern and serious voice that it left Cho looking visibly startled. Noticing this, Shiki reiterated himself in a much gentler manner. "I'm sorry," he said. "Really, it's fine."

Suddenly, Senri sneezed. "It really is chilly up here, isn't it?"

The headland provided no barrier against the wind and was fully exposed to the elements.

Cho looked worried. "It's not good to stay out here in the wind. I know a house where you could stop for a rest." It was a common belief that illnesses were carried by the wind.

"A house?" Shiki repeated.

"Jakuho's house. I'm sure he's put preparations in place so that you are able to stay there."

"That would be wonderful."

The three of them left the headland behind and decided to go back in the direction of the port, near to which Jakuho's residence was located.

Just before they went into the forest again, Shiki turned toward the headland one more time—but all he could see was the blue sky stretching out above him.

When they reached Jakuho's house, Senri barely wasted any time resting and began writing some letters instead. He wrote a report to Koshun as well as a letter to Jusetsu—even if, as far as he knew, she was still asleep.

"It's best that I keep His Majesty regularly updated," he said. "And I know the Raven Consort won't be able to read it, but still." "You never know. She might have woken up by now," said Shiki.

Senri laughed. Hearing Shiki say it made it feel like it could be true.

Shiki needed to write a report for Koshun as well. He took a brush and an inkstone out of the writing bag he carried with him.

The room that Jakuho had prepared for him to stay in was spacious and bright. Homes on Je Island had raised floors, presumably to keep the humidity out, and were made out of locally sourced cedar. The windows and doors were large, which kept the houses well ventilated. Just like the other houses here, Jakuho's home was surrounded by tile-topped walls intended to protect it against the wind, but it wasn't a noticeably luxurious property. There were no expensive furnishings—in fact, it was extremely plain inside. It was strikingly clear that Jakuho hadn't been using his power to line his own pockets. The port was well-organized, and there was no sign of discontent among the population. The island was full of life. That said, Shiki only arrived earlier that day, so he was sure there were many sides to it he was still yet to see.

Shiki picked up his brush. I need to tell him I saw Hakurai.

Why was that man, of all people, on this island? *I'd prefer to believe that nothing bad is going to come of this,* he thought to himself—but upon realizing how similar that was to what the old lady from the Sho family said earlier, the

bad feeling he had only intensified.

"Do you get the impression that some sort of disaster is going to unfold here?" he asked.

"I wouldn't know," Senri answered bluntly. "But the fact remains that there's something unusual happening in the sea. We need to keep that in mind."

The sea had gotten rougher, and bodies had stopped washing up on the shore. These weren't vague premonitions—they were facts. Senri made a proper distinction between the two.

"Going by the story that the Sho woman shared, the underwater volcano *did* erupt a thousand years ago—which also happens to be when Ikahi Island sank because of an eruption."

"Both of those events occurred a thousand years ago?" Shiki asked.

"What else do you think happened one thousand years ago?" "Well..." Shiki tilted his head to one side in contemplation.

"That was right in the middle of the war years..."

"That's right." Senri had a faint smile on his face as he nodded. He seemed to enjoy these sorts of discussions. "It wasn't just the people who were at war with each other. The gods were as well."

"What?"

"Uren Niangniang and the ao god went to war against one other. The ferocity of that battle caused an eruption on Ikahi Island. The ao god sank in the western sea, and part of Uren Niangniang sank in the eastern sea—the sea that surrounds this island. To be more specific, the missing part of Uren Niangniang is thought to be near the underwater volcano."

Shiki was stunned by what Senri was telling him, but at the same time, he didn't find it *that* shocking. Senri was the Winter Minister, after all.

"We suspect that some sort of disaster may have occurred before Uren Niangniang's missing part even sank," Senri continued. "There are several legends thought to be about the underwater volcano on Je Island that suggest an eruption a thousand years ago. There's a high likelihood that this is where

her missing part sank."

"In other words...you're searching for the missing half of Uren Niangniang?"

"Exactly."

"But why?" asked Shiki.

"So that we can save the Raven Consort."

So that's why we're here, thought Shiki—but he still didn't understand how finding the missing part of Uren Niangniang was going to save Jusetsu. Even so, he could now see the correlation between Senri's goal and his actions.

"Only the Raven Consort can tell whether it's definitely there. The Raven Consort will need to come here herself, but we can't just call her here right away—I must ensure it's safe for her first. That's another reason why the irregularities in the sea are concerning."

"Then we need to find out more about those irregularities," said Shiki.

Senri stared intently at him. "What is it?" Shiki asked.

"Nothing... It's just...you're very quick to understand things and adapt to them. You always know what to prioritize. It's immensely helpful."

"That's not true."

Senri's compliments made Shiki feel uneasy. He looked down at his hands. When he noticed the pale hand clutching onto his sleeve, it startled him.

Shiki averted his gaze. "There's one thing I want to ask you about, since you're the Winter Minister..."

"Yes?" Senri cocked his head, but swiftly straightened out his posture upon seeing how solemn Shiki was acting. "Go ahead."

"I asked the Raven Consort's help with this some time ago, but I'm being haunted by the ghost of my little sister. We weren't related by blood, but she was still my sister. She was murdered, and the people who killed her were executed, but the person who drove them to do it is continuing to live his life unpunished. I hate him and want to get revenge—but my little sister's ghost doesn't want me to. The Raven Consort says it's my fault she can't go on to

paradise as my hatred is holding her back. Do you think I should give up on getting my revenge? Do I have to stop resenting him?"

Shiki's voice grew increasingly impassioned as he spoke. The image of that man below the headland flickered through his mind. *I should have just run up to him,* he thought—but at the same time, he didn't want to cause his sister any more pain.

Senri stayed silent for quite some time. Eventually, though, he began to speak.

"First of all," he said, "unlike the Raven Consort, I don't know anything about ghosts. I can't see them, and I can't exorcise them either."

Shiki was somewhat disappointed that this was his longawaited answer. "Right."

"I can only go off what the Raven Consort herself says," Senri said. "If you want to send your young sister to paradise, you must stop resenting that man. If you hold onto your hatred, that will be impossible. Those are the only two choices you have. That being said, whether you hate somebody isn't a rational choice. You can *suppress* hatred with reason, but you cannot destroy it."

"I understand..."

Senri continued. "Revenge, in contrast to hatred, is an action. Although you can make a rational decision about whether to pursue it, the connection between the two is so strong that reason may fail when you are actually faced with the person you loathe. To sum it up, it's not a matter of whether you should abandon the idea of revenge or stop hating that man. This issue is far more difficult than that. You know that full well—you know what you should do, and yet you still can't bring yourself to do it."

Shiki took a deep breath in, then let it out. It was all so clear now—Senri had hit the nail on the head.

"The only thing you can do is accept your fate." "My fate?" Shiki asked.

"Accept the fact that you won't be able to send your sister to paradise. Not only are you unable to let go of your hatred, but you will continue to suffer as a result."

Shiki held onto his arm. Could he really accept that? His sister would be tied down forever.

"If you don't mentally prepare yourself for that, you won't be able to act when it really matters."

Coming from Senri, these words had some credibility to them. This was the man who was willing to surrender his own head for the sake of Jusetsu.

Shiki let out a small laugh. "Are you encouraging me to get my revenge?"

"I'm not encouraging it..." said Senri, a sad smile coming to his face, "but I know someone who stuck to his own volition, despite knowing they were on the wrong path—and ended up taking his own life as a result."

Shiki looked at Senri, taken aback.

"If you're going to follow your own will, then you need to be prepared for the consequences," he added.

Senri then gave Shiki a very calm smile—one that left Shiki feeling so ashamed that he lowered his head in embarrassment.

Once she finished reading Senri's letter, Jusetsu spent some time thinking.

I knew Je Island would offer us some answers.

According to the thousand-year-old legend, it was a reasonable assumption that area was where the missing part of the Raven was.

Still, Jusetsu was intrigued by the strange things happening at sea. What could the rough waters mean?

Jusetsu thought back on her conversation with the Raven.

During the battle one thousand years ago, the Raven had angered the gods of the Palace of Paradise by encroaching on its territory. Apparently, Je Island was on the border of that forbidden region.

After spending some time considering this in silence, Jusetsu got up and fetched some hemp paper from her cabinet.

"Are you writing a letter?" asked Jiujiu. She delightedly began preparing the

inkstone and ink for her.

Jusetsu needed to tell Senri that Je Island was on that boundary. Perhaps the sea god the people of Je Island believed in was from the Palace of Paradise. If the sea god were on the rampage now, could it have been because its territory was under attack— just like it had been one thousand years earlier?

I have a bad feeling about this.

Senri said in his letter that he was planning on taking a look at the area surrounding the underwater volcano by boat. If Jusetsu had been there, she would have stopped him.

Even if a particularly speedy messenger could deliver the letter to him, it still wouldn't reach him right away. Letters from Senri could take days to reach her under normal circumstances. Jusetsu couldn't help but worry what Senri might be doing right at that moment.

"A letter won't get there fast enough."

Jusetsu cast her brush aside. "Send a messenger to Koshun," she said. "I'm going to Je Island."

It took two days for the waves to calm down enough for a small boat to safely set sail. By the afternoon of the third day, the winds had become gentle, and the waves were much smaller. The clouds that had been covering the sky had also cleared up.

At long last, Cho was finally able to row Shiki and Senri out to sea. Swaying back and forth on the water, Shiki gazed out at the water. It looked so different depending on whether it was rough or whether it was calm.

"The warm tide coming from the south flows along the west side of this island, and it continues through to the northern side... or rather, it goes through here before meeting the sea currents from Ake out at sea. When they meet, the tide turns southward. It's as if Je Island is surrounded by warm tides," said Cho as he rowed the boat with his oars. The sound of the waves crashing against the boat complemented his raspy voice peculiarly well.

"That must be why the island is so warm, even in the winter," commented Senri. The climate here made more sense to him now.

"Yes, that's right. It's thanks to those tides that our island is so warm. It's the winds that carry the tides. They can bring good things, but also things that aren't so good."

Shiki, to whom it had never occurred that the warm climate and the currents could be related, found this fascinating.

Cho, a self-proclaimed seaman, livened up once they were out at sea, and become more talkative too. It seemed like he knew everything there was to know about the water.

"The winds are created at the Secluded Palace and the Palace of Paradise. These winds that form at the divine palaces turn, entwine, and eventually find their way back there," he explained. The wind was what caused the sea's waters to move. No matter whether it was summer or winter, the wind ruled over the sea as it circled around and around in its majestic cycle.

Shiki glanced at Senri, who was playing with a pebble he picked up at the beach. Even from a short distance away, it was easy to tell the man had a cheerful smile on his face. The news he received from Koshun two days previous had really lifted his spirits—Jusetsu was awake.

"What's that stone?" Shiki asked.

"Just a light pumice stone," he answered.

Senri then passed the red-brown, persimmon-colored stone— which had tiny holes all over it—to Shiki. True enough, it was extremely light.

"These featured in the story that old lady shared, didn't they? She talked about red stones covering the water's surface—light stones that flew about when the volcano erupted. Did they end up drifting ashore?"

This seemed to back up Sho's story.

"All sorts of pumice stones washed up on the beach—stones of all different sizes. Some were white, some were black, and others more colorful," Cho said. "If you do look into it more, you should be able to find lots of proof that the

eruption really happened."

"Really? How fascinating."

Shiki held onto the edge as the small boat swayed from side to side. Then, all of a sudden, the rowing stopped. He glanced up to find Cho staring ahead with a frown on his face.

"Is something the matter?" Shiki asked. "What's that?" responded Cho.

"Reiko, sir... Look." Senri's voice was shrill, and he pointed ahead. It was the first time Shiki had ever heard him sound so tense.

Senri pointed ahead as well, and Shiki followed his finger and looked carefully at the water's surface. This part of the sea appeared to have a slightly different hue than the water that surrounded it. It was a pale, brownish-yellow color, and almost looked murky.

Murky water.

Hadn't they heard something about that recently? In the old lady's story?

Before Shiki could shout to Cho to bring the boat back to the shore, the worst happened.

A bloodcurdling roar echoed through the air, and at that very same moment, black seawater burst right up into the sky. In fact, it looked more like a cluster of clouds than water. It started spouting up all around them. The whole area looked like little black balls were being scattered around. The men heard a dull thud nearby—there was now a hole in the bottom of their boat.

It's raining stones.

The blood drained from Shiki's face. He didn't even have time to consider diving into the sea before high waves lifted up the boat and flipped it over. The three men were thrown out into the water. Seawater flooded into their open mouths.

Shiki writhed about. All he could see was darkness. He never knew it was so dark beneath the waves.

It was painful.

There was no use in struggling—all he did was push around the seawater that was overwhelming him. It didn't take long for him to lose consciousness.

Hakurai had never seen anything like it in his life. He stood on the headland, gazing out at the sea in astonishment. He heard a roar, and in the next instant, dark water started spouting up from the water's surface.

Is this an eruption?

Unsurprisingly pale, Hakurai hurried down toward the beach. He doubted that Ishiha and Ayura had gone out to sea, but the thought still sent cold sweat running down his spine. When he got there, he found the two of them staring at the eruption from the shore, mouths agape. A wave of relief came over him.

Has the ao god done something?

He knew that the god had been devouring the corpses of the dead as of late. He'd been eating bodies that were adrift in the sea to heal his wounds. Because of that, the dead weren't washing up on this beach anymore.

Was this related? Or was this a completely different phenomenon?

Natari and the other sea swallows began to gather. This particular beach wasn't used by the island's residents, which was why they were able to stay there. It didn't seem like any islanders were going to turn up now either. They were probably at other beaches or ports, kicking up a big fuss.

The group spent some time just standing there, gazing at the eruption from a distance. It cycled between periods of increased ferocity and subdued lulls, but it showed no signs of abating. Before long, a mass of low clouds accumulated above it. A strange tepid breeze was blowing through the air. The bizarre sight left everyone speechless.

Suddenly, Hakurai felt a single gust that was unlike the wind that the sea was sending in his direction. This one was thin and refreshing—but he knew a gust like that was never a good sign.

This breeze had come from the rocky cliff. He looked over to it, and among the rocks, he could see a pale hand. He got a glimpse of a pale-yellow sleeve

with an intricate flower pattern printed. It looked like the hand of a young woman—although it was obviously not that of a living person.

The pale hand was beckoning him over. Under normal circumstances, he would've ignored it, but on this occasion, he found himself instinctively beginning to walk over.

The hand pointed toward the water. There was a riffle in front of a rocky area on the shore. Seaweed and other debris often became entangled with the rocks, and fish would get left behind in that shallow area at low tide. Hakurai looked at the area the hand was pointing to. There, he could see a person floating on the water, swaying from side to side. In fact, there were three of them.

They must be fishermen who got caught up in the eruption and got washed up on the shore, Hakurai initially thought—but when he saw what they were wearing, he realized he was wrong. One of them looked like a local, but the other two were dressed like imperial officials, or something along those lines. One of them looked familiar too. He felt he had seen him before—in Ga Province, perhaps?

Before he knew it, the pale hand was gone.

Ishiha had followed Hakurai there and took a peek at the riffle the man was watching. "There are *people* there!" he shouted.

The other sea swallows ran over to the area. They waded into the water with no hesitation whatsoever and went straight to the three men who washed ashore.

"They're still breathing," one person said. That came as no surprise—if they were dead, the ao god would have eaten them already.

The waves lashed against Hakurai's feet. There was something else stuck in the rocks. At first, he thought it was some wood from a boat—but it couldn't have been.

It was black. A black sword.

Hakurai picked it up—and at that exact moment, he heard water violently erupt from the sea again.



THE LAND of Ga Province was awe-inspiring and brimming with life.

The river that traversed down into the plains from the high, rugged mountains had caused floods on countless occasions in the past, and each and every time, it had left the soil even richer than it had been before. Even during long, dry stretches of hot weather, its water never dried up, and all the plants—whether they be rice or mulberry—continued to thrive. Shin believed that the soil here was the most fertile in all of Sho.

Shin got out of the boat and set foot in his home region for the first time in what felt like forever. The mountaintops far off in the distance were covered in snow. Fields filled with crops covered the plains, and settlements where people lived sat at the foot of the mountains.

There was a wide, sturdy road leading from the port to the area that had been constructed back when the Saname family ruled over the area. They'd dug down into the soil, laid out small stones, tamped down the ground, and then heaped up layers of sand to stop the road from getting muddy. Then, they'd covered the moist surface with twigs and leaves before heaping soil on top.

This prevented the ground from getting waterlogged or eroding from rain or underground moisture. No matter whether it was silkworm farming, regular agriculture, or building that road, the Saname family were masters at the art of coming up with ingenious solutions to improve things.

Every time Shin stepped onto that road, he felt proud. There were many other people taking the same route, but each and every one of them bowed and said hello when they saw him. Even now, the Saname family were treated as the rulers of the land.

The Saname family residence stood on a hill a short distance away from the other settlements. Shin could already see its remarkably large gate. The yellowish-brown mud walls glistened like gold in the sun.

Instead of going in that direction, however, Shin went down a side road. A gentle, hilly area that was covered in mulberry fields stretched before his eyes. Unsurprisingly for the time of year, the mulberry plants had dropped their leaves. Although the region enjoyed a temperate climate, it still experienced

four distinct seasons, and the winters were reasonably chilly.

The hill led to one particular mountain that hovered above the harbor, and Shin began to climb the mountain path. Before long, he could see things that were hidden from view just moments earlier. A small house appeared from among the trees. It was a rather unique building with a thatched roof and an intricate lattice window and a peephole on its door. The house was circled by a brushwood fence, but it was falling apart in places and had several holes—likely damage caused by wild animals.

Shin could hear weaving coming from the house. It was a light, rhythmical sound—one that he had loved ever since he was a young child. He wanted so much for the sound to continue that he hesitated to call to the person inside—but after he'd been standing there for a few moments, the weaving sound halted, nonetheless.

An old woman appeared from inside the house. "I knew it had to be you, young master," she said, smiling merrily at him, "I can tell I've got visitors because I can hear their footsteps against the dry leaves—and only you would be as polite as to wait before calling out to me."

"That's very perceptive of you."

Shin gave the old lady a friendly smile back. Her name was Kansa, and she had been Shin's mother's wet nurse. Kansa came to the Saname family at the same time his mother had married into it, and she had retired to this home after his mother died, after Banka was born. The house itself had been given to his mother as a place for her to recuperate.

Shin had more of a bond with Kansa than he had with his own mother and his own wet nurse—and they were still just as close.

"I hear you've been in the imperial capital. When did you make it back?" she asked.

"Just a few moments ago."

"I assume you haven't seen Choyo yet, then." "I'll go see him next," Shin answered.

"It's very wayward of you, coming to visit an old hag like me before seeing

your own father," said Kansa, but she made no effort to send Shin on his way—in fact, she invited him inside.

The loom stood right in the entrance to the house, the inside of which was divided into rooms with curtains. Behind the house was a separate building—a silkworm-rearing room where Kansa raised silkworms and harvested thread from them. She insisted that looking after them herself was no trouble, so didn't usually have any servant girls helping her. It was only during particularly busy periods that she'd employ a young servant girl to lend a hand, but it still seemed like a challenging task for an old lady and a young girl to take care of silkworms all by themselves. Silkwormrearing may have been her job, but when they were growing, the silkworms needed to be fed chopped-up mulberry leaves numerous times a day. They required round-the-clock surveillance, so it was a fairly intense job.

"How about you put a stop to raising silkworms soon?" asked Shin.

The Saname family made sure Kansa was well provided for, so she shouldn't have had any problems in that area. Even so, she insisted that without her silkworms, she wouldn't have anything else left to do.

"It's not working that's going to ruin my health—it's being inactive. That's just how people like me are built."

"You say that, but..."

"I still want to weave silk for you to wear, young master." Kansa then stood up and brought over some fabric from the back of the room. It was white silk, not yet dyed. "This is what I've woven most recently. I was considering having it sent to your residence, but it works out perfectly that you're here."

Shin unfolded the fabric. He was astounded at how smooth it was—the silk was woven so tightly that you couldn't tell where one thread ended and the next one started.

"I can tell that your skills haven't diminished. No—in fact, it's as if your weaving has gotten even *more* impressive over the years."

"You're flattering me," Kansa replied.

It wasn't flattery. Kansa had always been a masterful weaver, but as the years

went by, she'd polished her skills even further.

Shin's late mother had been born into a distinguished family, and Kansa, being her wet nurse, originally hadn't needed to do any manual labor. However, during Shin's mother's childhood, the family's status had declined considerably. Kansa and the other servants found themselves in difficult situations, struggling to scrape by, so they took on side jobs. It went without saying why Shin's mother married into the Saname family.

"Out of curiosity, young master..." said Kansa, a friendly look in her eyes.

"Have you done something so naughty that you're reluctant to show your face in front of your father now?"

Shin smiled awkwardly. "I'm not a child, you know."

"You were never naughty, even when you were young. You were always so well-behaved. The most shocking thing you ever did was catching that whole basket full of frogs."

No matter how old Shin got, Kansa always made the same sorts of comments. He owed her so much.

Although she was still smiling, there was now a tinge of concern in her eyes. "Has your father scolded you for something?" she asked.

"No," replied Shin, lowering his gaze. "My father never scolds me. You know that." Shin's father wasn't interested enough in him to bother with that. Shin knew that full well.

"Young master..."

Just as Kansa was about to say something else, they heard footsteps crunching against the dried-up leaves outside. It was exactly like she said—you could immediately tell when someone was approaching. Even so, no one had ever turned up while Shin was there.

Before he even had the chance to question who it might be, he heard a voice.

"Shin, are you there?"

The voice was gentle, but there was something peculiarly frosty about it too. It was a voice that Shin knew very well.

"Ko," Shin replied.

He stepped outside to find his younger brother, Ko, standing there. Ko was his next-youngest brother out of all his siblings. He was dressed in a long, plain grayish-blue robe, and wore a faint, indecipherable smile on his face.

"Father is waiting. He was going to send someone to collect you, so here I am."

My father never misses a trick, thought Shin.

Of course, it was only natural that he worked out where Shin was. He saw plenty of different people on his way here, so word of his return would've spread right away.

Kansa rushed out of the house in a fluster. "I'm sorry. It's my fault for keeping him here..."

"No. I'm the one who decided to visit," said Shin.

Ko pretended not to hear him. "I'd rather you refrained from taking advantage of my older brother's kindness," he said, reprimanding Kansa. While he possessed the kindest-looking face of the brothers, Ko was the strictest and most cold. He resembled his father in that respect.

Kansa hung her head repentantly. "Ko..." Shin began.

"Come on," said Ko, marching right ahead. Shin turned back to Kansa. "I'm sorry." "There's no need to be."

"Weren't you about to say something a moment ago?"

"No, it's all right. Now, hurry up and make your way back," she said. Kansa then gave Shin a languid smile—one that pained him in his chest to see.

"I'll be back," he said, before leaving her behind and catching up with his brother.

"Trust me, Ko. It wasn't like that..." he said to him.

"Is it not reasonable to assume that your own father would be the first person you greeted upon your return? That woman is toxic for not suggesting so."

"Kansa was our mother's wet nurse!"

"And? You should have gone to see her afterward. Are you aware of the sort of things the local people are going to say about you? Do you want them to think that you and our father are on bad terms? You're the next in line!"

Shin said nothing in return. Talking to Ko made him feel like his body was being covered in thorns. Ko never raised his voice or hurled abuse at him, but his words were still like cold prickles piercing his skin.

"You should stop coming here," Ko said. "Why?"

"Didn't you know? Kansa has been saying bad things about our father. To think that it's our family that's been keeping her afloat... That woman really has no shame."

"She has...?" Shin asked.

Ko let out a small laugh. "You get taken advantage of because you're too kind. Well, the way you were brought up may be partly to blame there, but still..."

Shin took offense to that. "We were both brought up the same way."

"Being the heir and being the second-in-line are two extremely different things."

I don't think they are, Shin thought to himself.

In reality, there had been quiet speculation that Ko was going to be the one to inherit their father's position.

"You need to be more mindful of your position—especially at the moment. I hear there's been some sort of trouble in the imperial capital."

"Were you notified about that already?" Shin asked. "Of course we were. You know who our father is."

A cold sweat came over Shin—his brother had a point. Considering everything that had been going on, the awkwardness of seeing his father was no excuse to have made this detour.

Koshun had directly issued Shin with a secret order—to find out what his father was going to do. That was when he learned Jusetsu was a surviving member of the previous dynasty, and that it was the reason his father, Choyo, viewed her as a danger. He was informed that his father once used Hakurai to

threaten her.

It had all come as quite a shock. Although it wasn't impossible to work out what his father was thinking, resorting to violent means was a step too far—and to make it even worse, the target of his animosity was just a young girl. Jusetsu's pale face flashed in the back of Shin's mind.

"That upheaval is the reason you've come back, isn't it, Shin? Shin...?" Ko's skeptical-sounding voice startled his older brother.

"Oh... Umm, yes."

"That's why our father is so eager to see you. He wants to hear the details."

"Is that so..." That's the reason he has been waiting for me?

Perhaps the fact that Shin stayed in the imperial capital against his father's wishes wasn't such a big deal after all. He might have been worrying himself over nothing.

"Has anything changed over here while I was away?" Shin asked. "Not particularly. Oh, but now that you mention it..." "What?"

"Never mind—it's best you hear it directly from our father." "Just tell me," Shin demanded impatiently, but Ko just smirked.

The Saname residence, which stood on top of a hill, enjoyed an expansive view of the plains. During the current season, however, there was nothing to see in those fields but dark soil. With silk cultivation also concluded, the women spent the winters spinning their looms indoors while the men traveled to other regions peddling woven fabrics. The same was the case for Saname clan, apart from the fact that the silk their women wove was primarily transported to Je Island—from where it would then be taken abroad. Those who excelled in raising silkworms and were known for their weaving were held in high regard and attracted throngs of suitors.

"I heard that the Raven Consort has managed to avoid execution and has instead been given a new role. Is that true?"

These were the first words to leave Choyo's mouth. Father always jumps straight to what's important, thought Shin, awestruck by his directness. He

hadn't even taken the time to welcome him back.

On the other hand, however, he couldn't help but notice the contempt with which he spoke of Raven Consort.

"From what I've heard, it seems His Majesty's chief vassals were all against executing her," Shin said.

"Not just Adviser Un, but Chief Secretariat Ka as well?" "I don't know the specifics."

Shin's response made Choyo scowl. He seemed annoyed by Shin's perceived incompetency.

"It also appears that the other concubines begged for her life to be spared," Shin added.

The lines in Choyo's brow deepened even more. The look on his face was a stern one—so much so that it wouldn't have looked amiss if there were blue veins protruding out of his forehead. Maybe Banka had just crossed his mind.

Shin continued. "Talk of the Raven Consort spread far and wide among the townspeople... They're saying she fought off a crowd of corpses and dispersed a pillar of water that had spurt up from the ground with a single arrow."

Choyo gave Shin a piercing look. Shin wanted to avert his gaze but resisted the urge. It felt like his father could see right through him—it was a feeling that struck him with terror.

"Did you witness it with your own eyes?" Choyo asked. "Well, no... It's just hearsay, but..."

"Don't believe everything you hear."

Choyo's voice sounded as authoritative as ever, but Shin could sense a hint of anger in it now. This didn't happen very often. He hadn't even sounded angry when Shin and Ryo had told him they were staying in the imperial capital. Did he really despise Jusetsu that much?

"The head of the Yozetsu family was appointed as the salt and iron envoy a short while ago, was he not? Do you know anything about his actions?" Choyo asked.

"As far as I know, he didn't express any opinion regarding her execution."

This response prompted Choyo to stroke his chin, lost in thought. "Well, I suppose he doesn't have any other choice," he grumbled to himself. "Has His Majesty issued any orders to the province council, or to the envoy institute? Has the army done anything?"

There was no way Shin would have been privy to such information. It wasn't as if he was one of the emperor's confidants.

"Nothing publicly, at least," he replied.

Choyo stared hard at his son. Cold sweat rolled down Shin's back and he found himself unable to look away.

"Anyhow," began Choyo.

To his son's relief, he had now averted his gaze. The next thing he said, however, caught Shin off guard.

"In the spring, you shall wed Tojo of the Kitsu family. I suggest you keep that in mind."

Shin paused. "Are you telling me I'm getting married?" He was dumbfounded.

Choyo shot him a sharp look. The man hated being asked questions to which the answer was already obvious.

"Kitsu Tojo... Isn't she...?" Shin began.

The Kitsu family was one of the Saname clan's branch families. That being said, their family had branched off quite some time ago, so they acted more as the Saname clan's vassals than anything else.

"She's turning sixteen this year. She's a terrible weaver, but she's hardworking and isn't afraid to get her hands dirty and pick mulberries. She'll make a good wife for you."

Shin thought of his late mother. As the daughter of a prominent family, she never picked up a needle—not even when her servants were making every effort to make ends meet. She never lifted a finger once she was married either. She left her children for her wet nurse to look after, shut herself inside her room, and never showed her face properly. Shin couldn't even remember her

having spoken to him.

"Has she finished her mourning?" Shin asked. "She's Kitsu Rokujo's daughter, isn't she?"

Kitsu Rokujo, who'd been one of Banka's ladies-in-waiting, had died after taking the blame for his father's plot.

Choyo was silent, but his eyebrows twitched.

"Wouldn't it be best to start the wedding rituals *after* her mourning period is over?" Shin added.

"It'll be too late by then."

People were expected to take three years to mourn the death of a parent. There were a number of cumbersome procedures involved in getting married, so it would take almost four years for the two of them to actually tie the knot.

"Kitsu Rokujo entrusted Tojo to the Kitsu family when she became one of Banka's ladies-in-waiting. She was raised as the daughter of the present head of the family. As such, she has no need to mourn."

What a preposterous thing to say, thought Shin. Rokujo was still her mother. What kind of logic was Choyo using? Why couldn't they postpone the marriage until her mourning period was over? What was the rush?

That wasn't the only thing that was troubling Shin either.

Kitsu Rokujo had died for his father's sake. It felt wrong to marry that woman's daughter. If she found out the truth, wouldn't Tojo come to hate both Shin and his father?

"Do you object?" Choyo asked Shin, who was looking depressed.

"It doesn't feel right to be marrying a girl who's still in mourning," Shin said.

His objection should have been obvious, but the look in Choyo's eyes was icy cold.

"Has the Raven Consort stolen your heart?"

Shin was startled. "Wh-what are you...?" He broke out in a sweat, tonguetied.

"She would be too much for you."

"What are you talking about?" replied Shin, finally managing to utter a cohesive sentence. "Why are you bringing up the Raven Consort all of a sudden? She definitely has *not* stolen my heart."

"Do you have somebody else in mind, then?" Choyo asked. "No. It's not that I don't like Kitsu Tojo—I'm just saying, I'd rather defer this marriage until after her mourning period has concluded."

"You cannot." "Why?"

"I don't want you to cause me any trouble over in the imperial capital," Choyo said.

Shin was taken aback.

"You didn't think that word wouldn't make its way back to me, did you? If you're part of this family, this region is where you need to be. Marry here. Live out your life here."

With that, Choyo said no more. He stood up from his seat and exited the room. The man was always like that.

Shin quietly sighed and got to his feet as well. Once he left the room, he went straight outside. Even though he had lived in that house his entire life, it felt so suffocating now.

Vast mulberry fields extended out behind the property. Their leaves had already fallen, leaving nothing but their bare branches to stretch up toward the blue sky. It was a dreary sight.

As a child, Shin was always excited for the beginning of summer to come around since that was when the fruit ripened. He'd grab dark, ripe fruit off branches and put them right in his mouth. He and his younger brothers treated the whole thing as if it was some sort of competitive sport. Back then, Kansa used to scold him for the resulting dark stains around his mouth and on his fingers too.

As he walked through the mulberry fields, memories of those days came flooding back. For some reason, he could feel an ache deep inside his heart. It

didn't help that the winter sky above was such an intense shade of blue that it hurt his eyes.

Then, Shin heard fallen leaves being crunched under someone's footsteps. He turned in the direction of the sound and saw a young girl. It looked like she was about to run out from behind one of the trees. He didn't even have a chance to call out to her before she tripped over the tree's roots in a panic and fell over.

Shin walked up to her and offered her his hand. "Are you all right?"

She was quite young, around fifteen or sixteen—likely only just old enough to have started wearing her hair up. She was fairly well-dressed, so it was unlikely that she was a servant of any kind. *She must be a guest,* Shin thought—and that was when it clicked.

The girl, though timidly looking down at the ground, was red in the face.

Once Shin had helped her up, the girl bowed and then fled without saying a word.

"A secret rendezvous among the mulberry trees? Very smooth of you, Shin."

The sudden voice gave Shin a fright. Ko appeared from among the mulberries.

How long has he been there?

"That was Kitsu Tojo, wasn't it? The head of the Kitsu family arrived a short while ago. He brought her with him."

"Did he get her to come out here?"

Had he orchestrated a situation for the two of them to meet, and tried to make it look like a coincidence? This thought made Shin feel uncomfortable.

"Well, I don't know about that... Maybe she just spotted you and decided to chase after you?" Ko suggested.

Even if she *had* tried to chase after Shin, it still would have been under the head of the family's instruction. She didn't seem like the sort of girl who'd act like that on her own volition.

"Still, she's far too quiet to be the wife of the future head of the Saname clan." From his words, Ko unsurprisingly already knew about the arrangement.

"Barely any time has passed since the death of her mother," commented Shin. "Obviously she's not going to be in the best of spirits."

"You really are a softy, aren't you, Shin?"

Shin fell silent. He wasn't in the mood to play along with his brother's wisecracks.

Noticing the somber expression on Shin's face, Ko followed suit. Still, he didn't seem like he was going to leave either.

Shin had no choice but to speak up. "Did you need something from me?"

"Well, not exactly, but..." Ko sounded uncharacteristically evasive.

"Just tell me," Shin demanded.

Ko drew closer and whispered, "Doesn't our father seem unusually irritable?"

Now that his brother mentioned it, Shin had noticed it earlier. "He does..."

"It's rare for him to let his emotions come to the surface. No, it's not just rare —I've *never* seen him express what he's feeling at all."

That must be an exaggeration, thought Shin—but it was only natural that Ko found the change disconcerting. Shin couldn't remember their father even looking happy when his siblings were born. He probably didn't express any joy when I was born either, he thought to himself.

"It's probably because I didn't have any worthwhile news to report," suggested Shin, but Ko just gave him an awkward smile. Shin wasn't sure what Ko was feeling.

"You need to conduct yourself in a more noble manner, Shin."

"What do you mean?"

"Our father left you behind in the imperial capital because he trusts you," Ko said. "He listened to your reports carefully, didn't he?"

"I stayed there against his wishes," Shin reminded him.

"If he really wanted to bring you back with him, he could have. The fact that he let you stay means you had his approval."

Shin went quiet. He didn't enjoy talking to Ko—his brother always spoke in a clear manner, which just reminded Shin of his own stupidity. The fact that Ko viewed him as his older brother only put more pressure on his shoulders. He couldn't help but wonder what Ko really thought of him—was he actually making fun of him, deep down? Every time these doubts resurfaced, they chipped away at Shin's heart.

"Anyway, you always think too negatively. It's all simpler than you'd expect." With that, Ko left and headed back toward the house, seemingly exasperated by Shin's lackluster responses.

Is it really simple?

Shin was well aware that his surly attitude led him to stubbornly warp his perception of the world around him, but that still didn't mean there was anything he could do about it.

Shin stood stock-still among the withering trees. A cold breeze blew and sent the fallen leaves by his feet flying through the air.

The next day, Shin paid Kansa another visit. The icy, wintry wind seeped into his collar and through his sleeves, giving him a chill. He could hear a faint, whistle-like sound—was it the wind?

It sounds so sad.

"Well, if it isn't you, young master!" Kansa greeted Shin happily. "I didn't expect you to come back so soon."

"You didn't get to finish what you were saying yesterday," he replied.

"Oh, is that why you came back? Well, I'm pleased nonetheless." Kansa had Shin sit down in front of her bronze brazier. Red-hot coal was burning inside. Relieved, Shin held his hands up to it. His body had been exposed to the bitingly cold winter wind moments earlier, but now it began to warm back up. In terms of fabric, silk responded best to heat, and hemp fabric preferred the cold. That being so, Kansa needed to heat the room with a brazier when she was weaving silk in the winter months.

"Please take a look at this, young master," said Kansa, showing Shin some fabric. It was a length of silk dyed a pale shade of red. "I just picked it up this

morning. I requested for it to be dyed."

Although clothes tended to be tailored at home, the actual dyeing of fabric tended to be left to fabric-dyeing shops. Different craftsmen specialized in different colors and techniques, so it was necessary to visit specific artisans depending on whether you wanted your fabric dyed blue, black, or red, or if you wanted someone to decorate the fabric with a stencil or even tie-dye it.

"It's beautifully dyed... But what's this for?"

"Don't you think it'd suit the daughter of the Kitsu family marvelously well?"

Shin's eyes widened. "You know about that?" It hadn't even occurred to him that Kansa might have been aware of the plan.

"Everybody knows, young master," she said. "We've known about it for a long time. You're just out of the loop because you were in the imperial capital."

"Is that right...?" Was I really the only one who didn't know? Shin thought to himself. It made him so uncomfortable that it felt like his skin was burning.

"She's a nice, well-mannered young lady. Personally, I think you two would make a good match."

Shin found Kansa's wording somewhat intriguing. "Are you implying that there are some who don't agree?"

"Oh, no—that's not what I meant."

"If there's something you know, I'd like to hear it."

Kansa looked down at the floor, flummoxed. "She's a lovely young lady, but at the end of the day... The Kitsu family *are* your family's vassals. People were just expecting you to marry the daughter of a prestigious family from elsewhere..."

It sounded like Kansa was struggling to get the words out. She continued. "It's common to prioritize marrying someone of a similar background—you know that. I get the impression that many believe that the woman who marries the head of the Saname clan needs to be from a notable family... They don't understand why you'd marry someone of a lower ancestral status."

The woman left it at that, but there was an answer to that "why"—Shin was not going to be the next head of the family.

Shin found himself frowning. He'd heard people say things like this countless times before. It was like a curse he would never shake. "The heir to the Saname clan won't be their oldest son," people would say. "It'll be their second..."

"You didn't need to hear that. I do apologize," said Kansa, but Shin shook his head. She never sugarcoated uncomfortable truths, and that was why he trusted her.

"More importantly, what was it that you didn't get a chance to tell me? Was it about this?" he asked.

"Well, no..." She hemmed and hawed, seeming even more reluctant to speak now. The feeble sound of the breeze came from outside, surprising Kansa enough to make her stir slightly.

"Oh no, I almost forgot," she muttered before immediately retreating into the back of the room. The woman went over to the kitchen, and when she came back, she was carrying a basket of oranges. Then, she walked straight outside, still holding the basket.

What is she doing? Shin thought. He peered out through the window and watched her throw pieces of fruit over the brushwood fence. The oranges seemed to be falling into the thicket.

"Were you feeding the wild animals?" Shin asked once Kansa had returned.

Kansa looked somewhat embarrassed. "Dear Shosen is out there," she said.

Shin paused. "What?"

"She looks like she's starving, so I've been giving her some food. If I don't, she bites into my fence. Look—it's already broken in places... That's what I wanted to tell you."

"What are you talking about?" Shin was confused. Kansa was making this sound like simple small talk, but Shosen... "Wasn't Shosen my mother's name?" he asked.

Shosen was the childhood name of his late mother. Since Kansa was her wet nurse, she occasionally referred to his mother by that name.

"Yes. So..." Kansa smiled awkwardly. "This might be hard to believe, but dear

Shosen seems hesitant about leaving... This was where she passed away, wasn't it?"

"Are you saying that my mother's ghost has appeared?" he asked. "After all this time?"

"Yes. It gave me a shock too." Kansa placed a hand on her cheek. "I suppose it has to be a ghost," she said, continuing. "It's my first time seeing such a thing, so I can't say for sure. One evening, Shosen was standing there, just on the other side of the fence. She was wearing the embroidered robe she was buried in. I tailored it and embroidered it myself, stitch by stitch. She didn't say anything, but she looked so haggard. There was no life in her eyes. I offered her a boiled chestnut, thinking she might be hungry, and she ate it right up." Kansa was now happily chattering away as she told the story. "After that, she began showing up every now and then. Recently, I've been giving her dried persimmons and oranges. I make sure to have things like that to give her because when I forget now and then, she throws a tantrum and munches on my fence instead."

This story sent chills down Shin's spine—and yet Kansa was speaking with a smile, acting as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

You must be mistaking a monkey or something for my mother, Shin wanted to say, but he swallowed the words back down before they made it out of his mouth. Kansa wouldn't make such a mistake—and if she did, it would have been due to her own wishful thinking.

As her former wet nurse, Kansa had been very compassionate toward Shin's mother. When she died, she was inconsolable with grief for days. Did those emotions cause Shin's mother's ghost to appear?

Still, why now?

"When did this start?" he asked.

"Quite recently—while you were in the imperial capital."

Shin was usually the only visitor Kansa had. With Shin staying behind in the imperial capital, there was no one who would come see her. Had her loneliness caused her to start seeing strange things?

Surely it can't actually be my mother's ghost...

The idea that his mother spent all this time drifting through the mountains, starving and never having gone over to paradise, was one that Shin didn't wish to entertain. The thought of her devouring food thrown at her was far from tolerable either.

"When she gets particularly ravenous, she starts crying," said Kansa. "Listen...
Just like that."

Shin could hear the cold wind outside. "That's the breeze," he wanted to say to assure her, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

What is going on?

Shin agonized over all this as he made his way home. He never expected for Kansa to tell him something like that.

There was no way he could ask his father for advice. Should he tell the story to the family steward and get him to take care of it, since he was in charge of the house?

Shin was just about to pass through the large gate to the Saname family residence—still racking his brains about what to do—when somebody pulled him over by the arm.

"Shin." It was Ko.

Before Shin had the chance to ask him what he was doing, he found himself being pulled down a side road that led up toward the mountains. Shin got the impression that Ko wanted to have a private conversation with him—and it would be the perfect opportunity to tell Ko the story as well.

"Kansa's acting strange," Shin said.

Ko stopped in his tracks and turned around. He was scowling. "Kansa? In what way?"

As Shin explained what Kansa claimed to be seeing, the look on Ko's face grew stonier and stonier. The young man looked just like his father.

"Don't take what that woman says as the truth, Shin," spat Ko. Shin was confused by his brother's contemptuous manner of speaking. Kansa wasn't

perfect, but she was still their mother's wet nurse. Why would he be so spiteful toward her?

"She's obviously talking nonsense," Ko continued. "She's a serial liar."

"What are you talking about?" Shin snarled. Calling her that was a step too far.

"You believe every word that comes out of her mouth, so of course you wouldn't understand what a conniving old hag she is." Shin wanted to bite back and tell Ko how stupid he was being, but he stayed silent.

Ko had been driven into a corner—the grave look on his face made this unmistakably clear. Despite being someone who was always composed and never raised his voice, Ko was sounding increasingly infuriated.

"What are you accusing Kansa of doing?" Shin asked.

"Our mother was from a once-notable family that had fallen from grace. Kansa was upset that she married into the Saname clan. Even when our mother was alive, she's been talking behind everyone's backs, complaining that she was bought out by a measly clan from the countryside that just happened to be rich," Ko said.

"That can't be true..." mumbled Shin.

Ko gave Shin a pained grimace. "Shin... Kansa is the one who's been telling everybody that I'm going to inherit our father's position instead of you. I saw it with my own eyes."

The shock of his words hit Shin like a knife to the chest. *He's lying*. "Don't be so stupid, Ko," Shin pleaded. "Don't lie to me..."

"Why would I lie to you? Why do you think I'm lying?" "Why would she do such a thing? She has no reason to."

Ko choked on his words. "Well... Because she was upset our mother married into this family at all."

"So she wants to stir things up for us? What would she gain from that?" asked Shin.

"It's not that she has anything to gain from it—she just wants to cause

trouble."

"Don't be so stupid."

Ko knitted his brow, and Shin realized he looked almost sad. "Do you trust her more than me, your own brother? Your own flesh and blood?"

The concern in Ko's voice was so clear that Shin began to feel unsure. He had never heard Ko say things like this before or speak in such a tone. It was the first time he had ever seen such a look on his brother's face as well.

Was Ko telling the truth? But it was hard for Shin to accept immediately that Kansa would act in such a way too...

Who am I supposed to believe?

His throat was bone dry. Shin swallowed and began to speak. "Wh-why are you telling me this now?"

A faint smile came to Ko's face. "I'm going to the Northern Mountains on our father's orders."

"The Northern Mountains..."

"You know what my position demands, don't you? I have to let those tribes know how our father feels. Whether things go the way our father wants them to or not, there's a chance I might not make it back alive."

Shin gulped, taken aback.

"Doesn't that alone speak volumes?" he continued. "The heir would never be allowed to do such a thing. The second-in-line meanwhile, is disposable. I might not agree with our father's plans, but it's an order. I have no choice." Ko then drew a step closer and grabbed hold of Shin's arm. "I brought you down here to tell you one thing—our father is most likely going to fail."

"Fail?" Shin asked.

"This will not succeed. For some reason, our father has misjudged the scenario on this occasion. Listen, Shin—you need to go into hiding for a while, or at least stay away from this family. If you're on good terms with the emperor, make sure you keep hold of that connection," said Ko. "The Saname clan...is on the edge of ruin."

This hushed proclamation shook Shin to the core.

The Saname clan is on the edge of ruin.

Ko squeezed Shin's arm harder. "If you're going to trust me on anything, please trust me on that."

It was as if the desperation in Ko's grip caused his ardor to seep into Shin's own body. Before he even realized it, Shin was nodding his head.

After he parted from Ko, Shin couldn't bring himself to return to the Saname family residence. Instead, he made his way to Kansa's house again—he wanted to hear her side of the story.

Kansa appeared understandably unsettled by Shin's return, especially considering the sun had already set. "Oh... Young master. Is something the matter?"

"There's something I want to ask you."

Undeterred by how abnormally dispirited Shin seemed, Kansa ushered him inside.

"What is it that you wanted to ask me, then?" she asked. "Is it true that you've been seeing my mother's ghost...?"

Kansa's eyes widened a little. "It is," she said, sounding upset. "Don't you believe me?"

"Have you been criticizing our father behind his back?" Kansa stayed silent at that, however, and her expression became tense.

Shin continued. "Is it true that you're the one who's been telling everybody that Ko is going to inherit our father's position rather than me?"

All the emotion drained from Kansa's face. Shin felt like he was looking at a blank wall, unable to gauge how the woman felt from her expression. Her eyes, nose, and mouth were right there, but they were bereft of any sentiments.

A few moments later, Kansa began to smile—or rather, her face distorted into an odd, smile-like expression.

An impenetrable dark gloom appeared behind her eyes. "Well... It's not as if

I've been shouting it from the rooftops," Kansa began. "Even if I didn't say anything myself, there'd always be *somebody* spreading rumors about it. People are irresponsible. We love gossip."

Shin felt his strength drain from his body. It was true—Ko was right.

"Why? Why would you do such a thing?" he asked, his voice shaking.

Kansa remained tight-lipped for a while, before eventually saying in a low voice, "Isn't it obvious? Because I wanted to make one of Shosen's sons the head of the family."

"...What?" Shin didn't understand what Kansa meant. "But I'm her son too, aren't I?"

But the moment he said that, the blood drained from his face.

It couldn't be...

"Surely you must have had a *slight* suspicion," she said. "She showed such little affection to you—treated you so cruelly."

It wasn't just Shin who was treated that way. His mother didn't love any of her children—not Ko, not Ryo, not even Banka. She looked at every single one of them as if they were repulsive.

"Poor Shosen. She was informed that her husband had a baby with another woman the very day she married him," Kansa remarked.

"Does that mean that I'm the son of a mistress that my father had? I never—"

"If you were the son of a mistress, then it wouldn't be kept a secret. Such situations are common. In this case, though, the baby's very existence was concealed and there were very few people who knew of it. After ten months passed, it was announced that a baby had been born and that it was Shosen's son, but naturally, he couldn't be shown to the public. He was clearly *not* a newborn. Instead, the child was brought up inside the family residence and not permitted to leave. People were led to believe it was because he was suffering from poor health... And that child, young master, was you."

Shin listened to Kansa's story in complete silence. He didn't believe it at all.

"Do you think I'm lying to you?" she asked. "That doesn't bother me. I'll just

tell you what I have to say and be done with it. Why do you think you were kept a secret? There was no question that you were *Choyo's* son. In which case, there could only be one explanation—your mother was someone the public would have judged him for fathering a child with. Can you imagine who she might have been?"

Shin paused before answering. "No."

Kansa seemed to be getting a degree of enjoyment out of this exchange. There was a malicious glint in her eye. Shin had never seen her like this before, just like how Ko's temperament was a surprise. I've been learning a lot of new things today, Shin thought to himself, somewhat detached.

"Those who know the truth have kept their mouths firmly shut, and even I had a hard time getting to the bottom of it all. Still, once I found out the facts, it became obvious why people tried to hide them. Such a disgusting, sinful relationship could *never* be revealed to the public," she said.

Shin's back started to feel unpleasant and sticky—and yet his body was peculiarly cold. *Don't listen to her,* his whole body begged. *She has to be lying,* he could hear his body screaming out to him. *You're better off ignoring her!*

"Did you know about your father's younger sister, Yo? She was the Saname clan's youngest daughter."

Kansa paused and licked her lips. It looked disgusting, like a snake flicking its tongue in front of a frog it was about to devour. "The two of them were blood siblings, but they were in love.

Yo died after giving birth to their baby...and that baby is *you*, young master," Kansa declared, sounding almost triumphant.

Shin felt his heart freeze over. Nothing could shock him anymore. He gave Kansa an icy look.

"I don't know why you're bothering to waste your breath," he said. "This is ludicrous."

"Oh. You don't believe me?" "Why would I?"

Kansa winced. She wants to hurt my feelings, Shin thought. As such, he was

trying to reject what she was claiming. It didn't seem believable to him by any stretch of the imagination. He didn't *want* to believe it. It was all so preposterous.

"That's enough," Shin said, getting to his feet. "I will never set foot in here again. Farewell." He headed for the door.

"I'm going to tell everybody the truth!" Kansa shouted out, almost running after him. "There's no way that a cursed child who was born of two siblings can become the head of the clan! The person who inherits that role must be *Shosen's* child. I'd feel so sorry for her otherwise, wouldn't you?!"

Shin was trying to get away, ignoring Kansa—but now she had caught up to him.

"Since you didn't come back from the imperial capital, I was *certain* Ko had taken over as the new heir. But then...I heard Choyo had invited the daughter of a vassal family over, and he said he was officially appointing you as his heir!"

Shin couldn't help but halt and turn around. "My father said that?"

"Haven't you heard? He did. It's unacceptable—so unacceptable that it's even roused Shosen's ghost!"

Now it makes sense.

This was why Kansa was claiming to see his mother's ghost. That being said, it still wasn't clear whether she was talking nonsense or if she actually convinced herself that it was her.

Shin let out a sigh. "I didn't see a thing," he muttered, and opened the door.

But as the door creaked open, it revealed a person standing outside of it. Shin froze. Before he had the chance to work out who it was, a gust of wind rushed past him.

Shin heard someone cry out behind him, sounding more like some sort of monstrous bird. It didn't register that the cry belonged to Kansa and the man in front of him was his father until Choyo had already rushed past him. Startled, Shin turned around to find Kansa on the ground, with his father pulling his sword out of her chest and proceeding to thrust it into her throat. Kansa's arms

and legs were strewn about in different directions and her chest was stained with blood. The very moment Shin opened the door, his father took the opportunity to stab Kansa in the chest.

"Ahh..."

Shin's lips quivered, but no sound came out. He had barely moved an inch, and yet he was panting for breath.

"I let her live because I felt sorry for her, and this is what I get for it," said Choyo. The man's deep voice was ice-cold and seeping with contempt. "I knew she'd been spouting nonsense, but I'd dismissed it as meaningless gibberish. I should have dealt with her right away—perhaps even when her employer died."

Shin figured that "employer" was his mother.

Choyo pulled his blade out of Kansa's throat and turned back toward Shin. Blood spurted into the air out of Kansa's neck. Her body convulsed, and Shin couldn't tell whether she was still alive.

When Shin looked into his father's eyes, he could instantly tell—what Kansa had been saying was the truth.

He shuddered with horror. "Sh-she was lying, wasn't she, Father?" he asked, seeing if he was mistaken. His voice came out hoarse and shrill. It has to be a lie. It's too farfetched.

Choyo turned away again and continued into the house. He picked up the brazier and scattered its contents onto the floor. Red coal and ash were strewn about on the floor. Sparks quickly drifted over to one of the curtains that partitioned parts of the house from one another, quickly setting it on fire.

"Why does it have to be a lie?" Choyo said as he gazed into the flames. "Yo is the only person I will ever love. She always has been. If it wasn't for the Saname curse, she'd still be alive."

The Saname curse—the curse that caused the youngest daughter of the head of the Saname clan to pass away at the age of fifteen. It was a curse that had plagued the clan for generations. In order to avoid its wrath, the head of the family always adopted a girl younger than his youngest daughter to offer up as a sacrifice.

"Wasn't there a sacrifice to die in her place...?" Shin asked. "There was, but Yo didn't discover what her function was until she had turned fifteen and her adoptive sister had died. Unable to bear it, she took the blame and passed away herself—after giving birth to you," said Choyo.

Fabric piled up on shelves burned ferociously as the flames danced along the walls. Eventually, they reached Kansa's body and set her ablaze. The repulsive smell made Shin cough. Flame continued to erupt, and smoke filled the room.

Seemingly not in a hurry, Choyo calmly turned around, grabbed Shin's arm, and pulled him outside. The cold night air was comfortingly cool against his skin, and his breathing returned to normal. Shin turned around and watched the smoke trailing from the gaps in the house's thatched roof. Flames spewed out of its windows.

Shin stared in silent bewilderment at the burning house, unable to pose any of the questions he wanted to ask his father.

Didn't Yo die because she had a child?

Did she find the fact that she conceived a forbidden child unbearable?

"You are my and Yo's precious, only son. Do you know how happy I was when you were born? I can't fathom anyone but you becoming my heir. Do not let anyone deceive you again," Choyo said from behind him.

Shin's knees gave way and he fell to the ground. How strongly had he yearned to hear those words? Wasn't this what he'd been hoping his father would tell him all this time, but never allowing himself to believe it could actually happen?

I just wish I didn't have to hear it like this.

Shin dug his nails into the earth. It felt like everything was crumbling underneath his feet. What had he been doing all his life? What had he believed in? He didn't know what to think or how to live his life anymore.

He let out a lamentable howl.

By the time dawn came around, the house had burned down entirely. White smoke drifted up into the darkness, and the remains of the house—now ash—were only vaguely discernable. There was no sign of Shin's father, and strangely

enough, nobody had rushed over to watch the fire.

Shin was still there, standing around, and he heard the winter breeze whooshing past. However, something wasn't right—there was no wind here.

A thicket shook, and inside, he could make out a pair of eyes that seemed to glow. He was surprised, but the owner of the eyes was too and seemed to flee right away.

Was that a monkey, or another wild animal? Or...

Shin began to wander aimlessly. Unsteady on his feet, he descended from the mountain and then carried on down the road. The sun was only starting to rise on the edge of the mountain, so there weren't any people walking down the road. It was a large one, and one the Saname clan had built. It had always made Shin feel so proud, but now, he found it horrendously loathsome. He felt like he was walking over thorns.

Shin was headed in the opposite direction from the Saname residence and going toward the port. His plan was to go to the imperial capital. He needed to tell Koshun that his mission was complete.

I'm never coming back here again.

His father might have expected him to return. He probably even thought it was a given that he'd come back in the end. After all, Shin was going to become the next head of the Saname clan.

If he thinks I'm ever going to return to this land, he's mistaken.

Shin gazed out at the sea, with its water glowing in the dawn sun, waiting for a boat to come and take him away.

It took about three days for the boat to reach the port of Ko Province from Ga Province. To continue on to the imperial capital, he would have to sail upstream and traverse through the waterways. When Shin disembarked, he noticed how noisy his surroundings were. Before he had time to question it, he noticed something strange out at sea. People had probably been making a ruckus about it before the boat he was on made it to shore, but he was in too deep a sleep to notice.

There was smoke rising from the water. It might have looked more like clouds than smoke.

"It's an eruption!" he heard somebody cry out.

The underwater volcano had apparently erupted. Its intensity was varying, but the volcano was showing no signs of calming down. There were mixed reports about how long it had been going on—some said three days, while others said five. When Shin looked carefully, he could make out something resembling a red beach on the opposite shore, near the coast of Je Island. Further still, small, black, island-like structures were appearing in the area where the eruption was happening. Someone was explaining to the others around Shin that the erupting lava had solidified and was gradually turning into new land masses, and these "islands" were steadily growing bigger.

All the people who were watching the eruption from the shore had faces tinged with worry. It looked like ash from the eruption was landing on this very shore as well. The ground beneath Shin's feet definitely looked a bit whitish.

Shin thought about it, and imagined the land masses spreading out even further, and the lava spreading all the way between here and the island. It was a terrifying thought.

Does His Majesty know about this?

Of course he would—he obviously must have been notified some time ago. When Shin surveyed his surroundings properly, he noticed some panicked-looking officials nearby, as well as some local militia.

The flow of passenger boats to and from Je Island seemed to have come to a halt, but those heading to the imperial capital were still running. Even so, all the vessels were packed full of people trying to flee the area, and the destination port was already at capacity.

What am I supposed to do?

As Shin tried to come up with a plan, he heard a familiar voice coming from behind him.

"Aren't you...the eldest son of the Saname clan?"

He turned around with a start at the sweet yet clear voice. It was Jusetsu.

Why would she be in a place like this?

Her black hair was tied up at the back of her head, and she was dressed in a man's robe. Next to her were two handsome young men, also dressed in robes, and a military officer who was presumably there for her protection.

Raven Consort, Shin almost found himself saying, but he held his tongue.

Thinking it'd be too conspicuous if he were to get to his knees, he sidled up to her and gave her a small bow.

Jusetsu took a long look at his face. "You don't look very well," she said simply.

Shin placed his hands against his cheeks. He knew he must have looked dreadful.

Jusetsu gracefully pointed toward the town with the tip of her shoe. "Boats aren't able to sail to Je Island for the time being, so the provincial governor from Ko Province has invited us to his home. Let's go and have some tea." It sounded like she was indirectly inviting Shin along. "It's good to drink tea when you're tired."

The young woman didn't ask any questions—she just addressed Shin with a simple statement and proceeded to go on her way. The sight of Jusetsu's diminutive frame walking ahead confidently ignited a surge of emotion within him.

He wanted to fall straight down on his knees, prostrate himself in front of her, and cling to her legs.

As his vision slowly began to blur, Shin simply looked up at the sky to stop the tears from running down his face.

Yozetsu Jikei was traveling up a river on board a boat loaded with salt. The mountain range in the distance was completely covered with snow. Since part of the river would most likely be frozen further down the line, he'd have to travel on horseback at that point instead.

When he reached a town in Raku Province that was situated at the foot of the Northern Mountains, he brought the boat to the bank. Jikei had been taking breaks in different towns to assess the situation in each place and to collect information on the Northern Mountains. Although this did slow him down, gathering this information was his biggest priority. Even if the northern tribes were plotting something, they wouldn't be able to act on it very quickly.

Jikei began to go over to the town market with just two of his attendants accompanying him. Every single one of the attendants he brought with him was physically strong. Jikei hadn't gone out of his way to select the toughest candidates to bring with him— all of his men were sturdy and accustomed to hard work. After all, straw bags of salt were much heavier than grain, so no weak man would be able to do the job.

The people who lived in the heart of the mountains were similarly well-built. This was testament to the difficulty of living in such an environment. There was little arable land here, so most people made a living by cutting down trees for firewood and charcoal—something that was also impeded by the snow in the winter. They hunted and kept livestock, but farming was far more difficult than it would be on level ground. Despite this, everyone who had been raised in the mountains insisted they would never entertain the idea of moving anywhere else. That was just the sort of people they were.

While shopping for necessities at the market, Jikei came across a young man, seemingly a merchant, who was talking to the owner of a shop selling shoes. Apparently, the shoes he was wearing had gotten soaked through on the muddy, snowy road, leaving him in a bind. Jikei glanced down to find that the man was wearing a pair of brocade shoes. Not only that, but the merchant and his attendants were all wearing silk clothing. As well-dressed as they were, they didn't seem accustomed to snowy regions. The shopkeeper recommended to the merchant a pair of ridiculously expensive boots that offered little in the way of practicality to the merchant.

Although he was fully aware he was crossing a line, Jikei couldn't help but interrupt them.

"Hey, you. Hold on a minute. I'm saying this for your own sake—go for that pair," said Jikei, pointing at a pair of boots made with yak fur near the

shopfront.

The young man turned around, looking surprised. He had intrepid, manly features, yet he also had a kind air about him. He seemed to have a gentle demeanor as well.

"Yak fur is warm," continued Jikei. "The most important thing in the upcoming season is to be protected against the cold. Decoration and embroidery are pointless."

The boots Jikei pointed at would cover the leg from the ankle to the knee. The long fur would repel water, and its curved toes were designed to prevent snow from getting in. They were the warmest pair available by miles. They were made using yaks—a type of cattle with long hair—that were raised by the inhabitants of the snowy mountains.

"Stay out of this, Yozetsu," said the shopkeeper, a sour look on his face.

Yozetsu knew the merchant, and that he was probably planning to scam this young man because he looked wealthy.

"Perhaps you shouldn't be so greedy, then."

The young man looked at Jikei and the shopkeeper in turn in quiet confusion.

"Where are you heading after this?" Jikei then asked him. "To the northern mountains..."

"Dressed like that?" Jikei was appalled.

The young man looked embarrassed. "I've padded myself with layers of cotton wadding... Is that still not good enough?"

"Do you want to freeze to death? These aren't your ordinary mountains, you know."

"There are snowy mountains where I come from too, so I thought I knew what to expect..." the young man said, trailing off.

Jikei shook his head. "Buy some tightly woven woolen garments. Then, find yourself a lamb fur coat and a warm marten fur hat to cover your ears."

The young man seemed to be listening attentively to what Jikei was saying.

Once the older man finished speaking, he took a step back and gave him a respectful bow.

"Thank you very much for your kindness. As shameful as it is, it's my first time coming here, and I was clueless as to what sort of garments I required. I know this might be impolite of me to ask, but would you be so kind as to come with me?" the young man asked.

Jikei didn't have *that* much time to spare. He was just about to turn the stranger down—but the next words to leave the young man's lips made him change his mind.

"I should have mentioned this earlier, Yozetsu, but I'm actually the second son of a powerful clan from Ga Province. The Saname clan, specifically. My name is Ko."

With that, Ko gave him a friendly, yet somewhat unfeeling, smile.



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter